

Statement on the LOR dispute, the nationalist strikes and the British left

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Statement of the League for the Fifth International

The strike by construction workers at the Lindsey Oil Refinery (LOR) in Britain and another twenty or so power station sites where workers came out in solidarity with them was, despite all claims to the contrary, a strike against the employment of foreign labour. This was visually expressed in the TV footage of the pickets and mass meetings with placards reading: 'British Jobs for British Workers?' and 'British Workers First.'

In interviews shop stewards and union officials, as well as rank and file workers, repeatedly expressed the idea that British workers were being discriminated against because of the employment of a projected 2-300 Italian and Portuguese workers at the plant. These were permanent employees of an Italian subcontractor, IREM. The strikers objected that no British workers were included in the workforce or had the opportunity to apply for the jobs.

The Socialist Party (the British section Committee for a Workers International) had a member on the LOR strike committee, Keith Gibson. In an article posted on the Socialist Party website on February 1st Gibson explains the cause of the strike: "On Wednesday 28th January 2009 Shaws' workforce were told by the Stewards that IREM had stated they would not be employing British labour. The entire LOR workforce, from all subcontracting companies, met and voted unanimously to take immediate unofficial strike action." (Emphasis added ? L5I)

On the third day of the strike he successfully won a mass meeting to endorse a series of demands that included that foreign workers should be included in the construction industry collective agreement (known as 'the blue book' an agreement which lays down basic, shift and overtime pay rates, travel and accommodation allowances, pension contributions, sickness and accident benefits, etc.) and building links with continental unions, etc. All of them were reasonable trade union demands. However, since this did not include any clear renunciation of the aim which was to replace at least part of the foreign workforce with British workers, it was not only irrelevant but a smokescreen for the real demand - that at least half of the 200 ? 300 jobs should go to British workers.

This is further verified by the outcome of the strike - which its SP backers claimed was a historic victory. In Keith Gibson's words they would be employed on a 'one-to-one basis' with the foreign workers, i.e. one British worker for each of the foreign workers. The agreement means that the hundred Italian workers already on site will keep their jobs alongside 102 British workers. These workers will replace the Italian and Portuguese workers who were due to come to work on the four-month project. This reality shows, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the strike was accurately described in both the British and foreign media as against the employment of foreign labour.

Indeed, if the strike was a victory, as the SP claim, then how come none of the seven demands from the strike committee won? The Unite agreement with the contractors and Total simply agreed on the jobs. As soon as this was offered to the workforce, they went back to work. So the strike was a victory, even though none of the seven points were won? Something is not right here.

The several days of widespread media coverage of the pickets with the slogan 'British jobs for British workers?', the waving of large union jacks, the support of the joint general secretary of Unite, Derek Simpson, for a campaign for this very slogan (a poster front page, T-shirts etc, all, adorned with Union jacks) in the right wing, anti-immigrant tabloid the Daily Star meant that the overall effect of the strikes was one of fomenting British chauvinism against foreign workers. The SP has consistently minimised this and derided those who protested against it as seeking a 'chemically pure strike.'

The Socialist Party suggested that the foreign workers were being employed on wage rates below those of British workers and were in breach of the National Agreement for the Engineering and Construction Industry (NAECI) (the blue book) represented an attempt to break the union. But the Italian company had agreed to abide by this agreement in discussions with the union prior to the strike.

The strike only erupted when it became clear the Italian employers would bring their own workforce and not recruit British Labour. Indeed after a few days when the employers offered 25% of the jobs, it continued because in the words of Gibson 'it was not enough.' No appeal to the supplementary demands introduced by the SP or the statements by union leaders that it was 'not against foreign workers?', only for 'fairness?', for a 'chance to apply for jobs.' 'against discrimination,' changes this unpleasant reality.

The effects of this British chauvinist campaign in Europe were immediate. Italian union federation the CGIL and the largest Spanish federation the Metal, Construction and Similar workers section of UGT protested. 'What's going on in Lincolnshire is one of the ugliest pages in the history of the trade union movement in these globalised times: English workers against Italian workers,' stated Sabrina Petrucci of FIOM-CGIL (CGIL engineering section), and the CGIL's European secretary, Nicola Nicolosi. Javier Urbina of the international bureau of UGT protested to Derek Simpson of Unite-Amicus. "The European labour union movement cannot participate in simplistic and profoundly demagogic actions, which stir up hatred or put blame on the weakest party: the worker, and which, in any case, do not deal with the true origin of the problem."

In spite of all this the SP is trying to cover up or suppress the enormous wave of alarm and revulsion that the issue has aroused not only on the continent but also amongst huge sectors of workers in Britain - of both foreign and native origin. Likewise they ignore and downplay the effects of a long-term campaign by the reactionary tabloids against the 'flood of foreign workers.' Instead the SP concentrates its fire on the Guardian and the BBC for drawing attention to the placards and the union jacks. Likewise the SP plays down the role of Unite-Amicus general secretary Derek Simpson and did not denounce his nonsense about the supposed discrimination against British workers.

Of course it is no surprise that the voice of British Stalinism - the Morning Star - with its virulent Europhobia has been an enthusiastic supporter, talking of "the bosses' freedom to exploit as enshrined in EU law" (as if British law ever outlawed this) and that the EU "has effectively deprived British workers of the right to seek employment in their own country" (editorial 30 January). But for 'Trotskyists' to join in which this is really shameful. It is the product of the SP's engrained opportunism, which as Engels said consists in the sacrifice of the fundamental interests of the working class in pursuit of short term gains. The SP has glorified a shortsighted craft union objective (more jobs for UK or 'local' workers) whilst trying to camouflage its nationalist rationale as a fight for trade union rights.

The left organization that has played a positive role on this issue is the Socialist Workers Party which has exposed and condemned the chauvinism of the slogans and warned of its dangers in splitting the working class and undermining internationalism. They have organized a series of meetings based on the need for unity with foreign workers, getting PCS general secretary Mark Serwotka to support them. But the SWP has been equivocal on the strike itself. While not saying they supported the Lindsey strike, neither did they say they opposed it. They said that "those who urged on the strike were playing with fire" and, in relation to the outcome of the strikes, they said, "the answer is not to argue for hiring a quota of British workers, as the unions did at the Lindsey oil refinery." Plainly there is a centrist equivocation in these formulations but nonetheless they have come down on the correct, internationalist, side of this division in the workers movement on the issue. They have also drafted resolutions that combine "support for the Lindsey Oil Refinery strike committees seven point demands", with condemnation of the British jobs for British worker's slogans, without acknowledging the problem of adding seven progressive demands to a strike that ultimately had a reactionary goal. Here the SWP's left-centrist nature comes out again, endorsing the SP's cover for national chauvinism, whilst condemning its overt expression.

The British section of the Fourth International, the International Socialist Group, issued a statement that formally condemned the slogans but said little more about the strikes or the direction they were taking. But the ISG is a part of the rump of Respect, whose leaders, George Galloway and Nick Wrack have thunderously supported the strike - claiming the chauvinism is largely press misrepresentation.

Other much smaller forces on the British left have taken a more shameful position, scarcely distinct from that of the SP. The laughably named Communist Party of Great Britain with their gossip sheet The Weekly Worker supported the SP line. More surprisingly the Permanent Revolution network after some internal soul searching went over to the SP's line too in the two articles they drafted on the subject. As might be expected they and the flotsam and jetsam of the non-party left on the blogs have concentrated most of their spite on the internationalists. In short the LOR strike and its continuations has thrown a revealing spotlight on the British labour movement.

On the right are union leaders like Simpson and the CPB/Morning star who have few qualms about riding the tiger of British chauvinism, union jacks and all. They will "in the words of the limerick" "end the ride inside the tiger" if the anti-foreigner movement is not transcended in a huge wave of class struggle against the crisis. Then come the right centrists of the Socialist Party, Respect, the Weekly Worker and the PRN. These forces have shown that in a crisis "where reactionary ideas are blowing a storm and workers temporarily succumb to them - they cannot stand upright but bend with the wind. Harsher tests will face us in the period ahead but these forces have shown they will be unable to attack to give revolutionary leadership if they cannot pass this basic test of not succumbing to nationalist demands in the labour movement.

Workers Power does not, as some of these people claim, place the blame on rank and file workers and the unemployed at LOR or Staythorpe for these slogans. But there is a tendency amongst skilled workers to narrow craft union consciousness, including a blindness to the rights of unskilled, women, young, black and foreign workers. Amongst such sectors the "pre-entry closed shop" was a mixed blessing. Revolutionary trade unionists in the 1970s fought to overcome its use as a blockade against the employment of the above sectors and their promotion to higher grades. Postings on the workers' blogs indicate that a number of them are protesting against the chauvinist slogans, reminding their fellow workers that they too have worked abroad, will do so again and of the danger of stirring up tensions that could lead to blowback.

The real villains in all this are the workers' leaders, Simpson and the trade union bureaucracy, the CPB

and the Morning Star, George Galloway of Respect and the Socialist party. To follow their political direction, in the context of a mounting and massive recession would lead us straight to disaster. If trade unionists take to targeting 'foreign' workers, contract or agency workers, even unorganised workers, rather than fighting to save every job then a huge defeat awaits us. Divide we will fall. And this will be a gift to the BNP who will make British Jobs for British Workers a central slogan central in their election campaign for the European Parliament in June.

Here the traditional Europhobia of the British left, Stalinist and Labourite plays a very destructive role. These people are stuck back in the 1960s and 1970s when the thought everything in Europe from trade union rights to wage rates was worse. Because they wanted the UK to stay out and then pull out of the EU they glorified British industry and stigmatised takeovers by foreign firms. Of course, over the last quarter century huge parts of 'British industry' are now in the hands of multinational corporations, US, Japanese, German and French. These firms are now firing workers - not because they are not patriotic Brits (like General Motors they are firing their own workers too) - but because that is what capitalists do.

They must be expropriated to prevent them doing so but in a world of international components and production chains this has to be accomplished hand in hand with their workforces in other countries. Neither can British trade unionists assume that they are the best organised the most militant, the ones likely to be off the starting blocks first in such a struggle. Above all we need international unity and solidarity if we are to fight this massive crisis and use it to open the real prospect of putting an end to capitalism.

The alternative to the present nationalist diversion is a national campaign to fight back against job losses and factory closures (like the 850 workers sacked by BMW at Cowley or the components firm GKN's 564 sacking in the midlands). It means advocating the occupation of all plants whose employers are trying to sack all or part of the workforce. It certainly includes fighting contract and casual labour wherever an employer tries to replace a permanent workforce or undercut existing levels of pay and conditions. And it means fighting all attempts to 'solve' the crisis by turning on other sectors of workers, because they are foreign, sub-contracted or agency employees, unskilled, women or even because they are (as yet) unorganised.

But to defend workers jobs requires a broader outlook in a crisis than normal trade union goals, even ones backed up by the most militant methods. The government has spent billions on bailing out the bankers. Today workers cannot be coned so easily by Brown or Darling's bogus claims that 'the money isn't there.' The government could easily draw up - if it did it with the unions, imposing full rates of pay - a democratic programme of public works to absorb the 2 million presently unemployed. It could simply outlaw the further million or so sackings predicted for the year coming.

For skilled construction workers in power generation there should be jobs in such a programme to renovate and transform the all stations to ensure a planned transition from fossil fuel burning, massively cutting or eliminating carbon emissions. The entire industry should be renationalised, without compensation and put under workers control. An action programme like this represents a class policy. It is necessarily an international one that saves the jobs of workers in the UK whatever their country of origin but also those of the two million or so workers from the UK working abroad. With union leaders like Derek Simpson the necessity for a fighting rank and file movement to replace them was never more obvious. It will have to draw up its own working class policies not simply tail the twists and turns of sectional and craft unionism. But also this crisis shows the need for a political - i.e. a governmental answer to it .it shows too that across Europe workers do not have a parties to fight for their class interests, ones that could take power, form workers governments based on mass democratic organisations of the labour movement, imposing anti-

capitalist crisis programme, at the level of the different states and Europe as a whole.

Gordon Brown and his social democratic equivalents in mainland Europe are staunch defenders of capitalism. When they lecture us about ?internationalism? they are referring to the interests of the multinational corporations, not the cross-border solidarity of workers fighting for their jobs. If the trillion dollar bailout plans of the US and the EU fail then our rulers will turn in desperation to protectionism, wrapping themselves in their respective national flags. Workers across Europe, workers of the world, must spurn all appeals to rally to the flag. Indeed we need to have rallied already to an international flag, the red flag of workers solidarity and socialist revolution.

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