

Sweep ISS out of SOAS



On June 12th, cleaners working for ISS at the School of Oriental & African Studies (SOAS) in London were called to a meeting by management. The cleaners were "processed" by immigration officials who detained nine of them as "illegal immigrants". It was perhaps no coincidence that a picket of SOAS' governing body demanding the reinstatement of victimised SOAS UNISON Branch Chair José Stalin Bermudez, who had been prominent in organising cleaners, had been called for that morning. Those detained were denied union representation, but a campaign was quickly organised by SOAS campus unions and students, migrant worker activists and anti-deportation campaigners. SOAS management was held responsible for ISS "ambushing" their cleaners as punishment for winning union recognition and the London Living Wage.

SOAS runs courses on migration, human rights and refugee studies, yet treats its own migrant workforce

as "disposable". The SOAS Directorate building was blockaded and the Principal's office occupied. The SOAS management was forced by the scale of the protests and the negative publicity that the university was receiving to issue a statement denying advance knowledge of the raid, saying that it had been "distressing for everyone" (but more so for the cleaners!) and that such actions by the UK Border Agency were normal practice across the country.

In education as in the whole public sector, services are increasingly being tendered out to private companies who drive down costs to get contracts and boost profits. In a growing number of cases, this leads them to employ migrant workers, against whom immigration controls can be used when they organise to improve their pay and conditions. In this case, direct action forced the SOAS Directorate to agree to write to the Home Office asking that the cleaners be given indefinite leave to remain. In addition, they agreed to consider bringing cleaning in-house when the current contract expires. Protests also took place at the Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre in Bedfordshire where the workers were being held, outside Communications House in Old Street where cleaners had been taken to from SOAS, and at the Home Office in Westminster. However, by the end of June only one of the detained workers had not been deported. The SOAS case shows what can be achieved by direct action and by workers and students breaking down the artificial barriers which separate them. While ultimately unsuccessful in stopping the deportation of cleaners, the creeping privatisation of education has been shown to be stoppable, and management at a major London university have been forced to abandon the pretence that contracting out services absolves them of responsibility for their workers. For the SOAS example to be repeated across the sector, we need a permanent organisation of education workers which is willing to take direct action, willing to link up with students, and which does not fall foul of the bureaucracy and turf wars which have for far too long bedevilled the reformist education unions. Contact the Education Workers' Network: <http://ewn.rbgi.net> or email ewn@ewn.org.uk

Victory at Linamar



Rob Williams, Unite! convenor at Linamar's Swansea plant, was reinstated on 11th June. An official indefinite strike was due to begin that day after a ballot resulting in 139 votes for and 19 against on an 88% turnout. Rob had been suspended on 28th April by car-part manufacturer Linamar, which had bought the former Visteon plant in

July 2008, claiming an "irretrievable breakdown of trust". This was met by an immediate walkout by the day shift; Rob locked himself in his office and workers surrounded it in an unsuccessful attempt to prevent his removal from the plant by the police. He was called in and sacked on 7th May.

This was clearly an attempt to break the union and force through attacks on pay, conditions and pensions by "buying down" – offering workers worse contracts in return for a one-off payment. The sacking immediately followed 140 voluntary redundancies and preceded pay negotiations where management were trying to get workers to turn down a Ford-linked

5.25% pay rise. Rob had also been prominent in organising support for the Ford Visteon workers who had occupied factories in Belfast and Enfield and were blockading Basildon.

This resistance doubtless both helped the Visteon workers win a partial victory in their occupation and galvanised Unite! which organised a ballot in record time, the result being announced on 28th May, to head off unofficial action. The fear of militancy in the car industry spreading would have been at forefront of both Linamar and Ford management's and the Unite! bureaucracy's thinking. It shows that rank and file militancy, direct action and solidarity work.

Tube staff go off the rails



From 7pm on the evening of Tuesday June 9th until 7pm on Thursday June 11th 2009, London Underground workers in the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union took strike action. The main issue was job security as tube bosses flatly refused to rule out compulsory redundancies, putting 4,000 jobs at risk. London Underground originally also tried to force through a five-year pay agreement which could see significant pay cuts linked to deflation. This, alongside severe management bullying, led the workers to strike.

As the strike began, the London papers really pushed the boat out using distortions and outright lies to attack the striking workers.

Claims of workers demanding 5% pay increases ignored the fact that management asked the RMT to submit a pay claim in November (when inflation was higher) while Transport for London have yet to offer anything. These sleight-of-hand tricks with the facts were coupled with barefaced lies like talks stalling over two sacked drivers on the Victoria line. This entirely separate issue, though symptomatic of wider abuses of procedure on the tube, were at no point a part of the main negotiations.

Of course, the papers also failed to mention the 123 tube managers on £100,000+ salaries, plus bonuses. Or that forty minutes before the strike, an agreement

had been reached which, while the documents were being typed up, was cancelled by City Hall. These facts disappeared from media view entirely.

The theme of the media coverage was one of trying to stoke resentment against the strikers. Newspaper letters pages were filled with angry comments about 'people losing their jobs while tube staff want more money'. We're in recession now so we all have to tighten our belts, apparently. However, this just means that workers will be asked to tighten our belts, while our bosses continue living on six-figure salaries. Tightening our belts now doesn't mean bosses will reward this good will in the future, rather they will see it as an opportunity for further attacks.

Rather than resent the tube workers' struggle for jobs, conditions and pay, we should see it as a source for inspiration. As the recession continues, many of us will face similar attacks as bosses try to save money while saving their own salaries. Taking action together, like workers did on the Underground, will be the only way to protect ourselves from these attacks.

Know your rights

Immigration checks

Employers are required to ensure everyone they recruit has the right to work in the UK. They also have to check the documents of workers transferred to them under TUPE within 28 days. They can also check the documents of existing employees, but must avoid racial discrimination by singling out a particular racial, national or ethnic group or groups.

Workers need one set of documents if they have an indefinite right to live and work in the UK and another if they have the right to do so only for a limited period or to work a limited number of hours. These

documents are referred to as List A and List B, respectively. Employers can copy documents for their records but must return them to the employee, with two exceptions. If an employee's documents are with the Border Agency, the employer can check the validity of Application Registration Cards (ARC) and Certificates Of Application on 0845 010 6677 9-5 Monday to Friday.

An employee providing documents under List A need not be subject to further checks after recruitment or transfer but under List B they must be checked at least every 12 months. Further document checks may also be carried out where

there is suspicion that an employee may not have the legal right to work. Invalid National Insurance Numbers are explicitly mentioned in the guidance to employers, including temporary numbers beginning TN or numbers ending in any letter from E to Z inclusive. These are a favourite excuse for employers to use immigration checks to dispose of, harass and victimise workers.

To avoid unlawful racial discrimination, checks must be carried out on all employees to whom such criteria apply, not just to Africans or Latin Americans, for example. The law is not much help, but if used skilfully may obstruct and delay the process.

Further details from: www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/employers/preventingillegalworking.

For more general information on your rights at work: www.stuffyourboss.com

Return to Lindsey

Construction workers at the Lindsey Oil Refinery have defied the anti-union laws and won another wildcat strike against redundancies and victimisation. Following the previous strike in January and February, 1200 workers struck again on 11th June over the announcement of 51 redundancies without consultation, breaching the agreement which had settled it. Another contractor on site had just hired 61 workers, and strikers argued that the work should have been shared out among those made redundant.

Total, which runs the refinery, had 647 workers employed by main contractor Jacobs sacked for taking unofficial strike action as the strikes spread to other several other sites. This act strengthened suspicions that the original redundancies had been an attempt to weed out militant workers who had organised the earlier strikes. Workers were told to reapply for their jobs on Monday 22nd June, but their response was to burn dismissal notices and for 4,000 workers at 19 sites across the country to walk out in solidarity.

While officially repudiating the unofficial, illegal strike, union leaders argued that it was unavoidable

because the anti-union laws would have forced workers to wait six weeks to organise a ballot, by which time it would have been too late. Strike leaders speaking at the Shop Stewards Network national conference on 27th June when the strike had just been won emphasised the support they had got from the GMB union as a factor in the victory. They argued that this convinced Total that the solidarity action would continue indefinitely, rather than petering out. Whether or not they are right, tanker drivers had taken an interest and promised not to cross official picket lines.

The employment of overseas labour is still an issue. One worker was quoted in a national newspaper as saying that "unskilled employees from abroad will be brought in on the cheap, treated like scum and sent back after the job is done". Workers argue that the National Agreement for the Engineering and Construction Industry (NAECI) should apply to all construction workers in the UK, regardless of nationality. Alistair Tebbit, head of employment policy at the Institute of Directors, admitted that "what the unions would like to see, and one can understand their point of view, is European law amended to

say you cannot bring people into the UK below the prevailing rights and wages". While xenophobia is still present, it is off the agenda in spite of the best efforts of the media to play it up to condemn the strikers.

Since construction workers move from contract to contract, they rely on the NAECI to protect their pay and conditions. Workers involved in the Lindsey strikes will move on to other sites when their contracts end, and take the lesson that direct action and solidarity works with them. Equally, the blacklist in the construction industry has hit the news again – the bosses think nationally too. It remains to be seen whether Total and its contractors will move against the workers at Lindsey again when some of the contracts have ended. With less than three years to the London Olympics, further disputes are inevitable somewhere in the construction industry.



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Will the CWU deliver?

In spite of the withdrawal of the Labour government's plans to privatise the Royal Mail, postal workers' campaign of strike action continues. In truth, postal workers consider privatisation has already happened, when the profitable parts of the business were hived off in the 2006 "liberalisation" exacerbating the problems the Royal Mail faces. The dispute is about "modernisation" – job cuts, attacks on pay, conditions and pensions – and the bullying which has passed for management in the Post for many years. CWU members believe that management are seeking to break the union.

Workers in London and Edinburgh struck on Friday 19th June, and elsewhere in Scotland on Saturday 20th. Management are not honouring the 2007 agreement on modernisation, in spite of record profits delivered by postal workers. Another rolling programme of strikes hit London on 8th-10th July, with delivery offices, distribution and logistics workers, and mail centres striking on consecutive days, as part of a longer programme. A national day of action was planned for Friday 17th July and other areas of Britain were seeking ballots on industrial action.

It is likely that the dispute will become national, with a real possibility that if the union leadership continue to avoid a confrontation with the government that unofficial national strike action will break out. There is also a feeling among the union's members that its leadership has kept silent on MPs' expenses and failed to support its members against the Labour government. However, the rank and file of the CWU has been far more militant than its leadership for decades now – Alan Johnson is a former General Secretary of the union – so we will watch developments with interest rather than expectation.

Who we are...



Solidarity Federation believes that workers' organisation has to be based in the workplace, and must involve all workers, regardless of which union they are in - or whether they are in a union at all. Pay rises, job safety and control over how we work will not be won by representation, but by workers taking action for themselves, independent of their bosses or any would-be representatives.

"Workers rights" will only be won by direct action, or by negotiations backed up by the credible threat of direct action, regardless of legislation. To act in our interests as workers we

must build effective organisation in the workplace. Across industries, we organise in Networks; geographically we organise Locals, to support each other in our struggles and to fight for our interests, both in and out of the workplace. We are part of the International Workers Association, organising with like minded people across the world.

If you would like to distribute Catalyst, please get in touch at one of the addresses below or email catalyst@solfed.org.uk

College strike



Manchester College, the largest FE college in the UK is bent on breaking its UCU (Universities & Colleges Union) branch. Despite promises on job security after merger and with no attempt to negotiate voluntary redundancy or redeployment, bosses announced in June that 13 teaching posts were to be cut. The fact that the UCU secretary's post is among the first to go clearly signals management's intent.

A strike ballot gained 74% backing and a one day strike ensued on July 1st. There were pickets at all of the college's sites across the city, with Manchester EWN-SF (Education Workers' Network) attending the picket at the Sheena Simon campus in the city centre. Meanwhile, a lively and noisy march, started from the Openshaw campus, swelled to 250+ after passing Sheena Simon, and attracted much attention as it

wound through the city centre.

Later an assembly of strikers and supporters included a useful discussion on the day's activities, and a fruitful planning session on taking the struggle forward. By announcing the cuts at the end of the academic year, bosses think resistance may peter out. The fact the meeting set the next strike day to hit the August enrolment process and created an email for communication and preparation will surely prevent that.

The effects of the financial crisis are being felt in education, and a funding crisis is looming large. Already Manchester College has been wielding the axe, with the planned closure of the nursery at the Northenden campus. The attack on the UCU is a clear attempt to remove it as an obstacle to further cuts. Leaving bosses a free hand to make cuts as they please is not an option. Only by showing the type of resolve demonstrated by these Manchester College workers will we stand any chance of defending our pay, our working conditions and ultimately our jobs.

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