

Engineering workers occupy three BiFab yards in Scotland

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Last month, workers at the Scottish engineering firm BiFab briefly occupied and barricaded the company's construction yards. The occupation took place after contractual disputes left BiFab on the brink of bankruptcy and 1,400 workers facing unemployment.

BiFab operates three facilities: in Burntisland and Methil in Fife, and Arnish on the Isle of Lewis. Of the company's workforce, 1,132 are agency workers, leaving only 251 with permanent contracts.

Around 1,000 BiFab workers marched in Edinburgh on November 16 in protest, wearing their full work clothing, high visibility jackets and boiler suits. Children supported their parents with signs such as "Save Daddy's Work."

The march concluded at the doors of Holyrood, the Scottish Parliament building, to demand state intervention in defence of the workers' jobs.

BiFab manufacture structures for the offshore gas and oil industries along with offshore wind farms. The company recently won a £100 million contract from Dutch-based Seaway Heavylifting and Scottish Southern Electricity to build lattice substructures for the Beatrice offshore wind farm in the Moray Firth, off the North East coast of Scotland. Construction for these substructures was contracted until April next year, but disputes between BiFab and its clients over the volume of work completed led to BiFab suddenly facing administration.

Although workers effectively took control of the yards, the GMB and Unite trade unions were at pains to insist the action was a "work-in." Alan Ritchie from the GMB said, "The workers have decided to continue a work-in. They will be maintaining the gates to make sure the contract, which is 77 percent complete, will not be taken out of any of these yards."

In a statement on its web page, Unite went further,

stating "... the workforce voted unanimously to continue working until further notice to give the company time to sort the financial crisis. BiFab have indicated that at present the company has insufficient funds to pay wages and salaries this week."

The work-in tactic has been used for decades in Scotland to keep disputes isolated and prevent a turn to broader sections of the working class.

In 1971, the Conservative government of Edward Heath threatened the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders (UCS) in Glasgow, Scotland, with closure. Heath put forward an Industrial Relations Act in 1970, aimed at slashing social spending while closing outdated yards like those at UCS, which employed 8,500 workers.

Working and living conditions for shipyard workers at the time were harsh, with much of the city's housing outdated and overcrowded. Facing the unemployment queues, workers took over the yards, and UCS rapidly became a focal point of a growing strike wave across Britain.

Seeking to derail this, the trade unions under the Stalinist leadership of the Communist Party of Great Britain's (CPGB) Jimmy Reid developed the tactic of a "work-in." This meant that rather than being a centre of opposition to the Tory government, work would continue, unpaid, within the yards and would prove to prospective investors that the yards were a safe and profitable investment. The CPGB's nationalist campaign was also aimed in particular at securing a Scottish investor.

BiFab workers are being led into the same dead end. Pat Rafferty, Unite's Scottish secretary, summed up the union's bankrupt perspective, making clear that his primary concern was the health of the Scottish economy. He said, "This is a Scottish contract for a Scottish company sponsored by the Scottish

government. And it looks as if the whole project is about to come crashing down, and with it 1,400 jobs due to a financial dispute instigated by the main Dutch contractor, SHL. There's too much at stake for us to stand by and watch this happen."

In the event, the Scottish government hosted talks with BiFab, the trade unions and the contractors to cobble together a funding package that would enable the company to continue until April next year. In this scenario, the company can only continue to operate based on new contracts being won, ruthless cost-cutting, low wages and insecure working conditions.

BiFab workers should work to establish factory committees, independent of the trade unions and the company, to unify and co-ordinate their struggle with broader sections of workers across Fife, the Western isles and beyond.



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