

Mersey workers show the way



Dockers and firefighters on Merseyside are taking action to defend jobs

FIVE WEEKS AGO, the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company (MDHC) sacked 500 dock workers for refusing to cross a picket line. The conflict had been provoked by the employers who want to replace Transport and General (TGWU) members with casual non-union labour.

This action by MDHC comes after a series of attacks on dockers' pay and conditions. The workers have had contracts imposed on them which bind them to 12 hour days and seven day weeks for less pay. Liverpool is amongst the most profitable ports in the country. Last year profits were in excess of £35 million.

Support for the strike is pretty solid. At the start of the action 21 workers were

scabbing. Two of the scabs have now walked out and joined the dispute. No other workers have crossed the picket line.

On 20 October, the MDHC offered a deal: 150 workers would be reinstated on new contracts; other workers would get £10,000 compensation. This offer was rejected — unanimously.

Now strikers face escalating intimidation. Employers' stooges are phoning them at home, offering bribes for a return to work on the bosses' terms.

Local Labour MPs have demanded that the workers be reinstated. An early-day motion on the issue, signed by over 60 Labour MPs, has been submitted in parliament.

Paralleling the docks dispute is the fight by 1,300 FBU members in Merseyside against 20 job losses and a cut of three days in their annual holidays for the remaining workers.

The firefighters began their action with a series of 9-hour strikes, forcing management to offer unconditional talks. The bosses refused to back down and the FBU has rebalotted for 24 hour strikes.

90% voted yes, on an 84% turn-out. The firefighters have begun a series of three 24 hour strikes. Emergency cover is being provided by the army, in 40 year old Green Goddesses.

Both sets of employers look to be settling in for long disputes.

Chris Jones, a former chair of Merseyside FBU told *Workers' Liberty*: "these disputes are having broad repercussions. The business section of the local paper, the *Daily Post*, has commented that the strikes, though not dangerous in themselves, have implications for wage struggles which are looming in the local Ford and GM car factories. The example of militancy may prove contagious."

The dock and fire-service strikes come after the victory won by 300 residential social workers in Liverpool.

The Liverpool Labour council wanted to stop nationally-agreed payments for workers off sick, on maternity leave, or on training courses. The council took the workers' union, UNISON, to court under the Tories' anti-union laws, to try to undercut the action. To no avail.

The subsequent strike forced the council to back down on the issue of pay, though there is still disagreement over the hiring of new workers.

Workers' action on Merseyside shows that despite anti-union laws, and even in the face of determined, unscrupulous bosses, strike action can still be effective. Militancy pays!

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