

Electricians meet to plan next steps

Hugh Caffrey

Electricians from across England, Scotland and Wales gathered in Birmingham on 14 January to plan the next steps for the fight in defence of pay rates and their skilled trade. Seven companies are trying to tear up national agreements on pay and terms of employment, currently decided by the "Joint Industry Board" (JIB). This will mean up to 35% pay cuts for sparks and the deskilling of the jobs.

Organised by the Rank & File (R&F), this national meeting came at an important time, as the Seven are trying to force sparks to sign the new "Besna" contracts, under clearly implied threats of sacking if they don't. Around 70 sparks and their supporters took part in a lively discussion.

Gail Cartmail, Unite assistant general secretary, spoke first and confirmed that ballot papers were sent to 830 employees of Balfour Beatty (BBES), the "ringleader" in the breakaway seven, on 9 January.

The ballot closes on 1 February, with the first possible date for official strike action being 9 February. Although Gail did not spell it out, it seems that no other Besna companies are being balloted.



The protests are having an effect on the big building companies photo Paul Mattsson

Sparks will however welcome Gail's commitment that Unite regional offices and full-time officials must "consistently" support the protests, and that thousands of pounds in regional funds are available as well as what exists in construction branch funds.

Gail said the employers asked for more Acas talks but Unite refused because the companies won't lift the

threat of dismissals, which is Unite's precondition for serious talks.

The NAECI agreement (which covers engineering construction sites such as power stations and oil refineries) is "next in the firing line" and therefore Unite will put resources into organising NAECI membership.

A lively discussion saw a host of questions, some very critical, put to

Gail. Criticism of Unite full-time officers in the regions, and especially of national construction official Bernard McAulay, drew a very angry response from Gail. Out of this debate was agreed a proposal that a currently unemployed R&F activist in each region should be elected by the R&F to be paid by Unite at JIB rates, to organise sites while fighting Besna.

Other speakers from the top table included Brian Higgins, blacklisted building worker. He emphasised that full-time officials should be elected, and that if necessary we should defy the anti-union laws.

Steve Acheson, national and north-west R&F committee member, spoke powerfully. "We've wiped out Balfour's war-chest" said Steve, referring to the pot of money BBES boasted they would use to sit out the protests, now exceeded by contracts Balfour have lost since due to clients' fear of protests following BBES wherever they go!

Solidarity greetings from the National Shop Stewards Network were received with strong applause. There will be national weeks of local action against NG Baileys in the week starting 25 January, and against BBES in the week starting 6 February because 9 February is when official strike action should start. Most protests will continue to be on Wednesdays, except some in Scotland which will be continue to be on Fridays.

The next national R&F meeting will be on 4 February, again in Birmingham. All construction electricians need to be at this event to discuss the detail of walkouts in the following week, with all construction trades welcome.

Jobs massacre at La Senza

Ian Harris

Administrators KPMG have announced they are 'delighted' to have saved 1,000 jobs in the UK with lingerie retailer La Senza. They didn't mention the remaining 1,600 workers thrown on the dole with ten minutes' notice.

At a mass meeting on 9 January, a representative from KPMG unceremoniously informed 250 warehouse, mail order and office staff that despite the 'rescue' deal signed with Alshaya, our jobs, as well as those of the staff of 80 stores, were no longer required.

In my workplace in west London, this blow falls particularly heavily on young workers, many with young families. Their disgust was particularly strong because of the lies and distortions fed to us over the last few weeks. We were repeatedly told that we shouldn't worry, that a deal was being negotiated and we should carry on working as normal. Mail order and warehouse staff were even made to do extra overtime, meaning

12-hour shifts or more, in order to catch up with orders. We now have to claim these wages from the government.

La Senza, KPMG and the other retail giants and consortiums claim that restructuring and job losses are necessary due to the state of the economy.

But La Senza is not so much losing money, it is just not making enough to satisfy the private equity parasites, Lion Capital, who withdrew their investment. Alshaya have swooped in like vultures, to pick off the 60 best stores, and add them to their already massive high street portfolio.

La Senza workers in the UK are heartened by and 100% in support of the occupation of the Liffey Valley store in Dublin. Workers there are demanding their overtime payments for December and unpaid wages. The speech made by Socialist Party TD Joe Higgins in the Dáil supporting these workers, was particularly inspiring, and should stand as a lesson to politicians in the UK who claim to represent ordinary people.

Unilever workers say hands off our pensions

Iain Dalton

Unilever's attempt to scrap its workforce's final salary pension scheme, which will affect 5,000 workers, is being vigorously opposed. On 9 December, workers at 11 sites across the country shut down production with huge numbers taking part in the picket lines. At the Croespenmaen Pot Noodle factory in Wales, all bar one shop floor worker were present at the picket lines, with large vibrant pickets taking place elsewhere in the country.

After the demonstration outside the company's headquarters on 9 January, Unite, Usdaw and GMB called rolling action from 17 January, which will again involve 2,500 workers at sites in Purfleet, Port Sunlight, Warrington, Leeds, Crumlin, Gloucester, Manchester, Burton-on-Trent and Ewloe in Wales.

So far the company has refused to meet the unions or to go to the conciliation service Acas. Closing the scheme to new entrants in 2008 was supposed to ensure the scheme's



Fighting the pension snatchers photo Paul Mattsson

long term future. Yet only a few years later the Unilever tops, like the ConDem government, are coming back for more, determined to make ordinary workers suffer at the expense of the wealthy 1%.

Future action should be co-ordi-

nated alongside those public sector workers still fighting to defend their pensions.

The message of the unions must be clear: all workers deserve a decent pension, not the misery of pensioner poverty.

Doctors support call for action

A Junior doctor

As the fight for public sector pensions intensifies, unity in building the resistance is crucial. The message from the Con-Dems is clear in their final offer for public sector pensions - work longer, pay more, get less. Anger is growing amongst health workers already hit by pay freezes, job losses and an increasingly overstretched NHS.

This was reflected at a recent meeting called by the British Medical Association (BMA) in Portsmouth. There was unanimity amongst the 160 doctors there to call for industrial action short of strike in the BMA's current consultative survey of members due to close this week. This was

up from a third of doctors supporting industrial action short of strike in a similar meeting in the build-up to the 30 November strike.

This fight is not just about pensions. With companies such as the American consultancy firm McKInsey poised to take over profitable NHS services the Con-Dems are desperate to slash NHS workers' terms and conditions to make them more attractive for takeover. This is despite the fact that the NHS pension scheme is set to deliver over £10 billion to the treasury in the next four years.

It is key that the BMA works closely with members of other health care unions to build a co-ordinated campaign to fight NHS cuts and privatisation.

Eighth day on strike for bus workers

Alistair Tice

Stagecoach busdrivers in Barnsley and Rotherham, members of the Unite trade union, took their eighth day of strike action on 16 January in pursuit of their pay claim for £9.50 an hour.

Boosted by a branch members' ballot which had overwhelmingly rejected the company offer by 206 votes to 89, pickets at the Rawmarsh depot were in determined mood. One steward said that he had spent 16 hours on the picket line last time. He had put newspapers down his trousers and mustard powder around his toes to keep warm in the freezing temperatures!

Drivers were on £8.57 an hour and had a 2% rise imposed, taking them to £8.74.

The 'offer' was £9.05 an hour but with no back-pay (due from April 2011) and no further rise until 2013, in other words a two year pay deal, with many strings attached.

How far Stagecoach South Yorkshire pay has fallen behind other bus drivers was illustrated by three Arriva bus union reps on the picket line in solidarity - they are on £11.43 an hour.

The Barnsley and Rotherham drivers have been taking strike action since November but Stagecoach is bussing in supervisors and managers from all around the country. The result is the depot is able to get out

about 60% of the services.

But at what cost? The pickets have seen a pay slip showing up to £155 in bonuses per day for strike breakers on top of their wage. Hotel and travel is also paid.

The strikers are not disheartened because Stagecoach can't keep this up as it's more expensive than paying the drivers. Clearly the company can afford to pay the increase they are seeking!

• Messages of support should be emailed to Barnsley Unite branch secretary Tony Rushforth at a-rushforth@sky.com Cheques should be made payable to Unite, 8-9/9 Barnsley and sent to A Rushforth, 45 Tune Street, Wombwell, Barnsley S73 8PX