

Unilever Stepping up the action to defend pensions



On the picket line at Purfleet photo Ben Robinson

Paula Mitchell

Workers at multinational company Unilever are making a stand to defend pensions. Following a strike of 2,500 workers last month, from 17 January thousands of Unite, Usdaw and GMB members at Unilever are taking strike action for up to 12 days.

The strike is because the company threatens to end the final salary pension scheme, leading to pension cuts of up to 40%.

Pickets at the Purfleet factory on the first strike day, warmed by cups of tea and bacon sandwiches in the drizzle, explained their anger at the company.

"You should look at the pay at the top. They're taking off us to give to them.

"Our contributions were nearly doubled three years ago - we went from paying 4% to more than 7% - on the guarantee that would save the final salary pension."

One woman striker explained:

"I've been here ten years and I'll lose £2,500 a year - and that's based on the assumption of extra contributions. And it's only guaranteed for three years, then they could come back and move the goalposts again. Some of the guys here will lose a lot more.

"Unilever is refusing to talk. Unite and the other unions have gone to Acas and are willing to talk but the company refuses."

As the pickets recognised, public sector workers fighting to defend pensions are being told they should be grateful for what they've got compared with the private sector, while private sector workers are being told what they've got is too generous. "What we should do is all join up together!"

For more industrial reports, see the Socialist Party's website: www.socialistparty.org.uk. This includes a report from the picket line of Jet tanker drivers at Immingham docks on 24 January.

On the evening of 20 January and the morning and afternoon of the following Saturday, workers at Unilever's Leeds site in Seacroft took a further 24 hours of strike action.

The company, which was founded by philanthropist Lord Leverhulme, still claims to hold social responsibility among its values. Yet despite making €4.6 billion in profits last year, they now claim they can't afford to pay the workforce a decent pension. And as for Unilever workers outside Britain, a recent video produced by Unite the Union points out the entire workforce of the Lipton's tea factory in Pakistan are temporary workers with no job security.

If the company are still refusing to come to the negotiating table then it is likely to take an escalation of the action to do so. In the meantime, Unilever workers and the unions should aim to build links with all others fighting for decent pensions, not least workers in the public sector who face similar attacks on their pensions.

Unions and trades councils should invite Unilever workers to speak at meetings to help counter the government's attempts to divide public and private sector workers and fight for a decent pension for every worker.

A Leeds Usdaw member

Warrington

Pickets from Unite and GMB were outside the Unilever works in Warrington from 6am on 18 January. About 30 union members picketed with placards and flags reading "Unilever - Not as clean as you think" and "Unilever - Ditching my pension", while being watched by management and security guards from the security lodge at the main gate.

**Andy Ford
Warrington trades council**



Strikers at Ewloe north Wales on 18 January photo Stillshooter

Trafford Park

Manchester Socialist Party members joined the picket line at Trafford Park Unilever site again when the weekend shift walked out on 22 January.

Unilever cancelled Christmas for staff at other sites in retribution for the previous strikes. But at Trafford Park, workers haven't seen a company Christmas hamper in years!

Further action may well be needed and it's urgent that the trade union movement rallies round with donations to ensure workers can continue the fight.

• Please encourage your union branch to donate to the national hardship fund. Make cheques payable to "Unite the Union - Unilever" and send them to: Jennie Formby, Unite the Union, 128 Theobalds Road, Holborn, London, WC1X 8TN.

Port Sunlight

At the Port Sunlight picket line on 18 January, one Usdaw steward said: "Management like to talk about needing to pay big salaries and offer fat pension rewards otherwise 'you

don't get the right quality of management, but you don't hear them talk like that when it's about what, say, the forklift truck drivers should get."

As with any such struggle no one wanted to lose pay but there was an awareness that a stand had to be taken. The mood was one of quiet determination to carry on a drawn-out struggle otherwise "they'll just walk all over us."

Hugh Caffrey

Manchester

At Unilever's Manchester factory several strikers voiced anger at the cynicism of the company: "They're just jumping on the bandwagon, they've looked around and seen other companies doing it and thought 'Oh, we can do that too'."

"You get a Tory government in and the bosses think 'Right, here we go again,'" said one striker to me.

"This used to be PG Tips, it was locally owned, you'd have managers and workers having a laugh together in the pub. Not now though, it's a big global company like all the others."

Defend Len Hockey Outrageous attack on Whipps Cross hospital workers

A Unison member

Shock and outrage by porters, domestics and switchboard staff at Whipps Cross hospital east London, greeted the news of the threat by Initial Facilities to discipline Unison joint branch secretary Len Hockey.

In a move clearly aimed at trying to intimidate the workforce, Len has been invited to attend an investigation hearing on 30 January in connection with his role as lead representative for these staff. This comes on the back of attacks by the company in the recent weeks.

Redundancies

These include making domestic supervisors and help desk staff redundant and the demotion of deputy head portering grades. The workers have also experienced a big increase in the number of disciplinary measures they have been subjected to over the recent months.

The fighting record of these staff was shown in two rounds of strike action over the past years. This succeeded in eliminating inequality of treatment among workers and secured harmonised pay and conditions with NHS staff. It earned the



Len and one of his fellow Unison members campaigning against low pay photo Molly Cooper

branch first prize nationally for organising and recruitment.

Len, a porter at the hospital for 23 years, went on to describe workers' anger turning to revulsion when his members informed him over the weekend of a letter sent to them and which he had not seen.

This is from the Unison Greater London region. The letter, signed by the regional organiser and sent

to Len's members but addressed to Len, attacked and misrepresented his campaigning record in what appears to be a deliberate attempt to drive a wedge between the members and Len himself.

"With cuts and all the daily problems workers face, the last thing you would expect is a blow from behind," Len commented. "This act points up the urgent need for all

union officials to be elected, paid a wage in line with the members they represent and held to account - particularly to our low paid members as is the case here". He added: "A campaign and response to these attacks is now set to take place."

The fighting record of these staff was shown in two rounds of strike action over the past years

• Please send protests at the threat of disciplinary action, which we believe is an attempt to break the ability of the union branch to fight the cuts: to the employer Initial: susan.matthews@rentokil-initial.com, trish.sharpe@rentokil-initial.com and to Whipps Cross hospital trust: cathy.geddes@whippsx.nhs.uk

• Please send copies of protests to London Unison region, with a note to the region to say that you expect Unison to vigorously defend Len from the attack by his employer: v.lucioni@unison.co.uk, c.remington@unison.co.uk

Also send copies to Len Hockey at leonardhockey789@hotmail.co.uk

Save Vine services

Vine in Leeds provides specialist education provision for young adults with severe and complex learning difficulties. Many of the staff are female Unison members working part-time as Learning Support Assistants (LSAs). But since the beginning of the economic downturn in 2008 they have seen the service contract and deteriorate.

The students' funding is provided by Leeds City colleges via the Young Peoples' Learning Agency but there is a question mark as to how many students will be funded this way and how much will be provided by our own employer to keep our members in jobs. Overall it is predicted that Leeds City council is to cut another £55 million from its 2012-13 budget. That may mean up to 600 jobs will go!

Our members at Vine have lost out in the re-evaluation of our jobs as it failed to account for the 'Special Needs Allowance' for the personal care we provide to the students. Although we qualified for the three-year pay protection that ran out in February 2011, and with no decent national pay increase in years, our members have really felt the pinch.

We say enough is enough. No more cuts. Fair pay now.

A Unison steward