

The sorry saga of Corus steel

THE RECENT sale by Corus of the steel plant on Teesside to the Thai company SSI is welcome news but in reality the situation should never have got to this stage.

A socialist steel worker

The whole sorry saga began back in January 2009 when Corus announced it was to sell its share of Teesside Cast Products. This announcement was buried within a general communication that included 2,500 job losses throughout Corus.

The sale never went through due to the prospective buyer pulling out of the deal three months later.

This placed the survival of the plant in jeopardy and a Save Our Steel Campaign was launched that

concentrated on persuading Corus and the New Labour government to secure the future of steelmaking in the North East.

There were threats of legal action by Corus and false hopes emerged when the participants agreed to talks but these efforts did not bear fruit.

In July 2009 the campaign staged a march through Redcar attended by thousands of workers, including delegations from South Wales, Scunthorpe and South Yorkshire.

The campaign should have harnessed the support shown by the community and other areas to turn it into a national campaign for the whole of the UK steel industry, which by then was in danger of collapsing due to declining orders. But the campaign remained local, with further marches and fringe meetings at TUC and Labour Party con-

ferences. The campaign still clung to the forlorn hope of a government bailout.

In December 2009 the announcement came that the plant was to be mothballed with around 2,000 jobs lost.

During February 2010 it emerged that there was a buyer interested in the plant but Corus was showing no interest in negotiating. Community union (the ex-iron and steel union) arranged meetings with reps from other plants with support for industrial action being sought. This resulted in the spectacle of Community needing to get support from reps of the other steel unions because their own reps felt that their members would not fight.

Thanks to arguments advanced by militant elements of the steel stewards, the threat of industrial ac-

tion was made in March 2010. But by then it was an empty gesture and one that the company ignored.

The mothballing came and thousands lost their jobs. Vera Baird, the local Labour MP, lost her seat to a Liberal.

Pressure continued to be put on Corus to listen to offers from prospective buyers, resulting in the recent announcement of the sale of the plant. This gives the local area some hope but the plant should have been given a lifeline by the government with nationalisation an obvious option.

The sale is proof that there is a demand for the goods produced at the plant. New Labour found billions to bail out the banks, but a few million was too much for them to find to protect jobs and skills in the steel industry.

inbrief

Unison executive elections

Socialist Party members Hugo Pierre and John Malcolm are standing in the byelections for Unison's national executive (NEC). Hugo is standing for the local government male seat and John for the northern region male seat. Hugo is standing for the NEC seat that Glenn Kelly held but had to vacate following the witch-hunt and a ban from holding office. They both stand for a democratic, fighting leadership for Unison which is able to build an effective fightback against the Con-Dem cuts.

- The elections run from 27 September to 22 October. For more information see www.socialistparty.org.uk

National Shop Stewards Network

Eastern Region events:

- Public meeting: "Defending jobs at GSK". Wednesday 29 September, 7pm in Ware Drill Hall, 17 Amwell End, Ware, Herts SG12 9HP.
- All Welcome
- Eastern Region Shop Stewards Network Conference 2010 Saturday 2 October 11am - 4.30pm, Stevenage Friends Meeting House, Cuttys Lane SG1 Near Stevenage town centre

Save Southampton Libraries

On 15 September, dozens of striking Southampton library workers, Unison members, lobbied the Tory council as part of their fourth day of strike action. This is a long running dispute over the attempt to close and downgrade Southampton libraries, replacing qualified librarians with volunteers.

Presenting a petition of 4,500 signatories, library worker Bob Cole made a deputation to the council outlining the views of workers, children and the community who use these services. It would take over fifty volunteers to replace the library posts that were going.

Like the mad hatter from Alice in Wonderland, Tory councillor John Hannides attacked the union for spreading misinformation, claiming the council was not closing libraries or replacing librarians with volunteers, despite the fact that Millbrook librarians are being moved, with no plans to keep the library open, and Thornhill librarians are being moved and replaced with volunteers! Strikers were outraged at Hannides' outburst and are determined to stop these cuts. The verbal support of Labour councillors was an obvious boost to the strikers but cannot be relied on, given their plans to make cuts of their own if elected to run the council.

The Socialist Party gives full support to the demands of the library workers and is calling for wider action to be taken to stop other cuts to services on the council, to link up with other local campaigns against cuts as a means of maximising the pressure on local councillors to reverse them. With elections in May looming, anti-cuts candidates should prepare now to challenge the cuts budget of all three parties and put councillors in the chamber who are prepared to back a real fight to save jobs and services.

Nick Chaffey

Ex-Jarvis workers face more attacks

Stan Herschel, RMT North East regional organiser, spoke to The Socialist about the worsening conditions of ex-Jarvis track-side rail workers who are now working for Babcock.

"THE DEMISE of Jarvis came as a shock, but the aftermath is even more horrendous." On the London North East contract alone there were 353 working for Jarvis, but it looks as though only around 250 of those will be transferred to Babcock. Most of them will be supervisors and technical staff to supervise low paid agency workers.

"Less than 12 months ago Babcock, a multinational company, said they wanted to be out of the rail industry because there wasn't enough profit.

"They now appear to have a gleam in their eye. They can see profits can be made through the exploitation of former Jarvis workers who have transferred to Babcock on inferior terms and conditions.

"To make matters worse Babcock are insisting they will not work with me - they've refused point-blank!"

Stan also explained how Network Rail, Babcock and other companies with their 'snout in the trough' are using the same tactic against rail workers in the West and South West of the country. "Their strategy is straightforward casualisation of the workplace. The money is there, the work is there, but this is a case of Network Rail wanting the work done on a shoestring.

"Sacked Jarvis worker Bill Rawcliffe, who stood as a Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition candidate against Ed Miliband in the general election, now has one thing in common with former Labour MPs who lost their seats - he's also unemployed.

London bus workers show their strength



London bus workers demonstrate outside City Hall on 15 September. Supported by pensioners and other transport campaigners, the demo was against cuts in jobs and bus services. Transport for London are about to try to make big budget cuts. Unite's Len McCluskey made the point that Thatcher seemed indestructible but was brought down over the poll tax when workers said: "We're not having it".

photo Paul Mattsson

"If those MPs had lifted a finger to fight to save the jobs of workers, such as those at Jarvis, maybe Bill would still be employed by Jarvis and they might still have been MPs!

"All the cleaning on Tyne and Wear Metro was contracted out to Connaught Environmental, which

is linked to Connaught Partnership which is now in dire financial difficulties. Connaught is now on a merry-go-round of constant redundancies, downsizing and attacks on workers' pay and conditions.

"The previous Labour government had a big enough majority over the last 13 years to put forward meas-

ures to protect the public sector - but they didn't. It seems strange to me now that many Labour MPs, including those running for leadership, have discovered their socialist souls! These people just cannot be trusted. The time has come to form a new workers' party based on socialist ideals and principles."

Stop the decline to the minimum wage!

Shop steward Mark Robertson, spoke to Elaine Brunskill about the strike on 20 September at Tyneside Safety Glass, the biggest industrial glass manufacturer in the north of England, with around 150 workers.

"THE STRIKE is about pay, we haven't had any pay increases for a few years. Last year there were no workplace reps. I went to see the full time Unite official.

"Unite organised a meeting and they agreed a pay claim and I was elected onto the negotiating committee, alongside another who was to be a shop steward. We met with the com-

pany and they offered us 0% increase for the second year in a row.

"They then put up a notice saying they were cutting the sick scheme from 50% to 25% of basic pay. Our pay claim was for a pay rise and restoration of our sick pay.

"We also had various health and safety issues. For example the toilets hadn't been cleaned for six months."

Mark described how Tyneside Safety Glass refused to back down: "They claim that recently they've made losses and they've almost reached the limit of their overdraft of £1 million.

"So then we balloted for industrial action. Members voted to strike and for action short of a

strike. "Then we put on an overtime ban. This was followed by an ACAS meeting.

"At the meeting the ACAS negotiator stated that the company had made a loss of £400,000 at the end of 2009. I challenged this - I'd seen the accounts and they'd actually made a profit of £50,000.

"Obviously they're showing a different set of accounts to Company House. After the meeting the company was completely intransigent.

"At this stage, because of a time factor, it was necessary to re-ballot. However, despite the manager warning that strike action would be hugely detrimental to the firm, the second ballot was almost identical

to the first.

"Tyneside Safety Glass want to drive down our wages. Our slogan must be: 'Stop the decline to minimum wage!'

"Our basic rate has been continuously driven down. To make money we've worked longer and longer hours. Some of the lads work 12 hour shifts, six days a week.

"All of these attacks on workers' conditions raise the stakes. Workers at the factory are becoming more class conscious - feel they've got nothing to lose.

"We can already see that even refusing overtime means they are only getting 50% of their deliveries out. 'This strike will hit them!'"