

# Construction Worker

## Socialist Appeal Supplement

### Build on the success of Lindsey...

## All-out National Strike Action Needed!

by **Des Heemskerck**

WITH WORKERS everywhere being forced onto the defensive through employers' attacks on jobs, pay and conditions the victory at Lindsey of the protests and strike action will be seen as a marvellous example to others of what can be achieved in the face of attack. The background to this latest dispute has been a deliberate employers' offensive over a number of years to undermine the National Agreement for the Engineering Construction Industry (NAECI). The slump in the construction industry since last summer and the onset of the recession only intensified these attacks.

### Victory at Lindsey

The latest victory at Lindsey demonstrates what can be achieved in the face of the recession. Because of the magnificent solidarity shown by workers during the Lindsey dispute the bosses are panicking! Newspaper reports revealed that senior civil servants ordered an emergency 'Cobra' meeting to plan the government's response to the strike action. National Grid, the power distributor, has been monitoring the situation very closely in case electricity and gas supplies are interrupted. National Grid may instruct large energy users, such as factories, to close. The Isle of Grain Power Station alone provides 3% of UK electricity! The police and the army have been put on alert! Strenuous efforts have been made by ministers, officials, union 'leaders' and conciliators to try to halt the 'illegal wildcat' strikes.

### Brown Sides with Bosses

Labour leader Gordon Brown has sided with the bosses saying that the outbreak of 'wildcat' strikes are "indefensible". Every effort is being made to undermine the solidarity of the strikes and

protests. Lord Mandelson addressed the House of Lords saying "We should keep our sights set firmly not on the politics of xenophobia but on the economics of this recession." This was a clear attempt to try to smear the strikers and divert attention from the real issues of the dispute, which were protection of jobs and defence of working conditions. Some on the left have unfortunately fallen for this crude attempt to smear the strike. The BNP have tried to intervene in the dispute, hoping to turn it into a nationalistic strike, but have been turned away by the workers involved.

### Movement from Below

The reason for the success of this current dispute is that it is a movement from below controlled by the rank and file. For far too long the trade union leaders have sat on their hands shying away from challenging the Tory anti-union laws that prevent workers from legally striking in solidarity for fear of union funds being sequestered. No members want union funds to be confiscated, but what better time is there than now to mount a serious challenge? At the time of his election in 2002 Derek Simpson, the General Secretary of Unite Amicus, promised to 'abolish the anti-union laws' but has done nothing since to honour his promises! Simpson is now saying "We can't condone unofficial action".

### Wembley Stadium

We all remember what happened during the Wembley Stadium dispute in 2004 where workers were left to defend themselves while two Amicus officials attempted to escort crane drivers across the picket line. Thanks to the solidarity of the Dutch crane drivers who refused to cross the picket line, this attempt was thwarted. Only through the efforts of the workers themselves were Multiplex forced to reinstate the sacked workers

and prevented from removing the NAECI terms. The lessons from Wembley were clear. Control of disputes must be kept in the hands of the workers.

### Workers under Attack



The recent dispute, from the point of view of the present laws governing trade union activity, was "illegal". There was no ballot, no forewarning, there was mass picketing and solidarity action by other workers. And yet instead of quoting the law, the government and the bosses called in ACAS and tried to patch together some deal in a desperate attempt to get the workers back to work. Had the bosses not offered anything and the law had been used, in the present conditions, this would have led to a widening of the struggle. The message to all workers will therefore be very clear: militant action pays!

The action must now be stepped up to make sure that sub-contractors on all the major projects are adhering to the NAECI agreement. The leadership must call a national strike in construction now. The moment should be seized to extend the agreement to all construction sites beyond the major projects as well as launching a campaign to make improvements to the agreement. But at a national meeting of shop stewards called in Manchester on the 9th February no clear lead was given by the union leadership.

# Determined, defiant and committed

**Interview with Phil Willis,  
unemployed steel erector and Unite activist.**

## What are you fighting against? What do you hope to gain?

The protestors hope to gain equality and fairness and for common sense to prevail. They want all workers to be covered by the national agreement that guarantees the same terms and conditions for everyone. If the protestors were to fail in their quest, it would sound the death knell for the UK construction worker in this country and their skills and expertise and job opportunities would be lost forever, so the stakes are just too high for workers not to take action.

## What are conditions like at the Isle of Grain?

Getting information from foreign workers is notoriously difficult as they are deliberately segregated from having any contact with the UK labour force both at work and in their overnight accommodation. This is a well known employer tactic, to avoid workers comparing pay slips and terms and conditions of employment. Whilst details are very hard to come by, it is quite clear that Polish workers engaged on the Isle Of Grain are not being employed under the same terms of the NAECI blue book and do not therefore achieve parity with their UK brothers.

Ironically, this week when UK workers in Plymouth walked out in support of their brothers at Lindsey, Immingham and Staythorpe. Polish workers at Plymouth also walked out and stood shoulder to shoulder with UK protestors on the protest line, as they had been made aware that their terms and conditions of pay did not achieve parity and that they were in fact being exploited.

## How would you describe the mood of the construction

## workers?

Determined, defiant and committed to achieving their aims and objectives, no matter how long it takes.

## What's the next step? Where do we go from here?

The protests, lobbies and demonstrations are to continue. There is much still to do and much that can still be done. There will be a national demonstration organised shortly and lobby of parliament to keep the issue in the public consciousness until it is resolved. There have been calls to boycott all the products and services supplied by companies who have exploited foreign workers and who have excluded UK workers.

In the end it all boils down to the fact that we want fairness and equality and that is exactly what we intend to get. □



# Employers' lies exposed

**Interview with John McKewan, victimised worker from  
Lindsey Total Oil Refinery.**

## What was the significance of the Lindsey dispute?

Resentment has been building up for years. Now everything has blown up. As soon as we saw foreign companies coming into Lindsey, there was a spontaneous reaction from below. Everybody went out of the gate.

## How do you see things developing?

We were surprised by the support for this action from workers throughout the industry. It showed the anger. In my opinion we should have organised a national strike from the very beginning. The next battle is at Staythorpe Power station. This is going to be harder. Lads have been on the gates for last 6 months. There are some 150 foreign workers there, mainly Poles and Hungarians. The employers are playing a dangerous game. National shop stewards

met to consider further solidarity action with Staythorpe and the Isle of Grain.

Trade union leaders do not understand the anger of workers fearful for their jobs and livelihoods.

I asked the coppers what they were doing here. "Shouldn't you be in London arresting bankers and city speculators?" They seemed to agree. We told them to move the BNP. If not, then we would move them ourselves, so they obliged.

## Do you see the agreement at Lindsey as a victory?

Absolutely! It was the biggest battle in the construction industry for years. It was a massive victory. To begin with, TOTAL - totally anti-union - wouldn't even talk to the union when they kicked me off the site. Now they jumped when the workers walked out.

The strike - which was illegal and un-

official - was a huge challenge to the employers, government and trade union leaders.

## The media has tried to portray the strike as anti-foreigner. Is it?

That was not true. It was to protect our terms and conditions as well as our employment rights. We wanted to speak to the foreign workers, but there was a language barrier. They were kept on a prison ship in Grimsby dock. The gaffers said that the foreign workers were on Blue Book agreement, but they weren't allowed to show their pay slips. The workers were told to keep their mouths shut. One admitted on TV that they were being paid less than British workers. The employers' lies were exposed.

We need to talk to the Italian workers as their interests are our interests. We are all being asked to pay for the crisis of capitalism. □

# Solidarity from Italian Workers

**Socialist Appeal** interviewed Antonio Recano, an engineering shop steward, who works in the construction and maintenance of industrial plants, and works for one of the companies operating within the Syracuse oil refinery. He is a member of the FIOM-CGIL (metalworkers' union), on its Syracuse provincial committee and also the Central Committee (national committee) of the FIOM-CGIL.

## What do you know about IREM in terms of working conditions, wages, etc.?

IREM was set up in 1979. It started its activities in the industrial hub of Syracuse. It then diversified its activities by setting up a group which operates as a "main contractor," and expanded its activities mainly abroad. Now 90% of the activities of this main group are abroad, while the other companies belonging to the group operate in Italy. It is these smaller companies that operate locally that we are able to keep in check and where we manage to get them to respect the national collective bargaining agreement, together with other local agreements that establish conditions and wages. These local "satellite" companies are unionised and thus we can keep up the pressure in maintaining wage levels, and even in a recession like the one we are in today, we are able to guarantee decent conditions for the workers.

## Is IREM unionised and if not, why not?

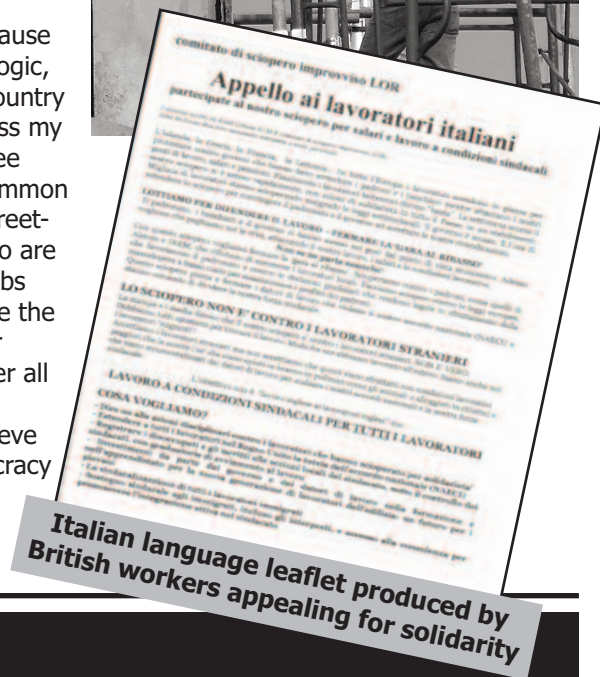
As I mentioned earlier, unionisation at IREM has always been on two levels. The union is able to control the situation in the smaller companies that make up the group and that operate locally, while it is unable to penetrate those affiliates that operate abroad. Most of the workers in these affiliates negotiate their wages on a one-to-one basis directly with the company, and are difficult to organise.

**The British workers made it clear that their struggle was not against Italian or Portuguese workers. It was in defence of conditions won through trade union agreements here in Britain. How did it come over in Italy?**

Italians, thanks to the information portrayed by the mass media, received a distorted picture of what was happening in Britain. Here in Italy the reactionary forces used the struggle of these British workers, presenting it as xenophobic in order to hide the real causes of the crisis throughout the world. This is aided by EU laws which seem to favour dumping, and a "race to the bottom" favoured by the way in which tenders are adjudicated, all of which is pushing companies downwards both within the national borders and within Europe as a whole. This race to the bottom in Italy is offloaded onto the shoulders of the workers. What is required is to reissue a call for unity of all workers, starting from below, from the rank and file, putting on the pressure to build a European-wide labour movement, a European-wide collective bargaining structure which would guarantee all workers the same decent conditions.

## What is your message to the British workers who organised this struggle?

To the British workers who, not because of any xenophobic or protectionist logic, continue their battle in the whole country for wages and jobs, I wish to express my full solidarity and explain that I agree with the aims that flow from our common condition. I salute them, bringing greetings from all the Italian workers who are presently struggling like them for jobs and wages. I hope that there can be the rebirth of a mighty European labour movement that, by bringing together all the voices of protest, uniting all the workplaces across Europe, can achieve genuine social and economic democracy for all us workers. □



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in Manchester on the 9th February no clear lead was given by the union leadership. Instead of calling for support for a national strike all they did was to announce a lobby of parliament on the day that mass protests had been called at Staythorpe and the Isle of Grain power stations. With no clear leadership the workers have again been left to defend for themselves.

### Change the Leadership

A change in the union leadership is required. Derek Simpson is up for election in Amicus on the 16th February and is being challenged by Jerry Hicks, who has been supporting the protests from the beginning. He has been at the protests at Staythorpe where he sustained a fractured leg after police attacked the protesters. Instead of putting the perks and privileges of the official above the interests of the members he will put the interests of the members first. He has pledged to only take the wage of the average skilled member. He is a rank and file candidate who will give the official leadership support that this campaign of strikes and protests need.

Across Europe workers are under attack. The bosses want the working class to pay for the capitalist crisis engulfing the world. We need a militant programme to defend workers. Part of this must be to transform the labour movement into a real weapon of struggle.

A new militant leadership needs to be created who are prepared to sweep away the anti-union laws and challenge the capitalist system. Only socialist policies can offer a way out of the crisis. Only when the banks and big monopolies are taken into public ownership can the economy be planned in the interests of working people. Only then can we guarantee jobs for all and a decent life for the majority of people. Join us in the fight for socialism! Join with Socialist Appeal today! □

**WE DEMAND :**

- AN ALL-OUT NATIONAL CONSTRUCTION WORKERS' STRIKE .
- EXTEND NATIONAL AGREEMENT TO ALL SITES .
- DEFY THE ANTI-TRADE UNION LAWS .
- RANK AND FILE INVOLVEMENT IN ALL NEGOTIATIONS .
- ALL TRADE UNION OFFICIALS TO BE ACCOUNTABLE TO THE RANK AND

### Workers under Attack

# Militancy Pays

**Interview with Keith Gibson,  
spokesperson for Lindsey strike committee.**

I BELIEVE the result in Lindsey was an excellent victory for the workers. It truly inspired me. The solidarity of the lads around the country in particular was tremendous. It was spontaneous. The lads were looking for a lead, especially as they were fed up at seeing employers with their own workforce for years coming in and undercutting the national agreements.

### Excellent Response

This mood intensified with the financial crisis. Workers were deeply worried about the future and their employment prospects. Was this what the future holds for working people? It was an excellent response in the support shown at Lindsey, with 20 different sites coming out in solidarity. All was unofficial action which swept away the anti-union laws in one sweep. □



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