

Unity against wage cuts in construction Time to step up the action!

Rob Williams

Chair, National Shop Stewards Network

The 'Dirty 7' construction companies, who want to slash skilled workers' wages, have finally been dragged kicking and screaming to the negotiating table. This has been achieved by almost five months of rank and file action which has included protests, walkouts and stoppages.

But the deadlock at the Acas talks before Christmas means that the action has to be stepped up - official or unofficial. The campaign of action reached a new stage when electricians fighting the new Besna terms walked out unofficially on 7 December.

A week later on 14 December, over 5,000 walked out as these sparks were joined by workers employed under the NAECI/Blue Book agreement who were fighting the imposition of a pay freeze. This was the first national stoppage in the construction industry across all trades since the building workers' strikes in the early 1970s - which infamously saw the 'Shrewsbury Pickets' jailed by the Tory government of Ted Heath.

Deskilling

The action has been necessary because the bosses want to withdraw from the JIB agreement and impose the Besna terms. This will lead to deskilling of electrical work and massive cutting of wages and terms and conditions. Some will see their pay reduced by up to 35%!

The pressure of this rank and file movement has forced Unite into balloting for strike action. This was won in Balfours (BBES) by 81% but ruled out by the anti-union laws on a technicality.

The talk among the activists is that Balfours only threatened an injunction. If this was the case, Unite should have gone ahead with the official strike and forced BBES to go to the courts. Hopefully the re-ballot majority will be just as overwhelm-



Liverpool 14 December photo J Marston

ing. In any case, the 81% vote has legitimised this struggle. On 7 December, sparks refused to go into work, showing Balfours and the other six employers that workers will ignore the legal action to fight for their livelihoods.

The fact that talks at Acas took place before Christmas, should give construction workers confidence that action works. Unite has to send the employers the message: "If you don't rip up Besna, there'll be more action in the New Year".

The National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) welcomes the negotiating team's implacable opposition to Besna. We support Steve Acheson, a blacklisted member of the Rank and File National Committee being included on the Unite negotiating team. We also believe that any future talks need to be transparent and in front of the members.

Any offer from the employers should be put to a national meeting open to all electricians with their travel expenses covered by Unite. The deadlock at Acas means that further action is necessary. We be-

lieve that action needs to continue to be linked up with the NAECI/Blue Book sites that are fighting a pay freeze. Both disputes are at a critical stage.

We support the call to make 9 January the next national stoppage throughout the building trade. This call has to go out to all those in dispute to see if other strikes can be coordinated, such as the Unilever workers who went on strike at 26 sites at the end of last year to defend their pensions. In Gwent, in Wales, 156 out of the 160 workers were on the picket line!

We support coordinating action with any future strikes by public sector workers to stop the Con-Dems attacking their pensions. Before Christmas, some of the union leaders showed that they are willing to sell out the public sector pension battle.

The Socialist Party and the NSSN support the conference called by PCS Left Unity (see front page). This is open to members of all unions and has been organised to reject any sell-out and to name the date for the

next coordinated strike after N30.

All construction workers should attend to maintain the links between the private and public sectors. It will also be a warning to the Unite of-

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officials in the JIB/NAECI disputes! Let's make 2012 the year that workers in the public and private sector won famous victories against the bosses and their split government.

What's what

Besna: The Building Engineering Services National Agreement is a new national agreement for mechanical, electrical and plumbing workers in the building engineering services sector. It is being foisted on those workers by the Heating and Ventilating Contractors' Association on behalf of the seven major construction companies in the building engineering services industry. The 'Dirty 7' want this to replace the JIB agreement.

NAECI/Blue Book: The National Agreement for the Engineering Construction Industry, also called the Blue Book. This covers different trades to those covered by the JIB agreement. The employers want to subject the workers covered by this agreement to a pay freeze.

JIB Joint Industry Board: The existing terms and conditions for electrical and plumbing workers.

BBES: Balfour Beatty Engineering Services

N30: The 30 November joint public sector strike against the pension cuts

Cuts used to attack trade unionists

In its latest round of cuts, Waltham Forest's Labour council has cut another 26 jobs and merged its library service with the Waltham Forest Direct benefits, council tax and advice service.

Nancy Taaffe, Waltham Forest Unison chair and convenor for libraries, is one of the sacked workers. Nancy has a record of fighting tirelessly for union members and for public services in Waltham Forest, north east London. The council appears to be removing trade union activists in order to make it easier to push through savage cuts.

Nancy said: "Waltham Forest Direct is the first port of call for people who have problems; it can be a noisy and tense place. There should be privacy for people who require help and support and adequate time and space for people to provide a service properly.

"Primary school children trying to have a story read to them or students who live in noisy, crowded homes should not share the same space as people who are having problems accessing or relating to basic coun-



Picketing Walthamstow central library on N30 photo A. Hill

cil services. The reality is that the library service is being disbanded under the guise of a merger."

The council has used its new 'Residents First' department to create a tier of temporary jobs and advertise them externally. This is brutal exploitation of mass unemployment to intimidate the workforce and drive through cuts.

Nancy and others in Unison, backed up 100% by Waltham Forest

Anti-Cuts Union and other activists, have launched a campaign of resistance to all these cuts.

• Waltham Forest Anti-Cuts Union will meet on Thursday 5 January, 7.30pm, William Morris Community Centre, Greenleaf Road, E17 6QQ.

Waltham Forest Unison is holding two emergency branch meetings on Friday 6 January at Waltham Forest Town Hall, Forest Road, E17 4JF, at 12 noon and 4pm.

Fight job-cutting academies

Paul Gerrard

The only thing Santa brought the staff at the Oasis Academy, Salford, is P45s. Thirteen staff are to lose their jobs, nine teachers and four support staff.

The Oasis Community Learning is one of a growing number of 'chains' of academies, with schools in Enfield, Croydon, Bristol, Southampton, Grimsby, Oldham and elsewhere. It's an avowedly Christian foundation.

Four years ago Salford's Hope High School was under threat. Academy status under Oasis was offered as the only alternative to closure.

Staff reluctantly accepted assurances of 'no job losses'. They were TUPE'd over and at first all seemed well.

A year ago a new head was appointed by Oasis and about six weeks ago he announced 13 staff re-

dundancies, to take place mid-year, irrespective of the impact on pupils taking GCSEs. When pupils heard, they organised a walkout from the school and set off fire alarms all day.

A process of 'consultation' which would normally take three months has been concertinaed into five weeks, and the unions have been sidelined. NUT members balloted overwhelmingly for action. NUT and NAS/UWT have authorised strike days with full pay in the face of Oasis' intransigence.

The school was closed as part of the pensions dispute on 30 November and there were two strike days over redundancies in each of the first two weeks of December.

The government tries to entice more schools down the academy road but for all the glossy prospectuses and the flashy websites, in this crazy Con-Dem world each school is just another cost centre.