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Britain

Gate Gourmet - a political and industrial challenge

- News from around the world -

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In August the in-flight catering firm Gate Gourmet, which provides meals for British Airways (BA) and other airlines at Heathrow, sacked hundreds of low-paid workers. The company, which is owned by the US multinational Texas Pacific, wanted to replace these mainly Asian women workers (on about Â£15,000 a year) with cheaper east European workers.

The sacking was met with a solidarity strike by Heathrow baggage handlers, check-in and bus drivers, mainly, like the catering workers, members of Transport and General Workers Union.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/gourmetworkers.jpg>]

The one-day solidarity strike, illegal under the Thatcherite anti-union laws maintained by New Labour, severely disrupted BA's operations, losing them million of pounds and disrupting Heathrow, one of the two or three most important airport hubs internationally.

The dispute has not been resolved and the workers remained sacked.

There are two remarkable features about the solidarity strike. It was and the first such action in Britain since the 1980s.

This is an advanced form of action and although BA drivers and baggage handlers have huge industrial muscle with which to defend themselves the strike was undertaken at a serious risk to their own jobs at the hands of BA. Indeed they are now in BA disciplinary procedure over it - though whether BA will risk another confrontation with them is another matter.

The second is the tremendous tenacity and solidarity of the 770 Gate Gourmet workers themselves, first in resisting a degradation of their working conditions and then in standing together in the face of dismissal.

This is partly because they were a unionised workforce, which is unusual amongst low-paid workers in Britain these days.

They are also a workforce that is overwhelmingly made up of Punjabi women, and Asian women seem to have a remarkable capacity for resisting employers and defending their rights.

The tenacious Hillingdon Hospital strikers spring to mind. They were members of the public sector union UNISON sacked in 1995 and won full reinstatement and compensation after three years of struggle.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/hillingdon_hospital_strike.jpg] Asian women also led the fight at Hillingdon hospital in the mid-1990s

There was also the epic two year struggle Grunwick strikers of in the mid 1970s who were predominantly Asian women from East Africa.

The task in front of the movement today is to ensure that the battle that is shaping up at Gate Gourmet is fought to a successful conclusion and is concluded in weeks or months and not years.

The dispute is a direct result of the neo-liberal drive for privatisation in the 1990s. Gate Gourmet, an international union busting company took the contract after BA outsourced its catering services - the result unsurprisingly was an assault on the wages and working conditions of the workforce. Gate Gourmet workers quickly became typical of the

low-paid highly exploited section of the British economy.

By the time the strike took place the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) had been in negotiations with Gate Gourmet about redundancy and working conditions for over a year. Numerous proposed deals had been rejected by the workforce.

A deal was eventually imposed by Gate Gourmet management, no doubt with the tacit agreement of BA. The workers resisted and the sackings took place - mostly by megaphone and some by courier.

It soon emerged - as TGWU General Secretary Tony Woodley pointed out - that Gate Gourmet management had planned the whole thing, aiming to provoke a strike, sack the workforce, engage a new one and thus avoid the costs of redundancy payments, pensions, and other liabilities.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/cancelled.jpg>]

The task now is to make the Gate Gourmet workers a rallying point for everyone who is sick and tired of the low pay, high exploitation, and no security type of employment that Gate Gourmet management represent.

The best opportunity of winning the strike of course was in the wake of the solidarity action that had such a massive effect on BA. At this point the whip was in the hands of the unions.

That strength was decimated, however, with the decision to go to the government's arbitration service ACAS and begin discussions on wages and conditions without the issue of reinstatement being resolved. Once BA got back to normal some of the pressure was off Gate Gourmet management to settle.

The reinstatement of the sacked workers should have been a bottom line without which no discussions could take place.

But it is not just the framework of the neo-liberal offensive that makes this strike political. There was the issue of the anti-union laws - against which the unions once again had no answer.

Although Tony Woodley launched a big attack on the laws, saying that they were strangling the trade union movement by preventing it from defending its members, he went through the usual ritualistic repudiation of the strike in line with the requirement of the laws.

The fact is that after 20 years of these laws being in place the unions have no reply to them other than "defend the fabric of the union." (In other words, to defend the finances of the union which can be confiscated *in toto* if the union leadership refuses to obey the law.) The problem with this is that if these laws are not tackled there may be no "fabric" to defend.

The problem for Tony Woodley is that the issue of the most repressive trade union laws in any developed country other than under dictatorships is a political issue not just an industrial one.

It is tied up with the political nature of new Labour and its relationship to the trade union movement. Confronting these laws is not something that can be left to the time when a dispute breaks out.

Nor is confronting them compatible with defending New Labour in the way Woodley consistently does, canvassing for

it, and calling for an automatic vote for it when a general election comes around.

Put another way, the battle against the anti-union laws, which are fundamental to the decline of the trade union movement which we have seen for the past 20 years, are tied up as much with the development of a political alternative to New Labour as it is with developing a response by the trade unions themselves.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Alan4.jpg>]

PS:

Predictable sell-out at Gate Gourmet

Alan Thornett (1st October 2005)

The victimised Gate Gourmet workers have been stitched up and hung out to dry by their union the TGWU. Whilst Tony Woodley was praising the tremendous solidarity they has displayed throughout the dispute he was preparing to recommend a settlement which involved a third of the strikers, including the trade union activists, being permanently sacked. If anyone thinks 'stitched up' is to strong a term just look at the terms of the deal which had been accepted by the TGWU officials, for recommendation to the victimised workers, two days earlier and brokered by TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber.

Under the deal accepted by the overwhelming majority at a mass meeting on the recommendation of the union 397 of the sacked workers will be given the option of reemployment or accepting compensation. There are another 172 sacked workers who have already said that they did not want reemployment and would accept compensation.

This leaves another 144 victimised workers who will be made compulsory redundant according to so-called "object and measurable criteria". This criteria will include their disciplinary and absenteeism records as well an anything else the managers can dredge up.

This list includes all of those who the management has repeatedly said it would not reply, including the key trade union activists.

Moreover the rehiring of the 397 can only take place once the 144 being permanently sacked workers sign statements to the effect that they will not launch unfair dismissal claims against Gate Gourmet. If any refuse to sign the reemployment of the 397 could be delayed until mid December when this requirement lapses.

Tony Woodley said of the settlement: "This had been a bitter and historic dispute with innocent workers victimised, which must lead to changes in the law. I am pleased, however, that our shop stewards and members have accepted a settlement that will see the great majority of our members go back to work or take voluntary settlement".

All very fine but meantime the trade union organisation at Gate Gourmet has been broken in the process - since a union which cannot defend its activists and representatives is a union which is powerless in front of management.

True Tony Woodley got a resolution through LP conference for the restoration of a form of secondary action which would have allowed other worker at the airport to take legal action in defence of Gate Gourmet workers - but without action to back this resolution it will simply be thrown in the bin by new Labour. In fact it was publicly thrown in the bin by new Labour even before it was voted on the by conference.

And what does backing the resolution up mean? It mean three things in this case.

Firstly it means pull out all the stops to support a section of workers when they are victimised under the anti-union laws - not starting to discuss compromises with management before the dispute has hardly got off the ground - which happened in this dispute.

Secondly it means actually confronting the anti-union and not complying with them, again which is what happened in this case. So-called protecting the fabric of the union does not in the end protect the fabric of the union.

Thirdly it means withdrawing political support for new Labour - not backing them to the hilt every time an election comes around and bank-rolling their campaign. Defeating the anti-union laws and building a political alternative to new Labour are two sides of the same coin

New Labour can stand the occasional opposition resolution going through conference on the back of the trade union block vote. What they could not stand is the major trade unions actively looking for and building a political alternative the big business based politics they represent