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LINDSEY: TOTAL'S COUNTER-ATTACK ENDS IN DEFEAT

Introduction

A few months after having to back down in the face of a strike which spread to the main centres of energy production in the UK, Total again tried to impose its will on the engineering construction workers.

In May, a wave of strikes had already shaken the sector following the hiring of around a hundred Polish workers by a sub-contractor on the South Hook liquid gas terminal – co-owned by ExxonMobil and Total – in Milford Haven, Wales.

At that time the unions, *Unite* and *GMB*, were concerned with organising a vote amongst the 50,000 workers in the civil engineering sector. That vote was to be the prelude to a national strike around wages, conditions of work and job security.

Total unleashed its offensive on 11 June, at Lindsey on the construction site of the desulphurisation plant.

Chronology

11 June

Following the sending out of dismissal letters to 51 workers (mostly scaffolders) belonging to firms sub-contracted by Total, 1200 construction workers employed on the Lindsey refinery site go on an unofficial strike, for the fifth time in a year. The 51 were not offered new jobs when another subcontractor intended to take on 61 staff. For the workers on the site it is a provocation. The agreement signed after the strike at the beginning of the year specified that no “local” worker would lose their job while the Portuguese and Italians were employed on the site. Total says it will negotiate with the unions and subcontractors to resolve the conflict.

12 June

Total gets the subcontracting firms to send out dismissal letters, for going on an illegal strike, to almost a thousand workers. Originally, the workers expected about 900 of them to be affected but in the end 647 letters were sent out. The sacked workers are supposed to submit a request for individual reemployment to their employer.

15 June

The 1200 workers at Lindsey carry on with the strike after the breakdown in negotiations. Total demands that the workers end their illegal strike. The refinery workers decide to go back to their home regions to get solidarity from their class brothers. They head off to Liverpool, Scotland, Wales, Yorkshire. They also sent numerous text messages to explain the situation – “Now’s the time to fight”. A small demonstration at Lindsey; a few hundred strikers break through a line of police to block the A180 road for ten minutes or so.

18 June

The strike spreads to other construction sites concerned with energy production.

It affected power stations, refineries, gas terminals:

- 900 subcontractors at Sellafield (Cumbria),
- 400 workers at LNG South Hook and Dragon (west Wales),
- 200 subcontractors at the Aberthaw power station (Vale of Glamorgan, Wales),

- 200 subcontractors at the power stations at Drax and Eggborough close to Selby, (North Yorkshire),
- The workers at the Fiddlers Ferry power station in Widnes, (Cheshire),
- The subcontracted maintenance workers at the Stanlow Shell refinery at Ellesmere Port (Cheshire),
- 60 subcontracted maintenance workers at Didcot power station (Oxfordshire),
- More than 1000 workers on the site of Ensus biofuels in Wilton (Teesside).

The big electricity production companies like EDF, RWE, E.On are among the firms targeted. A factory producing industrial gas in Scunthorpe is also affected. A few hundred workers at the Connoco Philips refinery stop work to join the Lindsey strikers, whose site is very nearby. More than 2000 workers join the movement.

The GMB union asks for the intervention of ACAS. A government spokesman calls on the strikers to suspend their unofficial movement and to seek individual reemployment.

19 June

The solidarity strike spreads. More than 1000 workers from the Ensus factory in Wilton in Teesside go on strike in solidarity. The construction work on the bio-ethanol refinery is stopped. Even non-unionised sites join the strike. Total say that many workers are ready to return to work on their conditions.

22 June

The laid off workers burn hundreds of dismissal letters in front of the refinery. According to the terms of the letter, they had until 5 p.m. to beg for their jobs back. According to the shop stewards, at least 19 sites, employing 13,000 workers, were affected by the stoppages. In the afternoon a march went from Lindsey towards the neighbouring Connoco Philips refinery on the Humber.

23 June

Demonstration in front of the refinery of a thousand workers from all over the country, notably from Hull, Scunthorpe, Leeds and Chesterfield. 1000 strikers block the five ports of Ensus with the help of Ensus strikers. Workers from the Heerema factory, a maker of oil platforms in Hartlepool (County Durham, north east of England), join the strike.

300 workers at the ConnocoPhillips refinery, close to Lindsey, carry on with the strike.

Formal negotiations take place between the unions and the main subcontracting firms. Total does not participate but gives its blessing to the negotiators after having refused all talks for five days. The unions demand the rehiring of those dismissed, jobs for the 51 and no reprisals against the workers on illegal solidarity strike. The participants say that their views are still a long way apart.

The GMB union announces the creation of a strike fund of £100,000.

24 June

900 workers at Sellafield nuclear power station, on strike since Monday 22 June, go back to work, following the beginning of negotiations. The unions say they will prepare a national vote to officialise the strike.

25 June

The GMB union announces that two bus loads of strikers are going to Paris to demonstrate in front of the Total headquarters. Calls for solidarity and action do not diminish when new negotiations take place with the managers of the subcontractors.

The nuclear power station site of Sellafield (Cumbria) is again affected by a stoppage of 200 workers.

26 June

150 workers at the Longanet power station vote to return to work following the announcement of the climb down by Total. The unions had pressed the strikers to go back to work but twice they voted 4 to 1 to continue the stoppage.

29 June

Meeting in a general assembly in front of the refinery, the Lindsey strikers voted with a show of hands to end the strike on the recommendation of the shop stewards.

They obtained the reemployment of 647 laid off workers – without having to go through the procedure of asking for individual reemployment – and the promise that jobs would be offered to the 51 workers whose end of contract provoked the dispute. The companies also agreed that there would be no reprisals against the workers who took part in solidarity strikes.

The Defeat of Total

A few years ago, Prime Minister Blair boasted about having put in place the most restrictive trade union legislation of any industrialised country. Using the weapon of the solidarity strike, decreed illegal since the days of Margaret Thatcher, the construction workers showed that the law is no obstacle to determined action by a united and organised fraction of the working class. No striker found himself dragged in front of a court, despite the overtly illegal nature of the solidarity strike.

The government was careful not to intervene by applying the law as Total – which denounced the illegal character of a strike which didn't even use the union channels – wanted, for fear of inflaming the conflict. “It's a matter between the companies and the workers”, stressed a spokesman for the authorities. They probably put pressure on Total to reach a compromise.

For the oil company which had tried to get revenge for the movement at the beginning of the year, there was a steep bill to pay. Besides the humiliation of not being able to break the united front presented by the strikers, the oil company had to admit that its project was six months late and that it would cost 340 millions euros rather than the 240 million initially budgeted for.

By their organisation, the workers in this sector resisted the revenge attempt by Total, gaining something from their situation in a key sector of industry.

Britain: specific aspects of class struggle

From very political origins

The historic separation between economic and political struggle has not always been so marked in the UK. The unions have organised important political struggles. At the beginning of the organised workers' movement in the 1830s and 1840s, the Chartists organised the struggle for universal suffrage by organising mass meetings, with rallies of hundreds of thousands of participants, and important strikes in industrial regions.

It was the initiative of the unions (the TUC) which founded the Labour Party on 26-27 February 1900, with various socialist groups including the ILP, the Scottish LP, the Fabians and the SDP. Its principal objective was to have a party which would defend the interests of the workers in parliament and promote laws in their favour¹.

In 1926, following measures by the Baldwin government to lower miners' wages, the miners' union (MFGB) was supported by the TUC (but not by the *Labour Party*) which called for a general strike of all workers from 4 to 11 May. In fact, only the rail union (NUR) and the transport union (TGWU – dockers, fire-fighters and sailors) really supported the strike. This strike of around 4 million wage earners brought the country to a standstill, but it failed. The government had seen what was coming and called out the army and civilian auxiliaries, and the TUC back-pedalled.

The miners carried on alone until October and returned to work defeated: wages were cut by 20% and 400,000 miners (a third of the workforce) were made redundant. Productivity doubled in the following ten years and profits were restored. Consequently, in 1927 the government passed laws making solidarity strikes, mass pickets, and the affiliation of civil servants to the TUC, illegal.

When struggles collide with the state

Since the end of the Second World War strikes have only become political in response to the initiatives of the state.

The miners clashed three times with the British state, which ran most of the mines since their nationalisation through the *National Coal Board*. Twice they were victorious but the third confrontation ended in a definitive defeat.

In the first national conflict since 1926, the strike for higher pay in 1972 saw the miners go on

¹ It is because of this origin that the *Labour Party* is not a centralised party like the social democratic parties (in Germany or Scandinavia) or the Stalinist ones. In effect, it is a federation based on the affiliation (an affiliation which can be refused or taken away) of the unions (but therefore not all of them), political groups (like at one time *Militant*) and the *Constituency Labour Party* (CLP) open to individuals and based on constituencies and able to designate candidates, run campaigns and manage municipalities.

the offensive and establish pickets at all the coal depots across the country. The Welsh miners fought hard with the police to block the Saltley coke depot. The struggle was particularly effective because coal was the main source of fuel for power stations. The government had to declare a state of emergency and introduce a three-day week to save energy. After seven weeks of struggle the state gave in and the miners became the best paid category of manual workers in the country.

There was a new confrontation two years later. This time the Conservatives called a general election and lost it. It was the Labour government which granted the pay rises.

It is this same Labour Government which suffered the most important wave of strikes in the UK since the general strike of 1926, the Winter of Discontent of 1978-1979. Faced with a crisis which sent it begging for help from the IMF the government had wanted to impose a wage freeze.

The Ford car manufacturer tried to conform to this by offering the workers a 5% wage rise. 15,000 workers, and their shop stewards, launched an unofficial strike, which was then recognised by the unions, bringing the number of strikers to 57, 000. After a two month long strike Ford gave in and granted a 17% increase, accepting the government's sanctions. As the wall of pay restraint cracked, various sections of the working class, the private sector first, then the state employees, rushed into the breach. The lorry drivers, using the weapon of mass pickets, brought the economy to its knees and the state gave up the idea of using the army. Nurses, train guards, grave diggers, and others entered the fray and blew the wage freeze policy apart. There were 30 million strike days in 1979.

In their turn the Labour Party paid the political price for their inability to control the working class and the Conservatives, led by Thatcher, came to power.

After drawing back in 1981, the state launched an offensive against the miners in 1984 by announcing a vast programme of pit closures. The Conservatives had meticulously prepared the ground: this time the struggle would begin in spring; the stocks of coal were high; the role of coal was declining relative to oil in electricity production; the forces of the police had been centralised, a decision technically illegal but highly effective. What's more, the miners in Nottinghamshire, a region where the modernisation of the industry had taken effect, did not join the struggle. Despite a year of struggle and violent confrontations with the police (more than 11,000 arrests) the defeat was complete.

The only positive effect was that numerous individuals (youth, feminist and gay activists, and various minorities opposed to the Thatcher government) were involved in the struggle of the miners and participated in solidarity movements.

The same activists would play an important role in the quasi-insurrection that was provoked by the introduction of the *poll tax* in 1989. This new form of local taxation reduced the contributions of the richest and increased those of the poorest. The protest movements mobilised millions of participants from the working class across the country, punctuated by violent confrontations with the forces of order.

The most important UK riot of the 20th Century took place in London in Trafalgar Square when around 200,000 demonstrators fought the police all afternoon and part of the night. 3000 were injured. The rioters were as hostile to Labour as they were to the Conservatives. "*Labour is no longer the party of the working class, nor even of the organised working class; even Tony Benn (leader of its left wing) couldn't talk to the angry young workers last Saturday*" said the *New Statesman*.

Eight months later, John Major replaced Thatcher at the head of the Conservative Party and the government. The *poll tax* would be abolished soon after.

The pragmatic British state always retreats in good order, lying low when a rigorous application of the law risks leading to a radicalisation of the movement. So, during a struggle of London dockers in 1972, it very quickly released the five strike leaders from Pentonville prison when the strike started extending to other sectors.

The shop stewards: a conflictual integration into the social compromise

The *shop stewards* (delegates of the workshop and, by extension, of the whole unit of production) are elected by their workmates to represent them to the managers of the workshop or the company. Originally done with a show of hands, their annual election almost always takes place these days with a secret ballot. The shop stewards in a workshop form a committee of shop stewards and choose one of themselves as the *convenor*. In large workplaces the convenors form a committee of

convenors in their turn which then elects a convenor of the site or company.

In the absence of open struggle the principal task of these delegates is the resolution of everyday issues which occur between management and employees. This function is not so benign as it appears because they oversee the application of collective agreements and their interpretation. This is a practice which has a strong bearing on the organisation and productivity of work.

Only big workplaces can pay the convenors in full for their representative activity and provide them with offices and communication resources. The others work like their colleagues, but their representation activity takes place in their work time.

When a struggle gets going, whether it's decided by the union, the workers or the shop stewards themselves, it is the latter who organise it. They become "struggle delegates". The shop stewards committee transforms itself into a strike committee (which the workers can participate in) given the task of organising the strike and being accountable to the workers.

Classically, the following is what happens: the workers go on strike, the shop stewards organise the strike and the unions negotiate with the boss and the institutions of the state, or the state directly during major conflicts.

With its federal structure, the TUC possesses a great organisational flexibility. Understanding the unions of the various industries and trades, it represents all unionised workers despite the strong divisions between the unions which compose it. More or less collaborators, more or less combative or corporatist, these unions do not hesitate to fight each other for the right to represent an important part of the work force.

The workers in large workplaces are thus represented by several competing unions even if the strong fall in the number of members has led to vast mergers of organisations.

The unions, permanent apparatuses assuring exploitation without too many jolts from the work force, also rest on the action of the shop stewards who assure their functioning at the base.

Relations between the two levels are always very pragmatic. "*We are not antagonistic to the trade union movement. We are not here to crush it but to grow it, to use every possible means compatible with the most effective organisation of the workers*", said J.T. Murphy, an activist in Sheffield in 1917. When negotiating in the name of the workers in struggle the unions are often disavowed by the base. No problem, they can start the negotiations again to get a better deal. In the case of conflict with the shop stewards they look for compromise. But the unions always know when to give the bosses the green light to fire those who are too militant. In 1962, 17 shop stewards at Ford Dagenham were made redundant and in 1979 came the turn of the convenor of Austin Rover at Longbridge, Derek Robinson.

The outflanking of the unions during conflicts by the shop stewards is institutionalised in the UK. What's more, most struggles are launched by the rank and file before being officially recognised by the union, which sometimes decides to follow it.

Most struggles remain confined to one workplace or one branch of industry. Solidarity strikes, very numerous in the history of the working class in the UK, became illegal in the 1980s.

British capitalism benefited from a favourable balance of forces to pass laws strictly constraining the actions of workers. From then on the unions were financially responsible and became reluctant to initiate or even support struggles which broke out of the legal straitjacket.

By pursuing their struggle without caring how much money their boss was losing, without waiting for the support of the unions and breaking a law which forbids solidarity strikes, the engineering construction workers have succeeded in making an oil giant give in. They have also shown to other workers that struggle can pay if it manages to draw in other workers from the sector. The spectre of the 3-day week can also encourage the state and other big employers to submit. An example which shows once again that a bosses' dictat can be resisted by a determined struggle.

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