

# Building a fighting union

Steve Hedley, the transport union RMT's London regional organiser will be standing for election as the union's assistant general secretary. He recently spoke to Sarah Sachs-Eldridge about crucial issues for the union in the transport industry.

## What made you decide to stand in this election?

We want to do more than react to attacks on our terms and conditions. For example we have a policy of nationalisation. We need to make fighting for that a priority including in all the feeder industries. We require a political as well as an industrial campaign to win over public sympathy against the proposed massive attacks on jobs, terms and conditions and that means standing anti-cuts candidates where necessary.

## Can you tell us about some of the successful campaigns you've had recently?

We've had people reinstated who've been suspended for trade union activity.

We've also had a pay increase of 5% this year and RPI inflation plus a half percent for the next three years with a built in minimum (if inflation is below 1.5%) of 2% a year.

This deal is one of the best in the public sector and reflects the level of organisation we have in London. To achieve it we organised a massive political campaign to educate and build the confidence of the members

## You've also won recognition in some areas?

We're organising all the people who have not been traditionally organised in unions because they were employed by contractors. It makes



Steve (left) supporting construction workers photo Suzanne Beishon

all of us stronger in the region to have those sections unionised. We've won recognition in the cleaning companies. We have just agreed a deal with John Laing – which is being signed off.

## Why is it important to support the National Shop Stewards Network?

I think it's important to build up links with militant trade unionists in other sections of industry. I always remember when the miners were picked off and the movement didn't come to their aid in terms of widening the strike. I think that was a historic defeat. And in a union like the RMT there's a danger that something like that could happen to us if we haven't built a broad layer of support in other industries.

## And that's why you've supported the construction electricians' protests?

Absolutely – they've got the same bosses – Balfour Beatty and people like that are in the railway industry

as well and if they can get away with cutting the wages for them – we're next. It's simple solidarity action.

## What about the national picture for the RMT?

With McNulty [report recommending cutting staff on the railways] people don't want unstaffed stations and they don't want driverless trains. They don't want a minimal level of staff anywhere on the railway. When British Rail was first privatised people wouldn't use the stations after 6pm because they were worried about safety.

We've got to build an alliance with the public and rail user groups, and to campaign in parliament and locally to stop this being carried out. We've got to coordinate a campaign of industrial action across all the companies to stop it coming in.

If it comes to the situation where we can't go on strike to defend our members because of the anti-union laws – then we've got to go back to the foundations of the union when

people were organising illegally to defend workers. The trade union movement has always opposed unjust laws and today the RMT should do the same thing.

As far as other sections of the RMT are concerned, I think the OILC in particular have a tremendous tradition of taking action to defend their terms and conditions. With shipping we've already got the Royal Fleet Auxiliary balloted over pensions and they won the ballot which is quite a historic victory. They took action on 30 November with the other unions. If I'm elected I'll be campaigning on everyone's behalf – not just rail workers but all those in our union.

## Why do you support the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC)?

I've got lots of respect for people like MPs John McDonnell and Jeremy Corbyn within the Labour Party but we've got Labour councillors condemning the cuts and then carrying them out.

When we've got Ed Miliband condemning people for going on strike to protect their pensions I think the Labour Party is no longer recognisable as a party that represents working class people. We need an alternative.

I think building a new party out of the trade unions is viable. I think it's going back to how the Labour Party was constructed in the first place. It was supposed to be representative of organised workers in parliament and that's just not happening.

We're putting forward a five-point anti-cuts platform and saying to Labour councillors – if you don't want a TUSC candidate standing against you sign up to these points. And as far as I'm concerned if they agree to fight the cuts there's no need to stand against them.

## In brief

### Private pensions strike

Workers at Unilever have voted overwhelmingly for strike action to defend their pensions. 85% of those voting supported a strike and 92% supported action short of a strike. The 24-hour strike on 9 December is the first time that the Unilever workers have taken national strike action. Unite is the main union but there are also members of Usdaw and GMB. The sites affected are in Norwich, Burton, Gloucester, Trafford Park Manchester, Purfleet, Port Sunlight (two sites), Warrington, Crumlin Gwent, Colworth Bedford, Deeside and Leeds.

### School strike

Members of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) at Langdon School in Newham, east London, are striking for three days, 6-8 December, against excessive workloads and management bullying.

The response of Newham's Labour council is to recruit supply staff to try and break the strike.

The use of agency staff during a strike is illegal but in the run-up to the 30 November strike action over pensions, the Department for Education issued guidelines to education authorities saying that a school could directly employ staff supplied by an employment agency.

The union's discontinuous strike action has been solid and is getting support from both parents and from trade unionists. A Newham NUT meeting voted by a magnificent 90-0 for a ballot for borough-wide action.

Send messages of support to [nutlangdon@aol.co.uk](mailto:nutlangdon@aol.co.uk)

### Electoral alternative

On the N30 strike day, the appalling attitude of Labour leader Ed Miliband was discussed on picket lines all over London. The necessity of standing anti-cuts candidates against all the main parties was a popular subject of debate. When Socialist Party members and supporters of the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) showed them the appeal letter from leading RMT and FBU figures in London, many picketers discussed the idea and took copies of the appeal letter, wanting to give it serious consideration. Many more were ready to sign straight away in support of the idea of trade union anti-cuts candidates in the Greater London Assembly elections in 2012.

New signatories, all in a personal capacity, include: Rula Sotiri GMB, Anthony Lines NUT, Hiren Das Gupta NUT, Sharon West Unison, Nia Phillips NUT, T Manning Unison, C Paul Unison, Eddie Tunnah UCU, John Barclay UCU, Christine Caldwell UCU, Adrian Budd UCU branch secretary, Mike Leary UCU, M Bishop PCS, Z Jamison PCS, Tracey Price-Tupper PCS

To read and add your name to the statement, go to [www.tusc.org.uk](http://www.tusc.org.uk) or email [jjpreidie@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:jjpreidie@yahoo.co.uk)

# Defend the JIB, victory to the sparks!

Rob Williams

Electricians working for Balfour Beatty (BBES) have spoken for all electricians in the construction industry and voted overwhelmingly to strike to defend their national pay agreements – the Joint Industry Board (JIB).

BBES has an order book of £15 billion and had made nearly £100 million in profits in the last six months but they want to slash wages by 35%.

Facing all the obstacles and complications that have given the employers such an advantage for years – low union membership, lack of shop stewards, agency labour, the blacklist etc, Unite and especially the Rank and File Committee have pulled off an incredible result.

Unsurprisingly, BBES has sought and secured a legal injunction against the ballot to stop the strike

on 7 December – the day that BBES workers face having the new contracts (BESNA) imposed on them.

This has caused the union to call off the strike and re-ballot. But even if Unite re-ballots, the dispute must continue and escalate unofficially. Whatever the law says, the massive YES vote has legitimised this struggle.

Meetings in London and Glasgow on 3 December put the call out for unofficial strike action at BBES and the other companies looking to withdraw from the JIB and impose the BESNA terms. It's been reported that workers are joining the union in the next two companies to be balloted, NG Bailey and Tommy Clarkes. This shows the potential for a national stoppage in the industry.

The best signal yet are the stoppages that have already taken place over the last four months and are actually escalating. Corus Teesside, Lindsey,

Saltend, Ratcliffe, West Burton, Carrington, Farringdon, Blackfriars, Kings Cross and countless more sites have seen walkouts.

In Glasgow on Saturday, 150 sparks met to decide that there will be an unofficial strike in Grangemouth on 7 December. They then marched through the city singing and occupied the NG Baileys site off George Square.

In Cardiff over 50 electricians met to decide that there'll be action that day at Llandough Hospital.

BBES, on behalf of all the 'Dirty 7' construction contractors, are using the Tory anti-union laws to stop this strike, democratically voted for by a four to one margin, on a spurious technicality. Unite must now call for a national stoppage in the construction industry, even if unofficial.

BBES are panicking because of the threat of strike action and the unofficial stoppages that are taking place



A placard at Corus Redcar photo Elaine Brunskill

every week around the UK. There should be no secret deals to end this dispute but a total retreat by BBES and the other six companies. There has to be transparent negotiations in full view of the BBES workers and the members of the union.

## Reinstate Paul Kelly: Solidarity with Portsmouth RMT

On 11 November Paul Kelly, an elected transport union RMT rep at Wightlink Ferries in Portsmouth was dismissed on trumped-up charges and what many workers see as an anti-union vendetta by management.

Paul has a proud record of standing up for his members' rights and safety. He recently campaigned against the imposition of new rosters, while highlighting issues which led to an intervention by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency

on the grounds of safety.

Following this campaign Paul was given informal advice by a manager after failing to wear full protective clothing when responding to an emergency request for technical assistance by a ship's captain.

However, this was suddenly escalated to a charge of gross misconduct and dismissal when a second allegation was made against Paul.

The RMT began balloting for strike action on 30 November,

while the city's trades council has pledged its support for any action the branch may take.

RMT general secretary Bob Crow said: "Paul Kelly's case is one of the most blatant examples of victimisation for union activities you will ever come across..."

"The events leading up to our member's dismissal appear farcical, with informal advice suddenly escalated to dismissal, and clearly show an employer jumping at the opportunity to remove an effective

representative."

In support of the RMT, Portsmouth Socialist Party demands the immediate reinstatement of Paul Kelly, an immediate end to the campaign of victimisation by the management of Wightlink and a full, transparent inquiry into how a manager used company disciplinary procedures to carry out a vendetta.

• Send messages of support to: [Portsmouth@rmt.org.uk](mailto:Portsmouth@rmt.org.uk)  
**Ben Norman**

### Olympic pay rise

Rail union RMT has negotiated a deal for workers on the London Overground over the period of the Olympic Games. Over 500 workers will be paid an enhancement rate of 25% (normal time plus one quarter) for shifts during the games, with a minimum gross payment of £650. This will ensure that adequate staff are available to work on the vital transport hub of Stratford while the Olympics and Paralympics are going on.