

# Mouvement Communiste

Letter number 30

June 2009

## THE STRIKE AT LINDSEY REFINERY: A STRUGGLE ENTANGLED IN NATIONALISM

### ▪ **Introduction**

For once a strike made the front pages of British newspapers and, what's more, it was welcomed. Why the hype about a "wildcat" strike which began on January 28 at the Total oil refinery in Lindsey in the town of North Killingholme (North Lincolnshire)? What was the reason? The Italian engineering company IREM won a contract for the construction of a desulphurisation unit at the site of the refinery. The contract was worth £200 million and was to be undertaken by its own Italian and Portuguese workers, including hundreds already on site and 300 more to join them (the workers of IREM are not unionised, at least according to the *Morning Star*, 5 February 2009). IREM won the tender against five UK firms and two other European ones.

This caused much anger among maintenance workers employed on the site and belonging to dozens of different companies but all affiliated to the same collective agreement, the Blue Book. Indeed, they demanded the hiring of local workers, and feared that IREM's actions would create an unprecedented situation that would breach the national agreement, although IREM in the UK is nominally bound by it.

The story most newspapers put forward was not workers defending the collective agreement but workers defending "British jobs", and demonstrating in a nationalist way, particularly because in the early days it was possible to see strikers, on pickets and on demonstrations, holding British flags bearing the slogan of the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown: "British jobs for British workers".

But what really happened?

### ▪ **If you missed the beginning**

#### ▪ **Lindsey refinery**

Active since May 1968, the refinery, located in North Killingholme, in the Grimsby industrial area, is the third biggest in the UK with an annual production capacity of 10 million tonnes per year (223,000 barrels per day). It employs 500 employees and several hundred sub-contractors which can increase to several thousand during major maintenance operations or during the development of the various sites.

#### ▪ **Construction engineering**

Firms in this sector provide industrial facilities or bring existing facilities up to new standards. In both cases, their contracts are subject to penalties for delay in the production of plant or premiums in case of delivery in advance. It is understandable that these enterprises need to be efficient and to use proven methods and skilled and competent workers who've got the hang of their assembly processes. It's therefore not surprising that a foreign company brings its own employees (or those of its subcontractors) when operating on British soil.

#### ▪ **IREM**

This is an Italian engineering construction company for oil refineries and chemical and petrochemical plants, founded in 1979 and based in Syracuse (Sicily). It carries out the design, manufacture and assembly of industrial facilities. It employs 1500 employees and has a volume of sales of 120 million euros per year.

## ***The sequence of events***

### ▪ **Wednesday 28 January 2009**

Start of strike at Lindsey oil refinery. No attacks on existing jobs but workers feared that some could occur at the end of the “no-sacking” agreement between unions and bosses in mid-February. From 800 to 1000 workers gathered and immediately voted for a strike. Shop stewards’ committee insists that workers follow normal procedure for industrial conflicts. Shop stewards’ committee all resign in order to make it obvious that the union distances itself from the illegal strike.

### ▪ **Thursday 29 January**

Demo and picket outside the refinery – 800 to 1000 people. This was present on all the successive days of strike action.

Solidarity strikes (illegal in the United Kingdom) by:

- Hundreds of contract workers at the neighbouring Conoco Phillips oil refinery,

Employees at BP's Dimlington gas terminal (East Yorkshire) and its chemical manufacturing plant in Saltend in Kingston upon Hull (North Lincolnshire),  
 Workers at Scottish Power's Longannet power station (Fife) Scotland,  
 Staythorpe Power Station construction site (Nottinghamshire),  
 Easington natural gas terminal (East Yorkshire).

### ▪ **Friday 30 January**

Solidarity strikes :

- 700 workers from Grangemouth oil refinery (Falkirk) Scotland,

60 people on picket line in Aberthaw power station, near Barry (Vale of Glamorgan), Wales,  
 400 strikers in Petroplus refinery, in Wilton, close to Middlesborough (Teesside),  
 Kilroot power station in Carrickfergus, Northern Ireland,  
 South Hook LNG gas terminal (West Wales),  
 Fiddlers Ferry power station, near Warrington (Cheshire),  
 400 walk out in Longannet power station (Fife), run by Scottish Power, Scotland,  
 other smaller sites ...

*The Guardian* says 3000 workers on strike across the United Kingdom.

Government convenes meeting of Cobra (“Cabinet Office briefing room A”), which meets at times of heightened alert or crisis. Senior officials from the Home Office, Department for Business, Department for Energy and Ministry of Defence, along with civil contingencies experts, meet in the high-security bunker room at the Cabinet Office, off Whitehall.

### ▪ **Saturday 31 January**

Much hot air from politicians about fairness and legality of how Total awarded contract. Employment Minister asks Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) to examine claims that British workers are being illegally excluded from major engineering and construction projects.

### ▪ **Sunday 1 February**

Don't appear to be any more strikes. Well, it is Sunday...

### ▪ **Monday 2 February**

Solidarity strikes:

- Sellafield nuclear power plant, (Cumbria). Contract workers building new storage facilities at the site went on strike,

Heysham nuclear power station, (Lancashire),  
 Staythorpe power station (Nottinghamshire),  
 Grangemouth oil refinery (Falkirk) Scotland, where 700 workers walk out,  
 Longannet power station, run Scottish Power, (Fife) Scotland,  
 Fiddlers Ferry power station, near de Warrington (Cheshire) where 200 workers walk out,  
 South Hook LNG gas terminal (500 stop work),  
 Aberthaw power station Wales,  
 Petroplus refinery in Coryton (Essex),  
 a Shell gas site in Fife, Scotland,  
 Chevron oil refinery, in Pembroke (Pembrokeshire) Wales,

Lange power station, Plymouth (Devon), 600 walk out, including 35 Polish workers!  
In Scunthorpe (North Lincolnshire), where ACAS was holding talks with Total management and the Unite and GMB unions, a small group of protesters gathered.

Formulation of demands by Lindsey strikers.

- **Tuesday 3 February**

No more solidarity strikes as far as we know... But there was the usual gathering of workers outside the Lindsey refinery.

- **Wednesday 4 February**

Strikers are advised to end their action after unions are offered 50 per cent of jobs for UK workers, i.e. some new jobs were created. This was enough to end the strike.

Tony Ryan, from the strike committee, tells hundreds of protesters at Lindsey oil site that they have been given 102 new jobs for a minimum of nine weeks. "We've been offered what we went in for, really, which is 50/50". "The stewards' recommendation tomorrow will be for the lads to return to work."

The final deal included an agreement that shop stewards could check that the jobs filled by the Italian and Portuguese workers were on the same conditions as the local workers covered by the national industry agreement, and that unionised workers will work alongside the IREM workers.

- **Shop stewards and trade-Unions**

- **Shops stewards, rank and file delegates in British industry**

### General framework

The law in general, and labour law in particular, is very little codified in the UK. It is based mostly on usage, so it is very difficult to describe in detail the complex and shifting role of shop stewards or to attempt comparisons with what exists in France or other European countries. The same applies to the unions as a whole, whose prerogatives can vary from one industry branch to the other. It is not uncommon (although less so today) to see two different unions, belonging to the same confederation, the TUC (Trade Union Congress), fighting against each other in the same industry or enterprise to unionise employees. However, starting with the Blair government, several laws have been passed relating to this area<sup>1</sup>.

The main roles of shop stewards (let's emphasise that they maintain their role as employees and are not employed by the union) are:

- Negotiation in the workplace (workshop, department),
- Representation of unionised workers,
- The daily management of union structure,
- Recruitment for union and the statement of contributions,
- Ensure that the firm is in compliance with laws and regulations regarding safety.

Right from the start the shop stewards have had an ambivalent relation with the trade unions, being at the same time outside and inside; forming part of the union (but not all the time) and promoting it but nevertheless being opposed to it both at the company level and at the branch level. With respect to their colleagues, they represent a direct democracy of the workshop, but which, outside important periods of struggle, is limited to ordinary economic struggle. They are also "protected" by the company agreement. The shop stewards can negotiate at any time with the management provided that they comply with the limits of the company agreement. The shop stewards of the same company come together in the shop stewards council which has the right to negotiate agreements on behalf of the union.

Aware of the danger they represent to unions, the latter have tried since 1970 to reinstate them systematically in the company/trade union structure.

The question of membership in unions didn't traditionally arise because the shop stewards were present primarily in industries where a closed shop was established, i.e. in companies that hired only unionised workers. The *Closed-shop*<sup>2</sup>, had been imposed by the workers as a means of defensive struggle. But, while

<sup>1</sup> 1998, National Minimum Wage Act (Agreement on the minimum wage); 1998, Working Time Regulations (Agreement on the duration of working time); 1999, Employment Relations Act (Agreement on the contractual rules between employers and employees but also the definition of legal rules in respect to strikes and the recognition of trade unions in enterprises with more than 21 employees).

<sup>2</sup> We must distinguish a closed shop from a union shop. The first means that the company only hires unionised workers while the second means that the company can hire non-unionised workers but that these must join the union after a certain period of time or lose their jobs. There were also places where the unions managed the hiring of

being focused on the defence of those belonging to the trade union that was responsible for the recruiting, they fought more against unions or workers excluded from the company agreement than against their own bosses. There are many examples of this, from the Press unions that exclude women in France to unions in the car industry, which was for a long time closed to black workers in the United States. There are some exceptions like the Liverpool dockers, traditionally prepared to boycott goods in transit through their ports belonging to companies where workers were on strike, and even those coming from countries engaged in particularly odious anti-worker repression.

In high points of the class struggle, shop stewards have exceeded their initial tasks and have become agents of a workers' counter-power disputing work organisation, particularly the assignment to workers of specific tasks, the nature of these tasks, the means to do them, the control over working hours and breaks or obtaining specific allowances. All these practices were based on complex relationships between the company's power to command and the workers, on the "custom and practice" which itself is the subject of continuous negotiations in the workplace.

### Some history

Initially assigned (late 19th century) with tasks such as collecting trade union dues, the shop stewards, delegates who continue to work, have gradually organised in parallel to unions. Unlike staff representatives in France, shop stewards are directly elected by their colleagues (workshop or trade) and are also supposed to represent their direct interests during negotiations with employers and in day to day matters. Although independent of trade union structures, shop stewards have developed mainly in industries where unions are present and they mostly belong to those unions.

Their take off as a form of organisation for workers occurred during the First World War, when all trade unions (and the Labour Party) participated in the war effort on behalf of National Unity and so, of course, were opposed to any workers' demands while conditions of exploitation were worsening. Workers therefore "naturally" used the only organisation available to them in the workshop, the shop stewards, by giving them an offensive role as struggle delegate in the beginning of 1916. The first strikes organised by shop stewards took place in the shipyards of the Clyde in Glasgow. Taking account of the size of the shipyards which were running flat out because of the war effort, the shop stewards created a centralised organisation at site level. So, born in the shipyards, the shop stewards movement spread to other industries and in some regions it centralised itself between different companies, as in the case of the Clyde worker's committee. The most radical of them explicitly supported the October Revolution and gave an additional political dimension to their work. However, after the retreat of the revolutionary wave, from 1921, the influence of shop stewards at the national level declined sharply for two reasons: decrease of the level of struggle and thus a shrinkage of the role of shop stewards in the company, sometimes down to a workshop level, and, secondly, integration of a large number of activists into the Communist Party in the process of Stalinisation (William Gallagher, the main leader of the Clyde worker's committee becoming CP general secretary).

In 1936, a new round of struggles started revitalising the shop stewards. In addition to the struggles for wages and working conditions, they were at the origin of political strikes in support of the Spanish Republicans or, as at Vickers, to prevent manufactured aircraft being delivered to Franco. At the beginning of World War II, the CP supported the USSR's strategy (Soviet-German pact), supported strikes carried out on the initiative of shop stewards against restrictions due to the war effort (campaign: "No fascism, no war") and helped to organise shop stewards national conferences to coordinate struggles in Birmingham in December 1940. Obviously, the invasion of the USSR in June 1941 tipped shop stewards faithful to the CP into support for the war effort and determined opposition to strikes. The shop stewards movement was broken but a determined minority continued to organise strikes, such as the miners in Kent in January 1942 or the Vickers Armstrong shipyards in Barrow-in-Furness in December 1943.

>From 1950 to 1970, they organised the resistance to modernisation and increased productivity in industry, especially in the car industry, in the ports, in shipbuilding, in newspapers and in the Post Office. The balance of power in favour of the organised working class with its rank-and-file delegates contributed to the decline of British industry, unable to cope with international competition.

Unable to modernise, the capitalists let it decline and then closed large parts of their industry. After the "Winter of Discontent" in 1979/1980 and the defeat of the miners in 1985, the balance of power was massively reversed and delegates lost much of their influence.

The position with regard to shop stewards varies between unions, and stewards belonging to different unions can organise themselves into the same committee.

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workers themselves.

3 These strikes had been preceded by the strike of 200,000 miners in Wales, in June 1915.

Most of strikes in the United Kingdom have been organised by shop stewards. Rather than wildcat strikes, they are non-official strikes, i.e. not organised by the union structure but a lot of strikes launched by shop stewards are then recognised by the trade union structure and become official. In 1967, approximately 5000 shop stewards represented 200,000 workers in the car industry. They were traditionally elected by show of hands, a practice that has gradually been replaced by a more formal election.

- **Branch unions**

To resist the erosion of their membership base, the trade unions have carried out important mergers. *Unite* thus became the most important British trade union with slightly less than 2 million members. In 2001, *Amicus* was formed by the merger of the MSF union (itself founded in 1988 by the merger of several trade unions), - led by the left and gathering skilled workers and technicians of various industries, some of its branches going back to 1834 - and the large trade union of mechanics and electricians, the AEEU (*Amalgamated Engineering and Electrician Union*), founded in 1992 but whose origins go back to the 1850s. Supporters of corporatism, the trade unions which formed the AEEU sometimes played the role of scabs, the electricians union in particular, in the '60s and '70s. In 2004, the GPMU union (*Graphical, Paper and Media Union*), heir to a two hundred-year-old tradition and representing the workers of the press and graphic arts joined *Amicus*.

This last became "*Unite the Union*" by integrating the T&G (*Transport and General Workers' Union*), the large trade union of transport, the car industry and generic unskilled labour. Founded in 1922 it unionised the workers of the ports, transport and the unskilled workers of industry. It took an active part in the general strike of 1926. Very often, it was delegates of the T&G which carried out the great struggles in industry during the '6s and '70s.

The GMB (*General Municipal and Boilermakers union*), more commonly called "*Britain's General Union*", is a general trade union, i.e. it unionises any worker whatever their line of work, and it has 600,000 members. It has its origins in the "Gas Workers and General Union" which was formed in 1889, then after the merger in 1924 with the trade union of the municipal employees ("Municipal Employees Association") it gave rise to the "*National Union off General and Municipal Workers*". Then by successive mergers (in particular workers in the textile and the clothes industry) it gave birth, in 1993, to the GMB as it is now.

- **Most important characteristic of the strikes**

- **Broadening**

What we can see here is that the most important characteristic of these strikes is the rapid development of solidarity actions in a variety of workplaces in the same "industry". Such actions have been illegal in Britain since the miners' strike of 1984-85 and so could not be officially supported by the unions. For this reason the strikes were reported as "unofficial", but this did not mean that they were "non-union" or "anti-union" because shop stewards undoubtedly played a role in organising the strikes and the workers largely saw themselves as acting as trade unionists. As always, such illegal strikes expose the stupidity of the view that workers need friends in parliament to grant them permission to struggle.

- **Was it a nationalist strike?**

Yes, to some extent...

The workers really did hold up placards saying "British Jobs for British workers", and they weren't all supplied by the union! There really were British flags on the picket lines. Workers did express nationalist views – "the foreigners are taking our jobs" – both to the media and on the Bearfacts website ([www.bearfacts.co.uk](http://www.bearfacts.co.uk)). The bearfacts website acted as something of a centre of coordination and the first "British Jobs for British Workers" posters were downloaded from the web site ([www.bearfacts.co.uk](http://www.bearfacts.co.uk)).

No, not really...

On numerous occasions workers and union officials expressed the view that they were defending existing agreements and fighting discrimination against local labour and that they had nothing against foreign workers (who were in the same position as them, just wanted to feed their families etc.). Even Derek Simpson - joint leader of the Unite union – said that the campaign of strikes "is not about race or immigration, it's about class". At no point were demands put forward for the foreign workers to be sacked or repatriated.

The slogan "British Jobs for British Workers" was a reference to a speech made by Gordon brown at the Labour Party conference in 2007, so it was *to some extent* ironic... It was also contested as the strike progressed – for example, bearfacts changed its poster to "Fair Access for Local labour".

The demands of the strike committee were completely trade unionist but in no way nationalist. Here they are, as stated on 2 February:

- No victimisation of workers taking solidarity action.

All workers in United Kingdom to be covered by NAECI Agreement.

Union controlled registering of unemployed and locally skilled union members, with nominating rights as work becomes available.

Government and employer investment in proper training / apprenticeships for new generation of construction workers - fight for a future for young people.

All Immigrant labour to be unionised.

Trade Union assistance for immigrant workers - including interpreters - and access to Trade Union advice - to promote active integrated Trade Union Members.

Build links with construction trade unions on the continent.

Were the far-right seriously involved in the strike movement? No! Some members of the BNP did turn up at the Lindsey picket and were told to “fuck off” by trade unionists. They left. The BNP has its own union Solidarity (whose banner is based on the *Solidarność* one but with a British flag) but this has only a few hundred members throughout Great Britain.

It’s important to understand that the right-wing press in Britain (*The Sun*, *The Daily Mail* etc.), who normally never have a good word to say for strikers, were markedly “sympathetic” and did everything they could to emphasise the nationalist side of the strikes, as did the British media in general.

On Friday 6 Feb the BBC even apologised for having misrepresented a comment by a worker. What he actually said was ““These Portuguese and Eyeties – we can't work alongside of them: we're segregated from them.” The BBC had removed the last sentence!

#### ▪ **What sort of workers are we talking about?**

We are talking about highly skilled construction workers. They are not “ordinary” construction workers – they don’t build houses or offices. They work in “engineering construction”, that is they build power stations, chemical plants, oil refineries... They are scaffolding erectors, welders, ladders, pipe-fitters, electricians, platers... But they are not that well paid. Under the terms of the National Agreement (see below) an “advanced craftsman” is paid £14 per hour (i.e. about 2.5 times the minimum wage). Generally they work on short-term contracts and expect to be out of work from time to time. A notable feature of the strikes is that unemployed workers took part in the demonstrations and assemblies, indicating that there is not such a big division between employed and unemployed as there is in the working class generally. They work for a bewildering array of specialist construction firms. At the time of the strikes Lindsey oil refinery employed labour through 267 different companies. These range from small local subcontractors to huge global companies like the Shaw Group, which, according to its web site, employs 26,000 people around the world.

They also expected to have jobs in the near future. Energy is one of the few sectors that is expanding in Britain. Staythorpe is among several planned new gas-fired power stations. New coal and nuclear plants are also planned, along with storage for natural gas, liquid-gas import terminals, new pipelines and expanding the electricity grid to accommodate more renewable energy.

There appear to be a lot of informal links between them. It is not clear to what extent they are mediated by the union structure, i.e. shop stewards, but there is certainly a strong informal autonomous element to them. A post on libcom (<http://libcom.org>) from a Lindsey electrician is relevant here:

“I am a Spark on LOR the refinery where the strikes started. I was at the meeting where we voted to take illegal action. Our major grievance was the use of the posted worker directive to bypass our national agreement (The Blue Book). We felt that going through procedure between the union and employer which would have taken longer than the duration of the job (something both the bosses and our joke of a union are quite aware of and more than happy with) action needed to be taken. Since the bosses break the Blue Book agreement on a regular basis with minimal protest from Unite, we failed to see why we should play by the rules they ignore on a regular basis. We were addressed by the regional delegate for Unite and told we would lose any dispute on this issue and were told to pick our champions as we were on a hiding to nothing. As regards to the union organising walkouts across the country on the quiet, complete rubbish, it was organised at grassroots level by lads from LOR ringing round mates on other Blue Book jobs around the country.”

The national agreement between the bosses and the unions (National Agreement for the Engineering

Construction Industry – NAECI, the “Blue Book”) is very important in determining pay and conditions of work, right down to things like tea-breaks and paid time off for funerals of colleagues<sup>4</sup>. Interestingly enough the NAECI explicitly prohibits “sympathy stoppages” when colleagues die! Almost all engineering construction firms operating in Britain are members of the Engineering Construction Industry Association and so agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement – IREM obtained provisional membership. The agreement first came into existence in 1981 with the express aim of preventing unofficial strikes.

Yes, these workers still have tea-breaks... But the NAECI only allows for one tea-break per day (in the morning) and not on Fridays. “Employers complain privately that the 10-minute paid break entitlement can result in workers being off site for a significantly longer period” *Financial Times* 06/02/09. For those who recall history, this is a step backwards. In fact, old timers have not forgotten a time when the moral economy of the British working class demanded two breaks per day in all workplaces

All sorts of wild rumours circulated about the sort of contracts that the foreign workers were on, but the company employing them claimed that their pay and conditions were the same as the United Kingdom workers doing similar work. We don’t know... but it seems likely that their treatment will have been similar because they had the same kind of skills and worked in the same international sector.

In the words of the ACAS report on the dispute<sup>5</sup> “IREM were fully aware and, in submitting a tender, would be implicitly accepting that all of their workers on site would be employed on the terms and conditions set down in the National Agreement for the Engineering Construction Industry (NAECI) including their pay”, although the ACAS report stops short of saying that the bosses actually honoured the agreement.

The motives of the bosses were not likely to have been blatant wage-cutting, more just a case of using workers with less connection to other workers in the same local environment. The converted barge that they are presently housed in apparently has a cinema... but no alcohol is allowed on board.

#### ▪ What was the role of the unions?

As already mentioned, the higher levels of the unions involved (the GMB and Unite) could not be openly involved in organising the strikes in any way because the strikes were illegal. If the unions were seen to be directly involved they could face substantial fines. As already mentioned, on the first day of the strike at LOR the entire shop stewards committee resigned (on advice from full time union officials).

However, unions played a significant part inside movements that lead to the Lindsey strike. The National Committee of shop stewards met in January to study the case of Staythorpe power plant where Alstom refused to hire a local workforce and instead was importing Polish and Spanish workers. During this meeting, it was decided that all sites regulated by the Blue Book must send delegations to Staythorpe to put pressure on Alstom. Furthermore, Unite had already organised demonstrations in Staythorpe for the same reason since October 2008.

The bosses, very sensibly, didn’t make any legal threats against the unions (which could have been threatened with injunctions or fines) or against individual workers (who could have been sacked for taking unofficial action). This kept the dispute more or less within the usual negotiating framework, with the unions representing a strike which they didn’t officially support...

There were certainly tensions between the strikers (and the shop stewards) and the unions, but no more than is usual. The unions began to recommend returns to work by solidarity strikers after the first two or three days but these were rejected because the Staythorpe workers were still out. In the first meeting between Total and the strike committee, the employers kept looking at their watches. When asked why the meeting was being cut short, they said they had a meeting to go to with Unite officials and ACAS in a hotel in Scunthorpe. This was news to the strike committee, who immediately organised to go up to the hotel with other strikers and demanded to be let into the negotiations.

The strike committee at Lindsey seems to have been mostly composed of shop stewards, some of whom were active leftists. For example, at least one of them, Keith Gibson, was a member of the Socialist Party (no, not the Labour Party... The SP is a small populist Trotskyist party ultimately derived from splits in the Militant Tendency which was active on the left of the Labour Party in the ‘80s and ‘90s – in Britain today the Socialist Party seems to be the Trot party most active in workers’ struggles).

4 The full text of the agreement is available online: <http://www.njceci.co.uk/assets/downloads/NAECI%2020072010%20Final%20Printed%20Edition.pdf>

5 <http://www.acas.org.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=1019&p=0>

According to the *Guardian*, to some extent the strikes appear to have been organised by stewards in advance<sup>6</sup>:

“The groundwork had been laid by 40 stewards who had met several times amid mounting concern at the way companies in the sector were refusing to hire British workers. This group included McGuigan, and Phil Willis, a now-unemployed steel erector from near Maidstone in Kent. Union officials were not informed because the plans involved illegal and unofficial action. Any sense that they were involved and the union could face substantial fines.

As pressure built on *Unite's* leadership to take a tougher line, the stewards reconvened in London on 7 January. ‘It was decided we had to campaign against what was happening, so we decided to go to Staythorpe, which was the main problem at the time,’ said Willis. Independently of the *Unite* leadership, several busloads of union members were dispatched from Yorkshire and south Wales to join the protests.” Although, in the same article, we can read from Billy Corrigan, 60, a scaffolder and steward from the Stanlow refinery in Cheshire: “The lads had been talking about the issue since Staythorpe. These actions are not coming from the stewards, they are coming from the lads.”

#### ▪ **What were the strikes about?**

There were two main grievances expressed by the workers:

- They felt that they were being discriminated against. It was considered unacceptable that local workers were being excluded from the contract. Many workers expressed the view that it was normal to recruit a certain percentage of local labour for similar projects around Europe.
- The contract was seen as undermining pay and conditions by circumventing the NAEI.

According to “industry insiders” who spoke to the *Financial Times*, it was the traditional militancy of the engineering construction workers in the United Kingdom which led to the use of overseas workers.

“The engineering construction sector, at the heart of last week’s dispute at the Lindsey oil refinery, lost more than 22,400 days to unofficial action in the year to November. This equates to almost one day for every one of the roughly 25,000 blue-collar workers employed – about 32 times worse than the average for the United Kingdom workforce as a whole for the same period.” *Financial Times*, 06/02/09.

There was a great deal of hot air from union leaders and politicians about the deficiencies of EU labour law, but essentially it came down to this: EU law says that EU workers employed in another EU state must be subject to local laws (minimum wage etc.) but it doesn’t say anything about respecting industry-wide union agreements unless they are in some way legally binding.

Will we hear more from this sector of workers ?

Quite likely. See our supplementary Letter on the June strikes...

#### ▪ **Some firm positions**

Mainly shaped by the relations of capitalistic production, the working class is never a homogeneous whole. This is true during periods of low intensity class struggle as well as during the beginning of the revolutionary period or even during it. It is criss-crossed by contradictions and antagonisms resulting from its various places and roles in the relations of production. Antagonisms based on qualification, age, sex, religion, race, commitment to the company, to the region or to the State are produced by competition between proletarians. The working class sometimes escapes from them, and always has to get rid of them. One of these contradictions was expressed during the Lindsey strikes.

The emergence in the demonstrations and pickets of British flags decorated with the slogan "British jobs for British workers" is one of these symptoms, even if we take into account the "British sense of humour"! Despite the intentions of the organisers of the movement, the local population and those of the participants less engaged or less class conscious may have taken this message at face value. All the more so given that many newspapers or other capitalist institutions, in the United Kingdom and in Italy, played on this aspect of the strikes. This is the reason why we cannot in any way endorse or even justify the supposed joke of the slogan “British jobs for British workers”. It must not be forgotten that those who, at the beginning of the conflict, waved British flags - certainly a minority - were not prevented by the others.

So is this what the struggle was really about? No, as we have shown. Even in a strike of such short duration as this, things change, and quickly. Soon, the nationalist slogan was abandoned and in the list of demands the strikers included a demand that the workers of the company IREM enjoy the same benefits as themselves. This is the evidence that strikes develop in a contradictory way and that this time this one found the

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2009/feb/05/union-strike-lindsey-refinery>



resources to partially overcome its limits.

If nationalism has therefore not taken over amongst the strikers, on the other hand it has served as a crystallisation point for those (unemployed or not) who have participated in solidarity demonstrations, as is suggested both by the slogans and the flags. During this period of crisis, bosses are adjusting production capacities to the likely market demand (of today or tomorrow) and therefore they tend to bring back factories from “abroad” towards the “country” under the benevolent shelter of the state. On their part, workers experience a rise in unemployment, which “naturally” increases the weight of nationalism, and the rejection of foreigners, especially if they are considered as a potential competitor, real or imaginary, in a shrinking labour market.

In this context, the despair of workers facing a worsening of living conditions, especially because it cannot turn into a collective movement against capital, results in hostility against immigrants, in more or less violent racist reactions, in the rise of various extreme-right organisation during elections, more generally in the rise of nationalism. We see then that the support of those workers to the Lindsey strike is contradictory for more than one reason. But nationalism would not have been expressed, from the beginning, if the workers at Lindsey had clearly prevented any manifestation of it.

Another problem arises from the following claims of 2 February ("Union controlled registering of unemployed and locally skilled union members, with nominating rights as work becomes available"). This is nothing other than a union shop (only for "unionised" and "skilled" workers).

Indeed, this is a request for control of recruiting by the trade unions. It is thus an explicit request for co-administration of labour power. The “closed shop” or the monopoly of recruiting in the hands of the trade unions is an extreme form of this type of practice. Among multiple examples from many countries we can quote the American dockers and the printing works of the Press in France. We need to remember that this is a powerful means, given by the state and the bosses to the trade unions, to control the working class and prevent unrest. It also encourages corruption, mixing business and politics, at the very heart of those trade unions.

The weakness of the workers of the sector of construction engineering in the face of their bosses appeared very blatantly. In spite of their skills, their fight for better conditions is made difficult because, firstly, of the numerous firms which they belong to and, secondly, because they are spread around different locations due to the very nature of their work. This weakness is partly mitigated by the collective agreement (Blue Book). Under these conditions, it is not possible in any way to support a policy (co-management and the control of recruiting) that would promote only trade union interests and which, even more than the scattering of the work force into small firms, would hinder the battles to come.

There is fortunately another point which deserves the greatest attention: it is the persistence of informal horizontal networks between waged workers of the same sector, whichever union they are in, whether they are unionised or not, which allow them to react quickly and effectively. It is the guarantee of future success.

Brussels, London, Paris, June 12th 2009

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