

WORKERS

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HISTORIC NOTES



1926: THE
GENERAL STRIKE

14

CONSTRUCTION: THE WORKERS STRIKE BACK...

JOURNAL OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY



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WORKERS

“ Who needs a civil service? ”

THE REAL significance of Liam Fox’s links with Adam Werritty is not that he broke the Ministerial Code, nor that the Conservatives (like Labour before them) have lobbyists crawling all over them. It’s that British foreign policy was and is being driven by the interests of outsiders: American billionaires, Israeli arms dealers and US hedge funds. They called it the Atlantic Bridge – but the only traffic it carried was neoconservative Tea Party extremism.

That’s hardly news, some might say, and they’d be right. But that it was all done so blatantly speaks volumes about the way the top ranks of the civil service have been so bludgeoned by decades of political bullying

that they didn’t put a stop to it – not even when it turned into unvetted and unofficial advisers sitting in on intergovernmental meetings.

After the election in May 2010, the general secretary of the First Division Association, which represents top civil servants, talked about the loss of trust by citizens in politicians and Britain’s system of government: “At the very least, new ministers and MPs must begin to display the personal and moral integrity that was so obviously lacking in the previous Parliament, even within the Cabinet.” Some hope! There is the morality of decline and deference to the US. If workers want their own morality to win, they will have to impose it. ■

Less a civil war than NATO’s war

WE’VE SEEN ragtag militia driving to the front in cars, but hardly a single frame of one of the 26,000 NATO air missions which have laid waste to much of Libya. Radio reports speak of Sirte as a new Hiroshima, bombed out. As a letter to THE GUARDIAN said, there is a greater public visual record of the Crimean War than of this criminal war in Libya.

Pictures of Gaddafi’s bloodied body – clearly shot at very close range – show an execution.

What next for Libya? The “rebels” will find it easier to invite imperialism in than to get it to leave. Whatever Libya may have been under Gaddafi, it was not a plaything for foreign or fundamentalist interests, and it had better health and education provision than anywhere in northern Africa. The Libyan people now face a rough future, for which NATO and Cameron in particular, along with the “rebels”, are mainly to blame. Shame on us for permitting it. ■

Cover photo of construction workers at Westfield Stratford by Andrew Wiard/www.wiard.co.uk



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Pensions recruitment surge



LONDON UNISON has seen the highest surge in recruitment in September for over five years, with nearly 3,000 new members. The reason: pensions. Dozens of branch meetings briefing members on the pensions dispute have been held in hospitals, local authorities and universities. One hospital had to stagger meetings back-to-back due to the demand, with rooms overflowing, non-members joining and new stewards forthcoming.

Unison has one sole focus at present: delivering the Yes vote to support the campaign. Over 1.75 million leaflets have been issued, with 700,000 members texted or emailed. With 1.1 million Unison ballot papers, Electoral Reform Services needed an emergency import of paper as stocks in Britain were exhausted.

Unite, GMB, the National Union of Teachers, Unison and smaller health professional bodies and other teaching unions are now all balloting. Immense logistical difficulties are being tackled on a daily basis to try to ensure the ballot is deemed legal. Significant numbers of members whose union membership records are not accurate have sadly been withdrawn from the ballot.

But the challenge will come on 30 November when those prevented from supporting the strike by legal shenanigans will be faced with a simple choice: cross or don't cross the picket lines – and if you have to cross then don't touch the work of striking colleagues. Getting the records correct (and the slightest change deems members not eligible) will be an immense on-going challenge to all union stewards, members and organisers.

Support from non-striking unions and professional organisations such as the Royal College of Nursing (though quite a few nurse members are said to want to be called on to strike) and the British Medical Association will be demonstrated in acts of solidarity at lunchtime workplace rallies at hospitals and health centres across the country.

The proposed £4 billion tax on public sector pensions will be followed by similar tax moves on other pension schemes. Those in outsourced and privatised comparable schemes will be targeted next if these increases in contributions are not stopped. An estimated £20 billion would be raised by a minuscule tax on bank transactions if this government seriously decided to tackle the deficit caused by the banks' criminal greed. Highly unlikely considering the number of ex-bankers in government! ■

UNEMPLOYMENT

On the rise

UNEMPLOYMENT rose by 114,000 between June and August to 2.57 million, a 17-year high, according to official figures. Our unemployment rate increased to 8.1 per cent. The jobless total for 16 to 24-year-olds hit a record high of 991,000 in the quarter, a jobless rate of 21.3 per cent.

The number of people out of work and claiming benefits rose 17,500 to 1.6 million in September. Other figures showed a record cut in the number of part-time workers, down by 175,000, and there was also a record reduction of 74,000 in the number of over-65s in employment.

Some local authorities had very high ratios of unemployment to vacancies in September: Inverclyde had 3,057 claimants to just 87 vacancies (35.1:1), Hackney 11,081 to 487 (22.8:1), Waltham Forest 9,782 to 490 (20:1). ■

EUROPEAN UNION

Referendum vote fix

PUBLIC OPINION polls show overwhelming demand for a referendum on continued membership of the European Union, with over 100,000 people signing an online petition. The response from all political parties in the Commons? A three-line whip to reject the motion calling for a referendum.

The debate was moved from 27 October to 24 October to frustrate those planning on lobbying their MP – a cheap parliamentary sleight of hand to cheat the people of Britain (called "barking" by Miliband). Even so a massive backbench revolt saw 111 MPs vote for the motion. ■

If you have news from your industry, trade or profession we want to hear from you. Call us on 020 8801 9543 or email to rebuilding@workers.org.uk

EUROBRIEFS

The latest from Brussels

More money for Brussels?

CHANCELLOR GEORGE Osborne has raised the possibility of British taxpayers having to make a bigger contribution to the eurozone's rescue package through the International Monetary Fund. He said, "We have indicated our willingness to consider our position on resources for the IMF." Britain's potential liabilities via the IMF are currently capped at \$20 billion (£12.6 billion), of which around a quarter has been deployed to date.

More power to Brussels?

OSBORNE SAID after September's G7 summit in Chicago, "It's on the cards that a treaty change may be proposed ... This would be to further integrate the eurozone, further strengthen fiscal integration. I have said there is a remorseless logic from monetary union to fiscal union, and it's in Britain's interests that the euro zone is stable." He indicated that the government would support a new treaty. Labour's Ed Balls too has changed from being against further integration to supporting it. Jean-Claude Trichet, outgoing head of the European Central Bank, has reiterated his support for a change to the EU treaty to allow for the outside imposition of economic policy on a member state.

With support like that...

AN EU task force to Greece said it aimed "to support the country". The team arrived in Athens as fresh figures put unemployment in the country at a record 16.3 per cent, with 32.9 per cent of young people out of work. The IMF says the Greek economy may contract by 5.5 per cent this year, a direct result of the "austerity" forced on Greece by the EU and the IMF.

Unpredictable? Really?

LIBERAL DEMOCRAT leader Nick Clegg was asked about his views on the euro at the party's conference in Birmingham. He said, "I don't think anyone could have predicted at the time the euro was created that the rules which were supposed to be in place to ensure that everybody looked after their own financial affairs properly would be so spectacularly ignored and broken." This is untrue – lots of workers and even some politicians and economists predicted exactly what has happened. ■



Photo: Workers

THE VETERANS of the Upper Clydeside Shipbuilders work-in that started in 1971 and eventually succeeded in 1972 in keeping all four threatened yards open celebrated its 40th anniversary with a sold-out gala concert. Above, the Whistlebinkies folk group rehearse for the event on 1 October. They performed a new piece of music, commissioned by the veterans on behalf of the union movement from composer and flute player in the group Eddie McGuire. A brass ensemble, Alba Brass, and the saxophones of Sax Ecosse also marched in playing, to take part in the piece.

Hitherto unseen footage of the work-in, filmed at the time by London-based Cinema Action, was screened, and several folk singers who sung for fund-raising events during the work-in performed. These included the 80-year-old Jimmie MacGregor. Up-and-coming artists also featured – like Simone Welch, who performed Elvis Costello's song SHIPBUILDING.

One intention of the celebrations is to rekindle the spirit of resistance demonstrated by those workers in 1971. A leaflet issued by the CPBML that year carried the message "Not One Off, but a Prototype". Indeed over 100 similar actions were carried out during the three years following the UCS work-in.

Strike at Middlesex Uni

ON 4 OCTOBER Middlesex University academic and administrative staff, organised in the University and College Union (UCU) and Unison respectively, were out on strike against compulsory redundancies. Staff had first been informed of the threat of these redundancies in June, and by mid-July 300 staff had found themselves in "at risk" groups. It was not an easy time of year for staff to organise resistance to this onslaught. But throughout the summer holiday both union branches kept the union offices open, supported individuals affected and simultaneously began to organise collective action.

In June a UCU annual general meeting had passed a resolution asking the branch executive to plan for action if compulsory redundancy was threatened. This meant that the branch was able to plan for a ballot. But the management's timing resulted in the ballot being conducted before the term had even begun, and this meant that ensuring a good turnout would be a logistical challenge. In the event the turnout at 52 per cent was one of the biggest at a ballot in the union's recent history: 80 per cent voted for strike action and 94 per cent for action short of strike.

Having got the successful vote, the challenge for both unions was to organise quickly in order to make an impact. It was therefore decided to take action in the University induction week. This action was formally supported by the student union, a significant move forward after some years of student union reluctance to support action by staff. This time the student union clearly understood that what the management proposed would have a profound impact on the quality of their learning.

The joint union pickets were effective on the strike day, and after a period of refusing to speak to the unions, management have returned to the negotiating table. As yet no compulsory redundancies have been declared. However at least 100 staff have opted for voluntary redundancy. The staff involved would characterise this as jumping before being pushed. But the stark fact is that every voluntary redundancy is still a future job lost. ■

NEW ZEALAND**Blair pops up**

UNFORTUNATE NEW Zealand - a year of earthquakes, and then Blair touting himself around. Advertised as "the most exciting event in New Zealand", an elite lunch was offered to New Zealanders. \$1500 a ticket for a VIP introduction to meet and greet Blair at a cocktail party,

plus an individual photo opportunity.

Then after-lunch wisdom from Blair, defined as "the politician who defines our times" ... "continues to play a leadership role on issues such as faith and globalisation, the Middle East peace process, African governance and climate change." Better Blair over in New Zealand than Britain, but what an advertisement for superstition, war, intervention – and as much loot as he can pack in his wallet. ■

Obama's dangerous game

BASED ON unproven allegations and no trial of the accused man, US President Obama has accused Iran of planning to assassinate the Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the US, and has threatened "the toughest sanctions" against Iran. These are thought to include sanctions on Iran's Central Bank which would have the effect of bringing the country's foreign trade to a halt, a "world boycott" of Iranian oil and a military blockade of the country – all of which would be seen as an act of war by Iran. Obama has not ruled out a direct attack. With his accusations being repeated by Clinton and others, and with some saying that the allegations amount to an act of war, the accused has no chance of a fair trial in the US and the truth will therefore never be known.

What is known is that the man accused is a second-hand car dealer from Corpus Christie, Texas with mental health problems and a string of failed businesses behind him and is also a US citizen. He is accused of paying the Zeta drugs mafia in Mexico to kill the Saudi Ambassador either by shooting him in a restaurant or with car bombs outside the Saudi and Israeli embassies in Washington. The Zeta drugs mafia is Mexico's most bloodthirsty gang and would never cross the border and invite the kind of US "law enforcement heat" that the plot would have brought down on them. A \$100,000 deposit for the assassination was allegedly transferred from Iran, but this would be impossible because it would be against US law and US sanctions.

So there is widespread scepticism about the alleged plot both across the US and the world with the accused being described more like a "Mr Bean character than 007" with many believing it has been faked to justify a war in the same way as the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction". Would Iran have been so stupid as to risk a war with its three main adversaries, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the US at the same time? That's very doubtful. Yet Britain's Foreign Secretary jumped on the bandwagon to support the allegation and call for action, and the Saudi government has demanded that Iran pay a "high price". So here we go again. ■

WHAT'S ON**Coming soon****November**

Thursday 10 November, 7.30pm. Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. Nearest tube Holborn.

"Energy – Britain in Crisis"

Public meeting organised by the CPBML. This country was built on power: first steam, then electricity. Now they've closed the pits, North Sea oil is running out and power stations are being shut faster than new ones are being planned. Can renewables really plug the gap – or will the lights start going out? Come and discuss. All welcome.

SHIPPING**In peril on the sea**

THE ABANDONMENT and cancelling of the funding for the Maritime Incident Response Group and the Emergency Towing Vessel Service by the Coalition shipping minister has been announced. This endangers seafarers, crews working on oil rigs and all those who access these islands by sea.

The Maritime Incident Response Group was established to deal with two major oil spills and the subsequent threats to Britain's coastline. The Emergency Towing Vessel Service deals with some four incidents a week.

The safety systems these organisations developed are copied across the world as models of best practice for dealing with disasters. Yet again short-termism and false economy from the government puts lives and Britain's marine and coastal environment at risk. ■

US, BRITAIN**Shrinking economies**

THE US economy is still smaller than it was in 2007, even after the \$16 trillion bailout of US and foreign banks. In June 2007, 63 per cent of adults were in work; in June 2009, 59.4 per cent; in June 2011, just 58.2 per cent.

Britain's GDP is still 4 per cent down from 2008. Manufacturing output is down for the third month running, and is still 3.6 per cent down from 2008. Britain's nominal manufacturing output has been stagnant for the past 13 years, representing a cut in real terms of £3.5 billion a year and a 30 per cent loss of capacity since 1997. Meanwhile, the trade deficit in goods is a record £97.2 billion. ■



Photo: Workers

CAMPAIGNERS protesting against the City's policies set up camp outside St Paul's – a recognition that the blame for the current crisis lies squarely with finance capital.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Shrinking whose state?

THE POLITICIANS and financiers are trying to con us. Claiming economic necessity, they want workers to support “reducing the deficit” – a call that has no economic validity and will only weaken and impoverish us. They want us to back financial plans that are intended to impoverish workers while making bankers richer.

The con is summed up in the weasel words, “We must reduce the deficit!” On the ground this transmutes into “We must cut public sector jobs and services.” Already, almost a quarter of a million public sector jobs have gone in the coalition government’s first year of office. Calculations indicate that more than 600,000 public sector jobs will end up destroyed between 2010-2011 and 2015-16 – if there isn’t a complete change in direction.

To understand the con we have to be clear about the differences between the annual budget deficit and the overall public expenditure net debt (carried forward from year to year, and affected by such things as interest payments) and about where both are heading.

The truth is that the government’s proposed reductions in public expenditure will not reduce public indebtedness but increase it, because tax revenues will drop and social security payments will rise with the fall in employment and trade. That’s what’s happening in Greece, where even with a cutback of 16 per cent in public wages and a rise in VAT to 23 per cent, public indebtedness will reach 140 per cent of GDP by 2014. In Britain, public sector net debt is set to rise every year between now and 2014-15, from £932 billion to nearly £1.3 trillion, almost twice the government’s entire annual revenues, even if annual budgets are slashed by 25 to 40 per cent.

Paradoxically, while the annual deficit is coming down, total interest charges on accumulated debt are estimated to rise over the next five years from £44 billion to £63 billion, which is equivalent to half of our NHS costs. Avaricious financiers will pocket fortunes as they lecture us to do without essential jobs and services! Finance capitalism is quite content to live with these staggering levels of public expenditure net debt without any sign of anxiety. It seems only the budget deficit creates a crisis mentality and stirs traumas of the “end of the world is nigh” variety.

Wise up

We should wise up. The whole public expenditure cuts agenda is simply engineered to enable politicians to shout crisis and shrink the socially necessary parts of the state such as health and education, the bedrock for survival and prosperity, while their friends cash in on privatisations. Meanwhile, the government, shield of finance capitalism, will let the rest of the state apparatus grow without a murmur of disagreement.

Total government outlay is forecast to increase every year to 2014-15, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility. It estimates the figures will increase from £696 billion in 2010-11 to £737 billion in 2014-15 because of the “collective” debt and colossal interest charges being paid to Britain’s creditors, the banks and finance capitalists. Taxpayers’ money doled out in ever-bigger amounts to financiers is fine and never questioned. Taxpayers’ money paid out to public service workers such as teachers, civil servants and social workers is constantly condemned.

The savage public expenditure cuts will not reduce indebtedness and were never intended to. These measures were enacted in order to shift the balance of power between the two opposing classes in Britain. The finance capitalists want to destroy those aspects of society essential to workers. Simultaneously they want to preserve an economic environment where they enrich themselves on interest repayments.

The budget deficit is a smokescreen to hide capitalism’s naked class interests and hatred of working people.

We must change course! Stop the job reductions. Default on the debts. Don’t squander more on bankers. Use our national assets to Rebuild Britain! ■

Redundancies are threatening Britain’s place at the leading edge of aerospace...

Undermined: our aerospace industry

THE RECENT announcement of around 3,000 job losses at BAE Systems throws into even deeper doubt the much-promised revival of the manufacturing sector in Britain and the policies espoused by successive governments.

After 900 job losses were announced at Brough, where the Hawk jet is assembled, GMB’s Dave Oglesby said the government had turned their back on the workers and the industry. The 1,400 job cuts at BAE in Warton and Sablesbury prompted Steve Pye (chairman of the Federation of Small Businesses in Fylde, Lancashire, which represents more than 1,000 members) to warn that the county would lose the expertise and brainpower of those BAE staff made redundant. Also hit was the town of Yeovil where 250 jobs were lost at BAE Systems.

David Laws, disgraced MP for South Somerset already “disappointed” with the jobs cut at BAE Systems and at nearby RNAS Yeovilton, said of the fresh redundancies at AugustaWestland, “This is clearly further bad news for South Somerset, in a period where there have been other major local redundancy announcements affecting the defence sector.” Shouldn’t he be angry and also apologising for a lack of coherent government thinking about manufacturing in Britain and the lives of his constituents?

Petition

Unite asked its members to sign an online petition to save jobs at BAE Systems in Warton and Brough – and the future of manufacturing in Yorkshire and Lancashire. More than 14,000 people had already signed the e-petition, started by Unite members and supported by trade unions, politicians and the HULL DAILY MAIL as we went to print.

The significant impact of the job losses, effects on the local communities and devastation to the lives of individuals and families will be documented. The investment in the skills of those being made redundant is immense. It takes approximately 10 years for an aerospace engineer to train and gain sufficient experience.

BAE Systems’ own website claims, “The preservation of engineering talent is vital for BAE Systems and through its Skills 2020 programme, the



Photo: N.Chainey, © Airbus S.A.S. 2011

All-composite A350 XWB wing covers in the new Airbus wing factory at Broughton, Wales; meanwhile, there are job losses in Yorkshire.

company invests more than £50 million every year in education projects and skills development including training its 1,000 apprentices." You might expect this from Britain's largest engineering company, employing 39,000.

According to another website "Rolls-Royce has been training apprentices for over 50 years, and the Group's apprenticeship programme is an industry leader; awarded Beacon Status by the Learning & Skills Improvement Service, and OFSTED graded the programme as outstanding in all areas. The scheme enjoys a 98 per cent retention rate; 90 per cent of Rolls-Royce apprentices go on to achieve higher qualifications, half to degree level; and over one third of the company's senior UK managers began their careers as apprentices."

No doubt the government will claim that there will be support for those losing their jobs, in an attempt to mitigate the disaster which many in the industry think has been allowed to happen by poor procurement policy by successive governments.

Aerospace manufacturing is going through a shake-up. Early October saw US giant United Technologies (which holds Pratt & Whitney aero engines and Hamilton Sundstrand in its portfolio of companies) agreeing to purchase Goodrich Corporation, another large US conglomerate. UT, valued at \$68 billion, agreed to pay \$18 billion for

Goodrich. Both companies employ thousands of workers involved in engineering in many companies throughout Britain.

Goodrich and Hamilton Sundstrand employees might fear for their positions in the future when merged and synergy activity takes place even though it is claimed that most of the companies do not compete for work. Goodrich sites are in Leighton Buzzard, Birmingham and Wolverhampton. Hamilton sites are located near Bristol, Wolverhampton, Colnbrook (Berkshire) and Sunbury-on-Thames (Middlesex).

Wrapped up in this change is another Midlands-based company, Aero Engine Controls, a joint venture between Rolls-Royce Holdings and Goodrich Corporation with a history dating back 60 years.

In establishing the joint venture both parent companies will have transferred around £14 million of assets and cash into Aero Engine Controls. Aero Engine Controls has around 1,330 employees, comprising staff transferred from the two parent companies, and has sites in Derby, Birmingham, Belfast and Indianapolis.

With a merger of two Birmingham-based sites to one new site located near Birmingham International Airport, a distinct possibility in the near future is that workers at AEC may find themselves affected by the purchase of Goodrich by UT.

The loss of jobs in the defence area of

aircraft production goes on with a backdrop of rising order books for civil aircraft product as the two big aeroplane makers ramp up production of the new Boeing 787 and the Airbus A350 and A380 – all with super efficient engines (20 per cent more efficient than previous designs) which are supposed to reduce harmful emissions – to replace ageing fleets.

Proud history

Around 140,000 jobs are generated in Britain by Airbus wing work, directly as well as indirectly through supplier contracts. And recently Paul McKinlay, head of the Airbus north Wales site where wings are manufactured, said: "Broughton has got an extremely proud history, 70 years of aviation history. It's great we are staying ahead of the technology with state-of-the-art materials and state-of-the-art manufacturing processes. I'm delighted that Broughton is part of that. For our employees, this new factory – this aircraft [the A350] signals security of employment for the coming years at Broughton, and with 6,000 employees here that's absolutely great news."

As of mid June 2010 there were around 110,000 workers employed directly in the aerospace industry in Britain. To lose those in defence production will potentially undermine the entire industry. ■

Seven big construction companies have decided to play it tough have said they will sack their workforces and re-employ on new the challenge...

Construction: 'sparks' to start a prairie fire



Photo: Andrew Wiard/ www.wiard.co.uk

Blackfriars, London, 12 October. Electricians protest against pay cuts and de-skilling by contractors withdrawing the national agreement.

TRAFFIC IN London's Oxford Street is often congested. But at 7.30 on the morning of Wednesday 5 October, it was worse than expected. The reason: only one lane was open at the Marble Arch end of Oxford Street as construction workers belonging to Unite, UCATT and GMB demonstrated at the new Park House Shopping Centre site.

The demonstration was noisy but well organised and effective, with police allowing speeches but keeping traffic moving. Meanwhile the construction workers publicly burnt copies of the employer's proposed new contract outside Park House.

The protest moved from the Marble Arch site to Bond Street, Tottenham Court Road and Farringdon Crossrail sites, and on 12 October via Blackfriars to Tate Modern, where gallery space is being expanded. Other

construction sites targeted include the Shard on Bankside and the Westfield Shopping Centre at Stratford East, and the Balfour Beatty site in Cambuslang, Lanarkshire. There were also protests in Liverpool.

The demonstrations by angry electricians and other construction workers at key sites up and down the country have been taking place against the attack by seven of the larger mechanical and electrical (M&E) employers. The "Seven" are threatening to withdraw from national agreements covering this sector of the construction industry. The protests are set to intensify including "civil disobedience" – and they will, in the words of one Unite official, get "better, bigger and badder [sic]".

In September there was a protest in Salford outside MediaCity UK, the new base

for the BBC, ITV, Coronation Street, Satellite Information Services, and the University of Salford. Significantly, protest has spread to nuclear plants and oil refineries where workers are still smarting from attempts since 2009 to replace skilled local men with offshore foreign labour.

Power station hit

Two days after the London construction workers had demonstrated in Oxford Street, 120 members of Unite stopped work at the Ratcliffe-on-Soar Nottinghamshire power station when contractor SPIE Matthew Hall told them to sign new contracts or leave. Balfour Beatty did the same at Newcastle University resulting in a walkout. On 7 October, THE INDEPENDENT reported that 98 per cent of members of Unite, the GMB and

. They plan to tear up nationally agreed conditions and pay, and terms on 7 December. But workers in the industry are rising to

as contractors seek to axe agreement?

Prospect employed at the gas- and coal-fired Cottam power stations in Nottinghamshire have rejected a 3.4 per cent increase from EDF Energy. A strike ballot has been called for.

A day of action and national demonstration has been called for 9 November (location/s to remain secret) and workers employed by Balfour Beatty, regarded as ring-leader in the attack on workers, are to be balloted for strike action.

The employers are demanding that workers sign up to a Building Engineering Services National Agreement (BESNA) and quaintly state that there is "no intention in any of this to disadvantage any member of our existing workforce" (yes, and fairies really do live at the bottom of the garden!) To signal their seriousness, five of the seven have given notice to workers that they will be sacked and re-engaged on the new terms on 7 December.

The employers want to take control of such areas as the grading system by introducing de-skilled grades, dictate when short-time working and lay-off are introduced, combine the paid morning break with the unpaid lunch break and effectively introduce a no-strike clause.

The desire to introduce a semi-skilled grade of installer would essentially mean that there is the potential to cut wages by up to 35 per cent. The "Seven" are even telling their workers that the BESNA is an improvement and protest that the union is lying! But with each new job, where once they would have required 100 electricians it would become 30 electricians and 70 installers, as up to 70 per cent of an electrician's work involves installing. The rate for an electrician or "spark" being £16 an hour, for an installer £10.50 an hour. A similar attack was attempted some 12 years ago and it was rebutted – it must be again.

In a cynical attack on the young, they say that the BESNA will "create job security and give apprentices and skilled staff a bright future" but their apprentice scheme will stop at NVQ Level 2 – a qualified spark has NVQ3!

Then there is the change to the Joint Industrial Board (JIB) definition of the "shop" (usually the employer's local office, used for general trading and housing

The seven companies on the attack

The seven M&E contractors trying to back out of national agreements are Balfour Beatty, NG Bailey, Crown House Technologies, Gratte Brothers, SPIE Matthew Hall, Shepherd Engineering Services and T Clarke (the same one named by the Information Commissioner's Office as being the main blacklisting employers in the construction industry, and the contractor at the Park House Shopping Centre).

The seven were originally eight until MJN Colston got cold feet and tactically withdrew.

The national agreements are: JIB/SJIB (covering electrical in England and Wales/Scotland), JIB (PMES)/SNIJIB (plumbing and mechanical engineering services in England and Wales/Scotland and N. Ireland), HVAC (heating, ventilation and air conditioning). ■

personnel management staff). Currently, JIB agreement states any job over 15 miles from the shop will attract payments for travel. The BESNA clause covering the shop says that if the job/site/project is more than 25 miles away, the employer can temporarily redefine the job/site/project as the 'shop'. And, as if by magic, the need to pay the allowances (including Lodge allowances) is removed. Yet again, in the land of double speak, that won't disadvantage anyone in the existing workforce!

Roots of struggle

The history of the various agreements has its root in the nature of struggle on construction sites back in the 1950s and 1960s. What the employers called anarchy, we would describe as struggle to secure a better rate for our labour. The employers (and in truth, so too workers) ultimately wanted peace/order and thus agreements were made. They have been attacked and defended in equal measure ever since, both by disgruntled workers and employers depending on the conditions of the time.

But why now – why have these contractors decided to attempt the break from these agreements? With relatively few major projects in hand, employment is scarce, and fewer sites stop through industrial action.

There is, however, much on the horizon – some 64 major projects are in the pipeline, including the highly lucrative new nuclear builds. The time is ripe to make their move with an eye to winning the contracts on a cut price. Without doubt the employers, both clients and contractors, have been beaver-

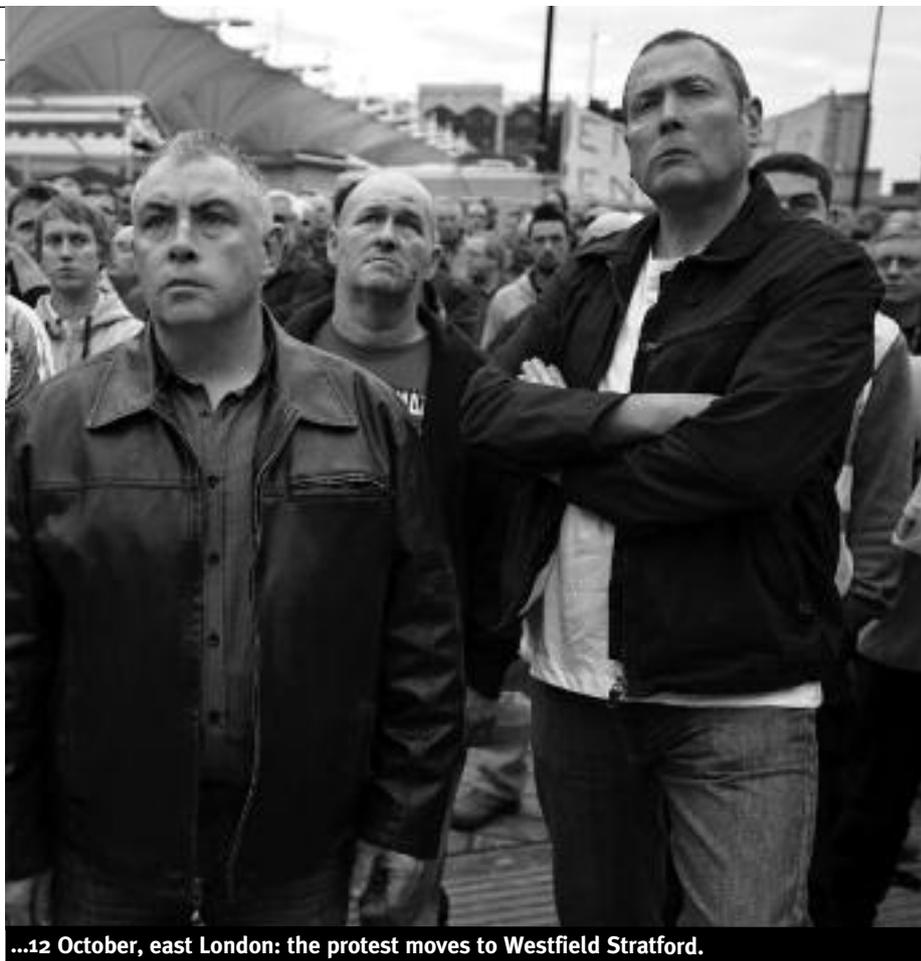
away behind the scenes aiming to reduce wages and undermine union control of sites. Until recently, JIB electricians had free membership of Unite, with the employer paying their union subscriptions – a position won in years past to ensure better union control of sites. Due to a decision, perhaps misguided, free membership stopped at a stroke and no mass campaign to re-recruit was ever undertaken. Electricians had to pay to belong and far too many chose not to!

Additionally, over the years, with a few notable exceptions, the electrical side of the industry has shown a reluctance to fight or support others in struggle and consequently have tended to occupy a somewhat isolated position. So, with favourable conditions and an eye to the future, the employers have made their move against what seems a weak section of the workforce.

The stakes are high for the whole industry and construction workers recognise that BESNA is the stalking horse to attack all agreements – the de-construction of all agreements being the goal. But electricians are in the frontline now and are being called upon to show their mettle. While Balfour is first in line, how the workers employed by the 7 react is key – a great deal of responsibility rests on their shoulders and they must stand up and take responsibility. If they accept the new agreement, it's odds on that it will become the norm as all M&E employers will abandon the JIB agreements if only to save their own necks.

Some may say "serves the selfish greedy bastards right for the treacherous role they

Continued on page 10



...12 October, east London: the protest moves to Westfield Stratford.

Photo: Andrew Wiard/www.wiard.co.uk

Continued from page 9

have played in the past" but now maximum unity across the industry is crucial.

It should be remembered that EDF, a French multinational, is to build Hinkley C in Somerset, the first new nuclear plant for over 40 years in Britain, and it has a poor track record. It has had problems in both Flamanville on the Cherbourg Peninsula in France, where over a third of the workforce are migrant labour and costs (and time) have doubled, and also in Finland. If EDF can treat the French workers with such contempt, what hope for Brits?

Alstom, another French multinational, which thought it might be in the running for the nuclear contracts, is apparently lagging behind.

Standing joke

A look at EDF's recent performance in Britain reveals much. West Burton power station, run by EDF/Amec, has had so many problems it is regarded (nearly) as a standing joke, with a bullying management lacking basic common sense and a workforce

unwilling, in the main, to stand up for itself. When it started, the job was touted as the turning point for the National Agreement for the Engineering Construction Industry (NAECI), with full-time National Engineering Construction Committee stewards and Category 1 status. Within six months it had become clear that EDF/Amec were more concerned with trying to succeed

where Alstom had failed (see below). By seeking to break the NAECI, its management style attracted criticism in the Gibson Review of Construction Engineering.

EDF is under investigation for their activities at Flamanville, where the practices on the site were described as a modern form of slavery. With two deaths on Flamanville in a space of six months it is obvious why EDF does not want the robust NAECI agreement on Hinkley. It would be scrutinised by both an independent auditor and the trade unions every step of the way.

Workers' power

By contrast, Pembroke power station, an Alstom job that has been built under union (Unite & GMB) control, has had few disputes as industrial issues are resolved with speed. Initially, Alstom had tried the same game as EDF at Langage, Isle of Grain and Staythorpe. But the company learnt through its experiences that workers wouldn't be crushed – hence their "enlightened" attitude on Pembroke. Consequently, it has been built on time and in budget. Its only delay is in gaining a permit to fire it up.

There is much at stake for the British construction industry, and the immediate attack on the various JIB agreements is the beginning. British workers must take responsibility and act on what they know, not only for their own terms and conditions but for the future of the construction industry in Britain. ■

Meet the Party

The Communist Party of Britain's new series of London public meetings began on 29 September, with further meetings on 10 November and 15 February; except on May Day, all are held in the Bertrand Russell room, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1R 4RL, nearest Tube Holborn. Other meetings are held around Britain. All meetings are advertised in What's On, see page 5.

M The theme of the next meeting, on Thursday 10 November, will be "Energy – Britain in Crisis". Details of further meetings will be announced in WORKERS and at www.workers.org.uk.

M The Party's annual London May Day rally is always held on May Day itself, regardless of state bank holidays – in 2012, Tuesday 1 May, in Conway Hall, Holborn. There will also be May Day meetings elsewhere in the country.

M As well as our regular public meetings we hold informal discussions with interested workers and study sessions for those who want to take the discussion further. If you are interested we want to hear from you. Call us on 020 8801 9543 or e-mail to info@workers.org.uk



European governments – including Britain – have paved the way for the European Union to negotiate trade deals that could see governments being sued by corporations...

Protection for investors, not for the people

ON 12 SEPTEMBER the EU Council, made up of Member States representatives, gave the European Commission the mandate to introduce “investor protection” into its trade deals, thus putting the rights of investors above those of elected governments.

Investor protection allows investors to sue governments for any loss of future profits stemming from any government action judged to negatively affect or “expropriate” those profits, directly or indirectly. Until now the EU’s trade deals have only involved state-to-state dispute mechanisms, with penalties in the form of trade sanctions.

The provision has been included in the bilateral investment agreements that some EU Member States have signed individually, and also in the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the US, Canada and Mexico. It has resulted in very large payouts, and also had a chilling effect on proposed legislation, even when the people of the country want that legislation.

Tobacco giant Philip Morris is using the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement to sue Australia over its laws on plain packaging for cigarettes, and EU member states have also had to pay up on bilateral investment commitments. Canada failed to proceed with legislation for cleaner petrol out of fear of the financial consequences in relation to NAFTA commitments.

So, in its effect, investor protection gives corporations control over government’s legislative initiatives that may for instance be for social welfare, health, industrial policy, or the environment.

For Britain, the important implications are in respect of control over policy on labour migration. The EU offers corporations based outside Europe Mode 4 access – that is, the chance to bring their workers into the EU – to get those countries into trade deals, but Britain will be affected more than other EU member states by Mode 4 offers. If Britain tries to pull back on these Mode 4 commitments and limit temporary migrant labour, for instance, could invoke legal action by corporations for compensation for lost profits if they have to employ more expensive staff locally instead of bringing them over from, say, India.



The European Commission, Brussels

Photo: Workers

The new mandate utilises the Lisbon Treaty, which shifted competency (control) of trade and investment from member states to the EU. It will be applied to the three Free Trade Agreements under negotiation: EU/India, EU/Singapore and the Canada and Europe Trade Agreement (CETA). The EU mandate gives maximum rights to investors, beyond those granted by NAFTA. “Unqualified national treatment” is specified – which means any transnational investor must be given conditions at least as beneficial as those given to any domestic investor, regardless of sector or company size.

Here comes the law

Although the EU version provides for “social, environmental, security, public health and safety objectives to be pursued in a non-discriminatory manner”, other parts of the text prohibit “unreasonable, arbitrary or discriminatory measures”. This indicates prospective legal battles over the legitimacy of legislation. In trade disputes judges lean towards free trade decisions.

Note that the European Council has gone even further than the European Commission, which recommended some safeguards on industrial and labour policy, including in relation to Mode 4 – and the Council is also overriding the recommendations for balance and caution made by the European Parliament. While speculative investment is not excluded, very full investors’ freedoms to move cash in and

out of a country are specifically included, forestalling a state’s right and need to impose restrictions in the event of, for example, a run on their currency.

Argentina has been sued by 15 corporations for financial measures of this sort that it took to protect its economy and population. Awards against the state have been made, but Argentina continues to argue that its measures were legitimate social measures.

Investor protection is a threat to all levels of governmental action: at the EU level; for member state governments; for provincial governments in Federation states and local government. Yet a major issue still undecided in relation to EU investor protection is where the financial responsibility lies between the EU and any member state that is judged to be liable. It is also not clear in which judicial system such a dispute could be held. The Commission is committed to producing a proposal on these two issues by the end of the year.

In the current climate of eurozone cross-border bailout, member states particularly want the financial responsibility question settled before any of these agreements are ratified, which occurs when the European Parliament “gives assent”, as the final process is called. But the EU/India Free Trade Agreement is in the stage of finalising actual negotiations and is expected to be completed by December this year. What happens with individual states’ existing Bilateral Investment Agreements is also undecided, with the EU deals being hastily pushed through.

International trade agreements contain an inherent contradiction. While negotiations are state-to-state, these deals are carried out on behalf of and for the benefit of the investors in private corporations. These corporations have a major influence on the substance and direction of trade deals while the content, progress and implications of those deals are, for the most part, kept from the public.

This makes it hard for people to act against the trade agenda. Information dissemination is a key part of resistance on what may seem like “technicalities”. ■

Why have food prices been soaring? According to the World Bank the 140 per cent rise in global food prices between 2002 and 2008 was due to biofuels: the replacement of food crops with plants grown for fuel.

The European Union and the great biofuels

POLITICIANS HAVE a poor track record when it comes to making bets on unproven technologies. And no one makes poorer decisions than the European Union – except, perhaps, Labour and Coalition governments who implement those decisions. So when the EU issued a Directive in 2003 instructing that 5.75 per cent of transport fuels to be made up of biofuels, and backed it up with another Directive in 2009 with a new target of 10 per cent renewable energy in transport fuels by 2020, only a committed Europhile would expect any good to come of it. And yet hardly anyone foresaw the extent of the potential damage to the world – its people and environment.

The debate over the production of biofuels for commercial use has developed over some years now and the risks have been documented. One is that as large companies spot a lucrative market, they switch agricultural land from producing crops for people and produce crops for cars instead.

To give some idea of the size of the problem: according to a Worldwatch study the US would need 30 per cent of its agricultural land if it were to produce 10 per cent of its fuels with home-grown biofuels. Even with biofuels in their infancy, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation reckoned

their production has been responsible for the surge in global grain prices in 2006.

And things haven't got any better since then. In a book* published last year Professor James Smith from Edinburgh University's Centre of African Studies warned we cannot ignore the statistics that reflect the speed of growth, the extent of biofuel production and its impact on food prices: "Figures from the US Department of Agriculture for 2009 show that the grain grown to produce fuel was enough to feed 350 million people for a year at average consumption levels. This represents a third of all those who constantly go without food." A third of all US maize is now used for ethanol, and globally, "between 2002 and 2006, the amount of land used to grow biofuels quadrupled and production tripled."

The food cost

Smith points out that contrary to US claims about biofuels contributing only 2 to 3 per cent of food price increases in recent years, the World Bank Mitchell Report, published in 2008, reckoned biofuel production had caused 75 per cent of the 140 per cent increase in staple food prices occurring between 2002 and 2008. The price of maize, the main feedstock for ethanol in the US,

doubled from \$117 to \$233 in the two years 2006/2007.

Oil companies are looking both ways on this. They want to carry on selling traditionally produced petrol, and are also investing heavily (hundreds of millions of pounds a year) in biofuels: an each-way bet. But when an oil executive says – as Shell's Eric Holthusen did in 2006 – that using land to grow fuel when people are starving is "morally inappropriate", it's probably time to look at what the European Union is doing.

European law now dictates that 5.75 per cent biofuels must be blended into all transport fuel, but though the target was set for 2010, it hasn't been achieved (in Britain, it's currently 2.6 per cent) and has had to be extended, in Britain to 2013. And no wonder: there simply isn't enough land in Europe to grow the crops required.

So there are two principal results of the policy: land in the developing world is being converted from food production (or, in the case of Indonesia, from virgin rainforest) to "grow" fuel; and the cost of fuel is going up, because it costs more to turn maize into petrol or diesel than to use fossil fuels (of which we still have a lot!).

You couldn't make it up: only the European Union can produce such a cock-



CPBML/Workers

Public Meeting, London Thursday 10 November, 7.30 pm "Energy – Britain in Crisis"

Bertrand Russell Room, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. Nearest tube Holborn.

Britain was built on power: first steam, then electricity. Now the pits are shut, North Sea oil is running out and power stations are being shut faster than new ones are being planned. Can renewables really plug the gap – or will the lights start going out? Come and discuss for Britain. Everybody welcome.

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As with many technical developments of humanity arising as necessity becomes the mother of invention, capitalism hijacks the direction of development through investment. "Biofuels represent both a promise of a technologically driven future and the spectre of a web of known unknowns and unknown unknowns. [They] are driving and transforming the increasingly entangled relationship between energy, food security and climate change," says Smith. He suggests that biofuel production may represent "the biggest change in North-South relationships since colonialism" because "the production of biofuels risks reprioritising land use across the globe, and as yet we know little about the implications of this."

For example, several African countries have been attracted by the lure of saving foreign exchange on fuel imports and even earning income, despite inadequate national food security. In Tanzania, where 25 per cent of foreign exchange is spent on oil imports, "foreign companies are growing sugar cane for bioethanol so that European countries can meet their biofuel blending targets," says Smith.

Biofuels can work

In the right climate, with sufficient rainfall (biofuel crops are very, very thirsty), the technology can work without wrecking the environment – witness the outstanding success of Brazil's biofuel production. Brazil pioneered the commercial use of biofuel (auto gas as it is known in the petrol stations) and now uses it extensively in the city areas, especially Sao Paulo.

But as Smith points out, that success cannot be replicated in many other places for agronomic and other reasons. He questions the Indian government's huge investment in *jatropha* plantations since the crop's performance is unproven under anything but ideal conditions, and also because the so called "marginal land", on which it is planned to plant *jatropha* orchards, already supports the grazing and gathering needs of millions of the very poor.

There are also indications in aerospace that infrastructure used to supply fuels can



What are biofuels?

Biofuels are any liquid, solid or gaseous fuels produced from organic matter. The extensive range of organic materials used for biofuel production includes starch and sugary plants such as corn, wheat or sugar cane; oily plants such as rape seed, soya beans or *jatropha*; vegetable oils and animal fats; wood and straw; algae and organic waste and others. Biofuels (mainly bioethanol and biodiesel) are commonly referred to as first-generation – the current technologies – or second-generation, which cover a variety of technologies in the pipeline whose central characteristic is that they can convert the woodier (lignocellulosic) parts of plants into fuel and so are more efficient.

Second- and third-generation biofuels

that do not compete directly (or, at least, not so much) with crop land are being developed, including the production of algae as a source of vegetable oil, biodiesel, bioethanol and other biofuels. Algal fuels may yield up to 30 times as much energy per unit area as first- and second-generation biofuel crops.

One of the alleged benefits of biofuels is that they are more carbon-friendly than fossil fuels, since the carbon they release is simply that taken from the atmosphere, rather than carbon locked up for millions of years in oil deposits. But others – including Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen – dispute the calculations, pointing to the carbon cost of turning earth, fertilisers, and biofuel production and distribution. ■

be compromised because some types of biofuel leave residues in the delivery pipes that can lead to contamination of the next delivery of, say, jet fuel. There could also be impacts on the fuel control systems of actual aircraft. So even though biofuels have yet to be fully approved for use in aircraft an effect is already being felt. More development will obviously be needed. That, too, will require research.

British workers have yet to be directly affected by the use of agricultural land for biofuel production, except of course through rising food prices. They are, though, at the forefront of global biofuels research – Britain has a world-leading research base in plant and microbial sciences. There are plenty of ideas for biofuels that won't eat

into the food supply.

In September 2009, £27 million was set aside for a British bioenergy research institute by the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council to work towards the creation of biofuels from willow and straw. It will take a great deal more investment over the years to keep Britain ahead in the race to develop biofuels that meet the needs of the people, rather than the investment needs of capital. Much of this is public money, and the question of who should or could control this technology – capitalists or workers – needs to be raised. ■

***Biofuels and the Globalisation of Risk, by James Smith, Zed Books 2010, 150pp, ISBN 978 1 84813 572 7 (Pbk) £17.99**

At a time when some are calling for a General Strike we need to
Britain...

1926: The General Strike, and why it should

IN TRADE union history 4 May 1926 is a special date – the day the General Strike took place in Britain. Given all the myths that have sprung up and the siren calls for similar action often heard now, it's particularly important to recognise what actually happened.

In fact, the impetus for the General Strike resides in much earlier events which unfortunately led to our working class drifting into a tactically inept, inflexible form of combat totally unsuited for an on-going, largely economic battle against a fully prepared, stronger class enemy.

In 1914, to strengthen their bargaining hand, the miners had sponsored the formation of a Triple Industrial Alliance with railway and transport workers as a tactic to press wage agreements and settle hours of work. The idea that trade unions should be revolutionary organisations – called syndicalism – was popular before the war and part of the background to this move.

In 1919, when the miners threatened to strike for more money and shorter hours, the other members of the Alliance declared support. To deflect this, the government set up the Sankey Commission, which duly reported almost wholly in favour of the miners, recommending wage increases, a seven- instead of an eight-hour day and a system of public ownership for the coal industry. Mines had been taken under direct government control during the 1914–18 War and remained so for a few peacetime years. With strike notices withdrawn, miners got their shorter day and some wage increases, but nationalisation was rejected.

At the end of March 1921 the mines were returned to private ownership. The coal owners refused to modernise the industry but immediately announced sweeping wage reductions, imposing a lockout of union members at all collieries. Again, the railway and transport unions threatened a Triple Alliance strike.

This time Lloyd George's government responded with a State of Emergency, called reservists to colours, had machine-guns posted at pitheads and sent troops in battle order to working class areas. Last-



May 1926: An armoured car escorts a food convoy down the East India Dock Road, east London

minute negotiations petered out in confusion and the Triple Alliance strike action was withdrawn, earning the event the derogatory name Black Friday.

In this episode an obvious weakness was that the transport and railway workers had no demands of their own but were placing their own livelihoods in danger simply for the sake of the miners. The miners resumed work on the owners' terms.

The 1923 boom in mining allowed negotiation of higher wages, but collapse soon followed and by 1925 with a return to the Gold Standard came calls for a reduction in wages. The newly formed TUC General Council, in an attempt to displace the Alliance, supported the miners. Realising conditions were not sufficiently in their favour, the government bought time in negotiations and brokered a deceptive

peace in the mines with a nine-month coal subsidy. Tempt the gullible with temporary solace. The trade unions, swollen-headed by the effectiveness of their mere threat to strike, thought Prime Minister Baldwin had capitulated, and called the day Red Friday. Whereas the government – knowing it wasn't ready – had allowed an armistice in order to gain time for a later assault.

Government preparations

At once the government took preparatory action in a strategic, class-conscious fashion. In September 1925, Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies Committees were formed in the metropolitan boroughs. Also registration of potential volunteers began, leading to a pool of 100,000 blacklegs by the time of the conflict, many of them British fascists. 226,000 special policemen were created.

get clearer about what happened last time there was one in

d not be mindlessly imitated



An Emergency Committee on Supply and Transport was established, meeting weekly to work out a scheme to keep food and transport services running. England and Wales were divided into ten divisions, each under a Civil Commissioner with Coal, Finance and Food Officers beneath them. In the event of a stoppage they were charged together with local authorities to control road transport, food and fuel supplies. By the spring of 1926, stockpiles of food, coal and fuel had been built up.

Meanwhile after Red Friday, trade union leaders acted as if trouble could be averted, and during the nine months of coal subsidy, to avoid being provocative, made no strike preparations or battle plans. Although the trade unions had declared war and rhetoric still flourished, union leaders and most of the membership had not apparently really meant it. No

preparations for a national strike on the trade union side were made until the 27 April when two trade union leaders met. There was unreasoning faith in the prospect of a settlement crossed with a lack of enthusiasm for action among the majority of the General Council. Most had pinned their hopes on the Samuel Commission which reported unfavourably for miners in March 1926 on the key issues of hours and wages. The miners refused to accept it.

Vain hope

Three weeks of futile negotiation followed in April 1926. Unlike in 1925 the government, prepared for eventualities, was not interested in making concessions or obtaining a settlement. The trade unions still remained ridiculously hopeful of a settlement. But in the very final negotiations on Friday 29 April, the mine owners offered a wage cut on worse terms than the Samuel Commission and the government refused to interfere or continue with negotiations. An Emergency Powers Act was signed. On 30 April – the day on which the subsidy ran out – mine owners posted notices in most pits and a million miners were locked out.

On 1 May the various unions declared they were prepared to hand over their autonomy to the General Council during the dispute (never a wise course of action) and voted to join a National Strike on 3 May. The General Council now deemed the conduct of the dispute to be completely in its hands, either to organise a strike or – increasingly from day one – to arrange a climb-down and call it off.

The “General Strike” was not quite a general, all-embracing strike; it was a partial national strike of some elements. Only one section of the labour movement was called out: railway workers, transport workers, iron and steel workers, builders, printers, dockers. The number of strikers was between 1.5 and 1.75 million. Other trades and occupations were kept back: engineers, electricians, woodworkers, shipyard workers, post office and telephone workers. More critical, the trade unions went into battle unready and with

divided leadership.

Government departments sent out detailed instructions, troop movements were announced including two battalions of infantry that marched through Liverpool. All army and navy leave was cancelled. Hyde Park was closed to serve as a food depot.

The response to the strike call was overwhelming. Its completeness surprised everyone including the TUC and the Labour Party which feared by association of losing “bourgeois” respectability. Public transport was mightily affected, especially the trains, and the trams in London stopped running for the duration of the dispute. Despite much publicity, the volunteers on buses and elsewhere had a minimal effect, but government plans to use road haulage lorries worked as goods were transported around the country by non-unionised labour.

The TUC General Council called off the strike on 12 May. It had obtained no terms for the miners or for the other workers who had struck in sympathy with them. The miners continued on strike alone for six months and eventually were forced back to work on regional settlements, longer hours and lower wages with an ever-present pool of unemployed miners to undermine their efforts.

In many other trades and occupations employers sought to inflict setback and sack trade union leaders. Within a year the Trades Disputes and Trade Unions Act of 1927 was introduced forbidding sympathetic strikes and mass picketing. TUC membership fell from 5.5 million in 1925 to 3.75 million in 1930.

Tactics and strategy are the lifeblood of our class. Properly understood, a general strike is a political weapon reserved for the most propitious circumstances when a working class is ready to move to the revolutionary seizure of power; a measure to be deployed only when a class wants to overthrow the exploiters’ system and seize the levers of power. Unless such a level of understanding is there, a general strike should not be broached; other more irregular tactics should apply. ■

Back to Front – Left, right and centre

‘To read most commentary, you’d think there was some kind of battle for control of a football pitch...’

DEBATES AT all three major party conferences this autumn focused on debt, austerity and cuts. But whether it was the Conservatives in Manchester, the LibDems in Birmingham or Labour in Liverpool, the differences were barely detectable. They all want cuts. They all want to save the bankers. They all back the rule of finance capital.

And yet to read most commentary, you’d think there was some kind of battle for control of a football pitch: left, right, centre.

For the Labour Party, one year into opposition, the question seems to be whether it is trying to hold the centre or drifting to the left. Some Tories are concerned their Party is not being right wing enough. The LibDems are said to have adopted radical compliance, claiming to hold the centre ground.

On the first day of the Conservative conference thousands gathered to protest against their policies. Most on that demonstration were said to be advocates of left policies, many belonging to the “hard left”, as opposed to the “soft left” clinging on inside Labour.

But, does any of this left-right polarisation really have much meaning today, indeed did it ever in Britain? After all, they are designations dating back to the early days of the French Revolution at the back end of the 18th century.

In truth, it’s a phoney war. Who in this morass of labels is really standing for the interests of Britain and its working class? Add up what we need – workers taking responsibility for Britain, an end to the

domination of finance capital, planning for the future, control over labour flows and migrant workers, independence in energy and agriculture, and out of the EU – then ask what label that fits under.

If you want to see class war being waged singlemindedly, look at how capitalism seeks to secure its own interests. It’s not worried about labels. It simply seeks to destroy the basis of our strength: industry and sovereignty.

And while the three parties were meeting to squabble over the best ways of making the working class pay for the catastrophic failure of finance capitalism, the money markets continued to speculate. In doing this they are beyond the control of governments, democratic accountability – and also it seems of the speculators themselves.

The working class needs to identify and then act upon those measures that will rebuild Britain in the way most favourable to itself. The question cannot be whether any given policy represents left, right or centre, but whose interests are served by it? The need to reinvigorate manufacturing and farming, to combat finance capitalism, to develop and maintain skills are fundamental to the British working class acting as a class for itself.

Leave the left and right wings, along with the centre, to the football field, and those parties bound to serve only themselves and the interests of the only other class in Britain, the ruling class. For the working class, these labels have come to represent only division. ■

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