

# Construction workers strike to defend agreements

## “All we’ll have is an existence - not a life”

**Alistair Tice**

On 26 September around 400 electricians from the West Burton power station site in Nottinghamshire walked out on strike for the day. They were joined by workers from Saltend and a few other workplaces.

They went to the Lindsey and the ConocoPhillips refineries near Immingham, seeking support in their struggle to resist attacks on their terms and conditions contained in the Joint Industry Board (JIB) national agreement.

They came to Lindsey because that site and the engineering construction industry in general is covered by the NAECI ‘blue book’ agreement on terms

and conditions. Electricians working on a NAECI site get NAECI rates, which are superior to the JIB rates.

But when they leave a ‘blue book’ site they go back onto JIB terms and conditions. Obviously if the JIB bosses get away with cutting those conditions and pay by 20-30% as they want to, then the NAECI employers will not sit still.

There were protests outside both plants and around 100 workers from Lindsey came out in support and to participate in a gate meeting.

Then we marched down from Lindsey to the Conoco site. There was a determined mood to fight to save these agreements. The workers understand that if it’s the JIB now it will be the NAECI next.



Protesting at the Tyne tunnel site photo Elaine Brunskill

## Angry workers protest

**Manchester**

About 20 electricians protested from 6.30am outside the Manchester Town Hall construction site on 21 September.

The site entrances were all barred and guarded by security so it was more like a lockdown than a workplace.

Nevertheless numerous workers going out for tea or food took the Site-worker leaflets explaining the plans of the major construction companies for pay cuts, enforced by mass dismissals and re-engagements.

Pride of place went to Steve Acheson’s banner: “Defend Trade Union Agreement - union rates for all” - fresh from a protest the day before at the Fiddlers Ferry power station site.

The previous week the sparks had protested at the Carrington paper mill site.

A text was received from inside the project saying that Siteworker was the “talk of the site” showing that the tactic of going to the work-

place gates is beginning to pay off.

**Andy Ford, Warrington trades council**

**Tyneside**

On the same day in North Tyneside, around 150 construction workers protested outside the site entrance of the new Tyne tunnel. Workers from the site told us that when the contractors found out there was going to be a protest, realising it was going to be well supported, they told them they didn’t need to go into work until 10am!

The protesters held up placards: “35% pay cut - no way” and “Spread the action - walk out now.” Many of the workers were young electricians.

One of them commented: “In the past construction workers could afford mortgages, had nice homes. Now loads of us are having to live with our parents until our mid 30s.”

Another commented: “If they go ahead with these wage cuts, all we’ll have is an existence - not a life!”

Jimmy Warne, branch chair of Unite Newcastle branch 1901, explained: “Eight major contractors have served notice that they intend to walk away from national agreements.

“This action is in coordination with the rank and file committee that was set up in Conway Hall, London.

“The purpose is to force the union into a national ballot. Already Balfour Beatty has served notice on over 800 sparks, telling them if they

don’t sign up to new agreements they’ll be sacked.

“We say our response to this will be to walk out. This action will happen locally and nationally.”

Jimmy went on to express his anger at Ed Miliband, who was “very quick to attack unions for striking while negotiations [on pensions] were ongoing, but stays silent while bosses attack workers’ pay and conditions without negotiations.”

**Elaine Brunskill, Newcastle Socialist Party**

## Standing up for our pension rights

The Gloucestershire Echo recently ran a feature on the pros and cons of going on strike to defend pensions, Socialist Party member Rob Bishop put the position for the strikes, against the arguments of a local Tory MP.

These are extracts from his article:

*“I fully support the strike. The workers are defending their terms and conditions and the government isn’t seriously negotiating. They’ve had the unions around the table, then made an unrealistic offer that*

*was always going to be unacceptable to the unions.*

*What can you do when your pensions are being raided and you’re losing something that you’ve worked long and hard for? Just like anybody would, they’re standing up to defend their rights.*

*We are running a huge budget deficit because the last Labour government bailed out the banks. The government is trying to make ordinary working people pay for a crisis not of their making. It was nothing to do with the public sector workers*

*and they shouldn’t be the ones who are expected to solve the problem. Many of the people whose pensions are at risk are not well paid at all, which makes it doubly unfair.*

*I suggest they increase the tax take by hunting down all the millionaires who take their profits abroad to avoid tax, because that would be much fairer.*

*That would go partly to make up the shortfall because there’s something like £120 billion which goes uncollected - and that’s a huge amount.*

*Many of the leaders of the unions involved are not known for their militant tendencies, but their members are forcing them into it because they know they have to fight for what they are due.*

*I was at the National Shop Stewards Network meeting in London recently and it was clear the mood is militant - justifiably so.*

*The union members know that their futures are at risk and that’s why they are doing this. I only hope that the TUC turns out to be as militant as its members.”*

## Basingstoke printers defy bullying management

**Gavin Marsh**

Southampton Socialist Party

As reported in a recent issue of the Socialist, printworkers at Wyndeham Impact in Basingstoke are now in their twentieth week of industrial action. This is over management’s refusal to negotiate the reinstatement of pay following a temporary pay cut, the issue of workers arbitrarily made redundant and the unilateral withdrawal of terms and conditions.

When we arrived at the picket line we discovered that a meeting was actually taking place between unions and management, not to address any of the issues mentioned above but to discuss redundancy terms and conditions!

Pickets told us: “A few years ago, when we agreed to take a temporary pay cut and help the company the manager put his hand on his heart and called us a great workforce. As long as we are giving he’s happy. But now we are ‘useless’ and ‘rubbish.’”

“All we are asking for is what is entitled to us and we are all really angry about the situation. We are even prepared to negotiate on the lost wages but he just doesn’t want to know.”

It is absolutely ridiculous that a profitable company with an excellent reputation (down to the efforts of the workforce and their pride in producing high quality work) is talking about shutting up shop. And there certainly isn’t a glut of printing jobs in the region, though one work-

er was so stressed by the working environment that he thought that redundancy would be a preferable option.

One picket commented: “I used to brag about working here, the working conditions were good and we had a great team but now it has all changed. Not only has he wrecked the good feeling here but he has actually lost us customers, people can’t stand his attitude.”

•Messages of support to: keegan20001@aol.com

### Fast news

#### Hold tight!

Transport union RMT has protested at plans to train 60 volunteer drivers to drive rural buses on the Isle of Wight. The Tory council has cut funding to Wight Bus, now it is pioneering this scheme, presumably part of Cameron’s ‘big society’. What Cameron has never understood, viewing society from his Eton/Oxbridge bubble, is that thousands of people already spend many unpaid hours volunteering for anything from helping with children’s sports to environmental projects.



It is an insult to those people and a potential danger to bus passengers on the Isle of Wight to use volunteers to drive buses. The jobs of properly trained bus drivers are being put in jeopardy.

It is no wonder that RMT general secretary Bob Crow has said: “RMT will fight this attack on bus services, and bus staff, with every tool at our disposal.”

#### Pensions strike ballot

The Unison ballot for strike action against cuts in the local government pensions scheme will run from 11 October to 3 November. Members of the scheme are being faced with working longer and paying more to get less. Everyone earning over £15,000 a year is fighting an effective pay cut. This ballot is part of the plan for coordinated strike action on 30 November.

The strike covers all members of the local government pension scheme, which includes those working for companies hived off from the public sector, like the 300 workers in the Tyne and Wear Metro.

#### Health strike

Unison members in health and education in Northern Ireland are to strike on 5 October. The 24-hour strike is in protest at the cuts in health and education funding. Other unions are likely to join the action.

#### Updates

The Socialist Party’s website: www.socialistparty.org.uk is updated daily and carries reports from many disputes and workplaces. If you are involved in a dispute, ring us on 020 8988 8777 or email a report to: editors@socialistparty.org.uk

We will try to post it on the website and carry a report in the following issue of the Socialist.