

Statement

British construction workers strikes - For international solidarity between workers

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Thousands of workers employed by construction contractors at oil refineries and power stations across Britain have been taking strike action against an Italian contractor, IREM, which has obtained a contract to build an extension to the Total Lindsey oil refinery at Immingham in the East of England. They are claiming that trade union rates have been undercut and that Italian workers have been employed and British workers excluded. The main slogan of the strike is 'British jobs for British workers'.

That protests have broken out in the construction industry is no surprise. The dispute with the Italian engineering contractor IREM at the Lindsey oil refinery at Immingham is the flashpoint. The industry was amongst the first to be hit by the crisis in the autumn of last year. Tens of thousands of construction workers have been thrown out of work. In recent years the industry has been deregulated, privatised and largely de-unionised. There has been cutthroat competition amongst construction employers for ever-lower wages in order to get and deliver contracts. No wonder resentment builds up.

This resentment is not helped by the response to the economic crisis by Gordon Brown. He has been stuffing money down the throats of the bankers who triggered the problem in the first place whilst being prepared to see other industries go to the wall and workers thrown onto the dole.

And the EU employment framework makes the situation worse. Construction, and other contractors, have been taking full advantage of the free movement of capital which the EU provides, which was always intended to facilitate the more effective exploitation of the European working class. It has encouraged employers to compete by undercutting existing wage rates and working conditions. The way the Posted Workers Directive — which covers workers in the IREM situation — has been introduced compounds the problem.

Workers have an absolute right to take strike action against such practices. In fact from the point of view of trade union principles they have an obligation to oppose such practices. This should not, however, lead workers — such as those in the current action — to attack fellow workers who are dragged into the situation. This dispute should be with the employers and governments at both national and EU level.

The slogan "British jobs for British workers" which has been dominant in every one of the protests, both verbally and visually, is the wrong way to conduct the dispute. It is a dangerous and xenophobic road to go down. No wonder the BNP are trying to muscle in with other dangerous right-wing elements. According to reports in the Independent (Sat Jan 31) the Italian workers involved have faced direct intimidation. A hostile demonstration from the Lindsey refinery assembled outside their living accommodation in Grimsby dock to tell them to "go back to Italy". This kind of action has a dangerous logic of its own.

In fact the demands of the strikers themselves imply that Italian workers at IREM should be sacked and replaced by British workers, and that jobs in Britain should be ring-fenced against workers from outside. This is seriously wrong — where would it leave British workers working under similar conditions in other European countries?

If wages are being undercut by IREM at the Lindsey refinery the strike is absolutely legitimate and should be fully supported both by solidarity action and by the unions. But the facts have to be clear and that is not the case yet. Maybe the Italian workers themselves or their unions could shed light on the matter of their rates of pay and working conditions? Has anyone asked them?

Wage rates and collective agreements, of course, should be defended against all comers, not just foreign employers. Undercutting from anywhere, including just down the road, is completely unacceptable. Collective agreements have to be defended at all times and the trade unions have a direct responsibility in this.

The way to defend construction workers, or any other section of workers, in today's conditions has to be by strengthening trade union organisation and by working class solidarity — and that included international solidarity.

The trade unions should make it clear that workers from abroad are welcome in this country. They should link up with the unions where workers come and ensure that all agreements, and obligations, are carried out by the employers.

Some of the unions involved in this dispute have rightly been having recruiting drives to recruit workers from abroad. This is the best way to build a fight-back. Pitting one group of workers against the other only benefits the employers who are always ready to divide and rule.

Defend all jobs wages and working conditions

Equal access to available jobs

Strengthen trade union organisation

For unity against the employers and the government

Defend collective agreements

For international solidarity between workers

No to racism, xenophobia and the BNP

P.S.

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