

WORKERS'



LIBERTY

postalworker

PO Box 823, London SE15 4NA ♦♦♦ 15 October 2002

REJECT ROMEC SELL-OUT

♦ link up with firefighters ♦ build public sector alliance ♦ stop privatisation

AFTER producing lavish publicity urging us not to turn our backs on our Romec colleagues, Union HQ has done exactly that. They have sold out our strike ballot for a miserable deal that John Keggie still has the cheek to hail as a victory.

After months of fruitless negotiations, it looked as if the sell-off of Romec could become the focus of a fightback against Post Office privatisation. Yet before the close of the ballot, we were told the strike was off and we had achieved "unprecedented safeguards" for Romec and uniformed postal workers.

What do these "safeguards" amount to? Take pensions, one of the key concerns of the cleaners and maintenance workers. If Consignia sells a further 21% of its stake in the new joint venture all that is guaranteed are pension entitlements "broadly similar" to the existing scheme. What does Balfour Beatty regard as "broadly similar"? Ask a former British Rail worker that one!

THE deal "has met — and in many cases exceeded — all the unions demands on job security, pensions and recognition." No wonder union leaders were lambasted by Romec reps at the meeting in London where they tried to flog them the agreement: the negotiators obviously didn't bloody well demand enough!

But the supposed trump card is that in return for selling our Colleagues down the river, Consignia will refrain from privatising any part of Service Delivery for another five years.

Keggie used the tactic of divide and rule before (robbing the PHGs and Drivers to pay for the Way Forward deal), but this represents a new low. By letting our "minority grades" go to the wall, the "uniform grades" are weakened too. And if they succeed with this sell-off, do we really believe that the rest of us are safe for another five years?

We need to restart the campaign, this time with the rank and file in the driving seat and immediately demand another ballot on terms that will make the sell-off of Romec impossible. It would mean skating pretty close to the law, but if we are serious we should be prepared for a confrontation with the High Court. When tube workers had their massive "yes" ballot banned by the judges, they walked out anyway because they knew that the anti-union laws side with the bosses against workers' democracy every time.

WE CAN take the public with us on this one, if we reach out to them — everyone and their dog is against privatising the Post Office. And you don't need to look further than your local fire station to see that other workers are challenging Blair's philosophy of "privatise everything".

Cash Handling & Distribution (CHD) workers have taken a lead by staging unofficial walkouts at depots across the country when it emerged that they were next in line for privatisation. Consignia have announced the closure of cash depots in 11 cities, and many CHD drivers used to work for

Securicor, and have no intention of going back to working for that lot!

It is right that the whole of the Post Office workforce are balloted for strike action when the general principle of privatisation is at stake. But whatever agreement comes out of the dispute should be voted on by the directly affected workers alone (i.e., just Romec staff).

Reject divide and rule! — Restart the campaign!

BACK THE FIREFIGHTERS!

WILL the firefighters get the trade-union solidarity they need to win quickly and decisively? On that question hangs much not only for the firefighters but for the whole trade union movement.

The firefighters' union FBU is currently in the middle of a ballot for strike action over pay. The ballot opened on 27 September. Its result will be announced on 18 October. Legally, the FBU can then strike after giving seven days' notice, i.e. from 25 October. The word is that the FBU plans to start its campaign with a four-day strike sometime in the period between 25 October and 7 November, which is its pay settlement date.

Firefighters are going out to workplaces to explain to managers and to union reps that all existing assessments of workplace health and safety become obsolete if the regular fire service is shut down. Have they reassessed? Do the union reps think it will be safe to continue work without a regular fire service, or will they declare that the job should be shut down on grounds of imminent danger to the lives of workers or the public?

Discussions are already under way among RMT and ASLEF trade unionists on the London Underground about shutting down the Underground network, on grounds of safety, during a fire service strike. Memories of the Kings Cross fire of 18 November

WHO WE ARE

THIS bulletin is written by postal workers who are members of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty, an organisation fighting in the unions and the workplaces for a socialist alternative to both capitalism and Stalinism, based on common ownership and democracy.

Postalworker stands for a decent pay rise for all postal workers and an immediate 35-hour, five-day week for all with no drop in pay. We are for a major increase in full-time and permanent jobs in the post office, against any sort of privatisation, and for public ownership with democratic workers' and users' control.

Contact us on 020 7207 3997, office@workersliberty.org, or www.workersliberty.org; or write to PO Box 823, London SE15 4NA.

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1987, in which 31 people were killed, sharpen these discussions.

If any significant number of strategic workplaces, like the Underground, are shut down during a fire service strike, that will greatly strengthen the firefighters' action. It will also break the taboo on trade-union solidarity action which has operated ever since the Tory anti-union laws of the 1980s became bedded in.

FBU ACTIVIST SPEAKS

Les Reid, East London FBU Group secretary, told *Postalworker*:

Our members feel undervalued and underpaid. Also, the way the government want to negotiate our wages is fuelling the strike. They want to bring new conditions and they want to scrap our old contracts that we have negotiated over many years.

We say we don't mind sitting round a table and discussing; but a) they want to shove it down our throats with out discussion, and b) they want to link it to our pay.

We say, we want a settlement on our pay claim first, then we'll talk about conditions of service but we are not going to have our pay as part of the conditions discussion — that's like performance related pay.

We have a lot of support from the public — at least on the need to strike. It takes discussion with people to explain that £30,000 is a justifiable claim, but we find that people are always convinced after discussion.

From other unionists the response is very good. We get constant messages of support. This is not surprising. It is us who make their workplaces safer. The Underground workers, for instance, will be perfectly justified in not working without fire cover.

In the national strike in the 70's they had rescue crews. They are no longer there, what with privatisation and cuts.

Our jobs have changed a lot since the seventies. We do so much more than we did then: car crashes, arson, chemical spills, community fire safety work. The job has changed and grown. The 42 hour week doesn't give us enough time to do everything we are supposed to do. But they want us to do all this extra work for an inadequate wage.

Want to get every issue of *Postalworker* sent to you? Send us a fiver (cheques payable to AWL) — and your address! Got a story for *Postalworker*? We welcome and will publish reports and comments from all postal workers. Also, get in touch if you want to come to our meetings, or to get involved in action about any of the issues we have covered. Contact: Workers' Liberty, P O Box 823, London SE15 4NA. 020 7207 3997. Email office@workersliberty.org. Web www.workersliberty.org.

“BUILDING ON THE RANK AND FILE REVOLT”

A trade-union day school organised by Solidarity and Workers' Liberty, with speakers including Mark Serwotka (general secretary, PCS) and FBU activists Steve Godward and Jane Clarke, all in a personal capacity. Saturday 26 October, 11 to 5.30, University of London Union, Malet St, London WC1. To register to attend, please phone 020 7207 3997 or email office@workersliberty.org.

NO WAR ON IRAQ!

The march to stop Bush's and Blair's war on Iraq, in London on Saturday, 28th, was the biggest anti-war protest in Britain for many years. There were large trade union contingents, and ten trade unions, officially supported the march.

Unfortunately the Muslim Association of Britain, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is the biggest Islamic-fundamentalist party in the Arab world, was invited to co-sponsor the march. But the vast majority on the demonstration had nothing to do with the fundamentalists.

Postalworker says: Saddam's regime is poisonous, but the antidote of US war is even more poisonous. The USA would replace Saddam by another Saddam, different only in that he would fit in more with US wishes. The USA's real motive is *oil*, not human rights.

The next anti-war action planned is on 31 October — a day of local meetings, protests, rallies, and civil disobedience.

ORGANISE THE “AWKWARD SQUAD”!

Before the Labour Party conference in Blackpool, the Labour leadership was assiduously briefing the media to tell them that “Labour Party conference no longer decides party policy”.

Those media briefings showed two things. First, that the New Labour hierarchy knew they would be defeated at conference on central issues, and wanted to discount those defeats in advance. Second, that they were confident that they could get away with blatant dismissal of democracy.

In fact there has been no formal, constitutional abolition of Labour conference's power to make party policy. On the other hand, in Blair's “New Labour”, party conference is no longer what it was in the 1970s or '80s, let alone back in 1944, when it was a conference vote that pushed a reluctant party leadership into including extensive nationalisations in Labour's 1945 manifesto.

Amidst much unsurprising continuity, the Blackpool conference also showed important change. For the first time since Blair started his “New Labour” hijacking of the labour movement, a large cluster of trade unionists flatly defied him and started to map out a different political direction.

What now? It would be stupid to push for the more assertive and militant trade unions to disaffiliate from the Labour Party. Those unions would spiral off into “non-political” or “pick-and-mix” trade-unionism — the direction sketched in a recent pamphlet by our union general secretary Billy Hayes, who is one of the so-called “awkward squad” of left trade union leaders, but advocates unions “engaging with” the Lib Dems, Scottish Nationalists, and Plaid Cymru.

Blair would be left with a docile rump. The revival of trade-union politics would be aborted.

On the other hand, there is no prospect of the Labour Party being returned to its patterns of the 1970s, or 1940s, in the fashion of an easy swing of the pendulum. Blair has changed Labour's structures fundamentally. On top of the “Labour” structure, he has constructed his own “party-within-a-party”, an army of thousands of spin-doctors, advisers, media-people, assistants, and so on, recruited and financed almost entirely from outside the labour movement.

That “party-within-a-party” has made it very clear that, rather than submit to any serious accountability to the organised working class, they will cut loose entirely and go for state and big-business funding. They can probably take most Labour MPs with them.

The way forward is for the trade-union “awkward squad” to get together, to organise links down to local and grass-roots level, and make itself an organised, consistently-campaigning force in the labour movement, together with those Labour MPs and constituency activists willing to challenge Blair.

Such a body should, for example:

- * Build both industrial and political support for the firefighters;
- * Go ahead and implement the Labour Party conference decision which Blair has dismissed, for an independent inquiry into PFI, while at the same time campaigning to stop PFI and other privatisations, for example PPP on the Tube;
- * Campaign against the war on Iraq;
- * Work to get class-struggle trade-unionists selected through mass sign-up campaigns in workplaces, directed not at supporting the Labour Party in general but at getting candidates selected to represent working-class constituencies who are committed to trade-union rights and to public services.
- * Set and proclaim the aim of winning a *workers' government*, answerable to the labour movement, pushing through policies to serve working-class interests.