

Southampton Council workers' strike spreads

Nick Chaffey

Southampton refuse workers finished their first strike action against cuts to pay, jobs and services on 27 May. It was 100% solid. Pickets received support from other trade unionists in the city including stewards from the Medirest NHS cleaners' dispute at Southampton general hospital.

Support has poured in from around the country and internationally. News of support from the United Steel Workers of America was cheered at a mass meeting on the picket line.

The mood is solid, determined and angry, especially at the arrogance shown towards the strike by Tory council leader Royston Smith. He has made contradictory statements in the press saying he won't meet for negotiations then saying he will meet with ACAS.

Unite officer Ian Woodland said: "Our executive has made it clear



Angry workers lobby the council earlier this year photo Nick Chaffey

we oppose all cuts in pay, jobs and services. Not a penny off our pay, not a minute on the day. This is a completely political attack on public services."

Selective strike action will con-

tinue with all workers in parking services out on strike for seven days from 31 May. A mass meeting of council workers will be addressed by Len McCluskey, Unite general secretary.

Unite's recent executive statement, making clear the union's opposition to all cuts and the need for generalised industrial action, has raised the confidence of the workers.

The support on the picket line needs to be taken to the streets with a mass demonstration to link workers and service users in a huge show of strength to force the Tory council into retreat. The call for council-wide strike action was raised on the picket lines and will certainly become part of the discussion on how to win this dispute.

- Send messages of support and financial donations to Unison Southampton District Branch, Civic Centre Southampton SO14 7NB. Mike Tucker branchsecretary@soton-unison-office.org.uk and Unite, 15 The Avenue, Southampton SO17 1XF. Ian Woodland, regional officer 07770704480 woodland_ian@hotmail.com TGWU 2/8 Strike Fund, Unity Trust Bank, Ac No: 20185358 Sort Code 08-60-01.

Saltend dispute ends

Alistair Tice

The heroic struggle by engineering construction workers locked out from work on the bio-ethanol plant at BP Saltend near Hull has ended after nearly three months.

The fight by 400 workers to win back their jobs, after their contractor Redhalls was thrown off the job by Vivergo, the BP-owned client, has not been successful. The decision of the NECC national shop stewards' forum, under pressure from the trade union bureaucracy, to not call industry-wide industrial action was a crucial turning-point in this dispute.

However, the refusal of the workers to accept a financial settlement with onerous conditions, and continued protests by a hard-core of protesters have forced Vivergo, who

initially refused any responsibility for the locked-out workers, to increase the money and drop most of the strings.

Whilst most workers have now understandably taken the money, a few, including Socialist Party and Lock-Out committee member Keith Gibson have refused to take any pay-off from Redhalls or Vivergo and will pursue legal claims against these companies.

These will be important test cases because the worry is that what BP/Vivergo have done at Saltend will set a dangerous precedent of mass sackings by employers in the industry as a means of breaking the national NAECI agreement and undermining TUPE rights.

A fuller article next week will look at the lessons of this dispute and its implications for the industry and trade union struggles.

TUC disability conference

Disabled people are in the front line of the government's attacks on the welfare state. The government has made a critical error - they assumed that disabled people would be a pushover and they had no allies. Wrong on both counts.

Sickened by the government's cowardly attack, thousands of disabled people joined the TUC's march on 26 March and thousands took part in the "Hardest Hit" rally on 11 May.

The TUC disability conference on 25-26 May showed both the extent of the government's attack on disabled people and the courage and anger of the trade unionists who will stand in their path.

The Daily Mail attacks on benefit claimants, echoing the Tories' lies in a cruder form, have had the consequence of increasing hate

crime against disabled people. The conference heard from John McArdle of Black Triangle on their work opposing defamation and victimisation of claimants.

It was guaranteed that any speaker who mentioned a public sector general strike would be applauded. John also suggested if Labour would not defend the National Health Service then unions should withdraw funding. He stopped short of saying what they should do to seek a political alternative but it was a very popular suggestion.

It was a very good conference and will inspire activists to forge the links between disabled groups and the mass of the trade union movement which can bring this government to its knees.

Derek McMillan

Save jobs!

Elaine Brunskill

Customer services on the East Coast Mainline are dealt with by National Express call centre workers at Baron House in Newcastle, but not for much longer if East Coast gets its way.

The rail unions RMT and TSSA held a joint lobby outside Baron House to protest against the loss of 200 jobs from the North East. TSSA regional organiser Chris Hargrave explained that the call centre services are to be put out to tender to Intelenet Global Services. He went on to say: "We've been told they are doing it to save taxpayers' money. But 70% of the work to Intelenet will be transferred to Mumbai, the rest going to Plymouth. This is a devastating blow to the North East."

Craig Johnston, RMT executive member, stated: "It never ceases to amaze me how bad these people are. But for a publicly owned company to sack workers, transferring the work to Mumbai, where they will exploit workers, giving only minimal wages, is capitalism at its worst. This has been a catalogue of failure, a catalogue of betrayal, they should hang their heads in shame!"

Action threat spells victory

Martin Powell-Davies

NUT national executive member, personal capacity

Two small but significant victories for Lewisham NUT, south London, have shown how an organised response - and the threat of union action - can achieve success in fighting the threat of cuts and redundancies.

Just as a ballot for strike action was about to be issued to NUT members at Deptford Green school over the threat to issue a redundancy notice to a member in the art department, the school agreed that it would, after all, be able to redeploy the teacher internally.

Previously, our demands to find continuing work within the school had been rejected.

This came after the news that Lewisham council would be saving the posts threatened to be cut from the nationally-renowned Lewisham Early Years Advice and Resource Network. This follows a public campaign to safeguard this vital resource coupled with an indicative ballot of NUT members across council schools and workplaces which produced an 86% 'yes' vote in support



Striking against job cuts photo the Socialist

of authority-wide strike action.

There are more battles to come - including continuing threats to children's centres and to oppose the redundancy of an NUT member at another secondary school. Ballot papers are going out to NUT members at Forest Hill school but staff have already shown their support in a 60-strong rally held on a Friday lunchtime.

NUT and PCS members in Lewisham are also balloting for strike action to defend pensions. With the

support of Goldsmiths UCU and student union, we are holding a rally on 20 June.

**Stop the pensions robbery
- all out on 30 June**

Public meeting: 20 June, 6.30pm. Goldsmiths College student union, Dixon Road, New Cross. Speakers include Chris Baugh, PCS assistant general secretary

Fast news

All out on 30 June!

Over 250,000 civil service union PCS members began voting on 25 May in a ballot for national strike action. The ballot, over cuts to pensions, jobs and pay, was voted for overwhelmingly at the recent PCS conference. It closes on 15 June. Coordinated action with teaching unions could begin on 30 June.

Postal strike

London postal workers have voted by four to one to strike against plans to close three mail centres and one delivery office in London. Mount Pleasant, Nine Elms, Rathbone Place and East London are under threat. Around 3,500 CWU members could strike unless reassurances are given over job security and management bullying is ended. Anger at these attacks could lead to action spreading more widely.

Housing strike

Housing support workers at the Leeds mental health charity Touchstone were on strike on 27 May. This was the third day of strike action against pay cuts of between £2,000 and £4,000. A year ago, senior management at Touchstone set up job evaluation panels which said that the existing pay levels were correct. But management ignored the results and have tried to force massive pay cuts on frontline staff whilst awarding themselves pay rises.

A Unison member and striking support worker said: "These cuts are not a response to budget cuts. Touchstone's chief executive, Labour councillor Alison Lowe, has said she would choose to make these pay cuts no matter what the wider financial situation."

Ian Pattison

It doesn't add up

A House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts report: "The impact of the 2007-2008 changes to public service pensions" confirms what unions have been saying - that there is no need for public sector workers to be paying in more for their pensions. The report says: "Government projections suggest that the 2007-08 changes are likely to reduce costs to taxpayers of the pension schemes by £67 billion over 50 years".

Christine Blower, National Union of Teachers (NUT) general secretary, said: "This report shatters the government's case for further cuts in public sector pensions. The Select Committee has confirmed the National Audit Office's verdict that costs are falling and pensions are affordable".

Hackney libraries

Hackney council has decided to cut library staff by 25%. Staff face losing their jobs or having their hours cut. Managers are unaffected and in some cases have been given pay rises. The service in general is being run down - staff suspect that this is to make sure a public consultation exercise comes up with a negative outcome, justifying more cuts. Union members have unanimously backed a resolution calling for a vote of no confidence in the head of libraries and to take industrial action in defence of services and jobs.

• For more workplace news see: www.socialistparty.org.uk