

The dead end of the “Save Britain’s Ferries” campaign: Build rank-and-file committees!

Robert Stevens
23 March 2022

The 800 sacked P&O workers face a struggle not just against the company that dismissed them with no notice last week and its allies in Conservative government. They are in a fight also with their false friends in the Labour and trade union bureaucracy.

From the moment the workers were sacked last Thursday, the unions and Labour Party have mounted a nationalist campaign centred on the fact that a Dubai-based company, DP World, sacked British workers to bring in a foreign workforce. This was coupled to a campaign to pressurise the Johnson government to step in and do the right thing in the interests of Britain as a maritime nation.

This perspective did not survive its first brush with reality. The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) union called a demonstration Tuesday outside DP World’s London offices, before marching to a rally outside Parliament.

RMT leader Mick Lynch spoke alongside Trades Union Congress (TUC) General Secretary Frances O’Grady and former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn.

Boosting the RMT’s appeal to the government and politicians of all stripes, Lynch said, “I never thought I’d see the day where the RMT was supported by the Democratic Unionist Party, Sinn Fein, the Labour Party, some Tory politicians, the whole spectrum.”

O’Grady summed up the nationalist agenda of the campaign declaring, “When it comes to P&O, they don’t salute any flag, they don’t respect any flag.”

For the union bureaucracy, the main issue with the job losses is that they jeopardised national security! O’Grady declared, “This is a battle for the whole country. Because we cannot afford to lose those skilled jobs, we cannot afford to lose our maritime strategy and security.”

No sooner had the assembled bureaucrats finished their speeches than their perspective fell apart. In parliament, Labour’s motion calling for the reinstatement of 800

sacked workers and the suspension of DP World’s government contracts and licences to run freeports passed with 211 MPs votes for and none against because the Tories abstained. The motion also called for legislation outlawing fire and rehire. The Tories could let it through as “Opposition Day” motions allow the opposition parties to sound off about whatever they want, but are not binding.

When the real business began, the Tories voted on a three line whip to not hold a vote on even the toothless bill put forward by Labour MP Barry Gardiner to ban fire and rehire.

DP World is working in partnership with the Johnson government, which was forewarned and allowed the mass firings to proceed. The company is at the heart of the Tories’ Freeports agenda, seen as essential for UK corporations to compete globally. DP World, which employs 50,000 workers in 40 countries and specialises in creating free trade zones, runs the largest of eight freeports, the Thames Freeport, and is a member of the government’s transport advisory group. Upon its appointment to the body in August 2020, the company said, “DP World is delighted to be part of the UK Government’s Transport Advisory Group as it steps up its plans to negotiate trade deals. We are looking forward to working with the Government to help global trade to and from the UK which will benefit our customers across the supply chain.”

In this context the jobs of 800 workers counts for very little, with the company likely to receive a slap on the wrist and maybe a fine by the government for its actions. On Wednesday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared in parliament that workers could take DP to court if they wished under the 1996 Employment Rights Act. But asked by Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer if he would “guarantee that these companies will not get a penny more of taxpayers’ money or a single tax break until they

reinstate the workforce”, he replied, “What we will not do is launch a wholehearted campaign as they [Labour] would want against overseas investments because that is completely wrong, and wrong for those workers.”

In their pathetic pleas to a government of Thatcher worshippers, Labour and the trade unions whine that sacking workers and replacing them with a workforce on a fraction of their wages is not the “British way” of doing things. Nonsense. As of last October, at least 28 companies in Britain either used fire and rehire or planned to, including British Airways, the leading supermarket retailer Tesco, and British Gas. At the height of the pandemic in April 2021, British Gas, owned by the British multinational energy and services company, Centrica, sacked—after 42 days of strikes—almost 500 engineers who refused to sign inferior contracts. The GMB union did nothing to defend them.

The RMT itself collaborated in P&O sacking at least 600 workers in early 2020, shortly after DP took over the company.

The Labour Party now claiming to be defending P&O workers are running local authorities that have imposed billions in cuts on behalf of central government. The Labour council in Coventry are at this moment spending millions of pounds in a scabbing operation against its refuse department workforce. This week, Labour-run Calderdale Council in West Yorkshire threatened to use “fire-and-rehire” to end a dispute in which community protection employees are opposing changes to working practices.

The nationalist “Save Britain’s Ferries” campaign only serves to divide the working class and facilitate the brutal worsening of pay and conditions being demanded by employers.

Such campaigns have ended without exception in defeats and mass job losses. In 1992, the leader of the National Union of Mineworkers, Arthur Scargill advocated a nationalist alliance with the employers and sections of the Tory government to “Save Our Pits”. Nothing was saved. For years the unions ran one “Save our Steel” campaign after another. Each time one or another set of asset strippers took over and sold off chunks of what remains of the former nationalised industry, with just 33,000 workers remaining.

In the seafaring industries this process is particularly acute. Vast tranches of the workforce hail from India, the Philippines, and countries in eastern Europe because no effort was made by the unions to ensure equal pay for all rather than desperately trying to maintain higher wages

for British crews.

Workers cannot successfully fight on a national basis against companies whose operations are based on a global strategy. They must base their struggles on the programme of socialist internationalism.

The Socialist Equality Party urges workers to form rank-and-file committees operating not just within companies but spanning industries and borders. The trade unions have a decades-long record of betrayal. But this is not the result of a few “bad leaders”. It is due to their nationalist, pro-capitalist orientation.

The speech by Corbyn to the rally was a flight of fancy, portraying the unions, (“if you’re not in a union, join a union now”) as leading some monumental struggle—rather than overseeing another defeat and the hundreds of redundancies they specialise in. The government, he declared, should take up the fight against DP World. But “if they won’t do it, we will do it.” He told his audience to “get there on the picket lines... support the dispute. And above all, when we’ve won this one, there’s a lot of other disputes we’ll win as well.”

Who is he trying to kid? There are no picket lines or “dispute” to support because the unions have called no industrial action or any fight in response to P&O’s attack. Instead, they have instructed seafarers to say nothing to the media about their sacking lest it affect their redundancy package. This only plays into the hands of the company, who said this week that receiving a redundancy package was conditional on workers signing a non-disclosure agreement.

The RMT only confirms that they are already reconciled to yet another crushing defeat for their members. As always, the main concern of the union bureaucracy is to maintain their role as an industrial police force for the corporations. As O’Grady declared Wednesday, “UK law requires companies to consult with workers and unions before making redundancies.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact