

# Diary of a striker

NATFHE members at Southwark College, south London, began an all-out strike against compulsory redundancies on Tuesday 14 March. This is the diary of one striker.

## Week 1

AFTER 12 MONTHS of escalating action — one-day, two-day, and three-day strikes against the imposition of new contracts — we have been on all-out strike for two weeks. Management demanded 38 compulsory redundancies out of a total teaching staff of about 600 — the equivalent of 350 full-time teachers, as many are part-time workers.

Some areas were solid, but at other sites, like my workplace at Surrey Docks in Bermondsey, union members have crossed picket lines.

We won the latest ballot for all-out action by nine votes. We were pleased but somewhat nervous with such a small majority.

During the whole dispute management have behaved like utter prats.

At first they would give us nothing; when they heard the ballot result they offered a much improved voluntary redundancy (VR) package.

Surrey Docks is a weak link in the union. During past disputes there have been only one or two pickets. But on the first strike day there were 13 of us.

Despite rain and the snow during the first week, all the lines have been strong.

There are two stints on the picket rota: from 7.30 to midday and then, an easier one, from 12.00 to 3.00 in the afternoon.

No-one crossed the picket line on Day 1; the scabs had all sneaked in at 6.30am, before we got there. Normally these people would get to work at 8.45.

They all stay in the building at lunch time and do not dare leave until 4.00, after the pickets have gone home.

Some of these scabs are ex-radicals who used to make speeches about what a crime it is that south London workers are offered such poor education! When it came to it, they were not prepared to put themselves on the line. I hope they feel shit.

Our strongest site is on The Cut, near Waterloo station. 100 of the 107 union members were out on Day 1. Of the seven who scabbed some were management spine who had kept on their union membership after they had been promoted.

We asked non-teaching staff to wear stickers at work, to show solidarity and to wind

up management.

We said we understood why they had to work — because they'd be sacked if they didn't.

On Wednesday a young admin worker refused a sticker. He put his hand up and just said "No way." Why?

"I'm not going to wear one of those stickers — because I'm not crossing that picket line!"

He has not been on strike before, but he understood solidarity. He took two days off on unpaid leave and then some on paid leave. In the end we had to persuade him to go to work, or he'd be sacked!

There is one member of management — "Rambo" — who is a very ambitious man; the Hard Face of management, he specialises in bullying people. "Rambo" started as a part-timer and is now a Head of Faculty, picking on the most vulnerable. Recently he screamed at a heavily pregnant woman in a corridor.

When "Rambo" caught a security guard helping us — they are mostly black workers on around £2.00 per hour, with very few rights — he threw the man off the site and phoned his bosses, getting him relocated.

*"He has not been on strike before, but understood solidarity. He took two days off on unpaid leave and some on paid leave. In the end we had to persuade him to go to work, or he'd be sacked!"*

## Week 2

THE LOCAL postal workers have been great, delivering mail to the strikers on the picket line and then leaving the rest on the pavement or taking it back to the depot.

At the Cut site, building workers chopped up a big oil drum and gave us a load of wood to build a fire in it.

On Tuesday 21 there was a mass lobby outside the governors' meeting and everyone was there — strikers, students and delegations from local unions.

The staff governor was excluded from the section of the meeting about the strike because we had a "pecuniary interest" in the dispute. However, the Principle — representing the other "pecuniary interest" — was allowed to stay and put his case. The strike was item 26 on their agenda!

We still do not know exactly what was said in the meeting.

The next day, Wednesday, Day 7, the management began playing a bit of cat-and-mouse. They told our chief negotiator, Stephen Rose, to ring them at 11.00 and they would have a positive offer which they could reveal after taking legal advice. Stephen rang back regularly, with no results.

The next day, Day 8, our negotiators met management. No, they had nothing new to offer!

The joint-sites union meeting on Friday, Day 9, was told that management had offered nothing: people were angry. The cat and mouse games strengthened the strikers' resolve. The meeting voted — overwhelmingly — to continue indefinite all-out action.

There will be a big picket for Monday morning, Day 10, when another meeting with management is set, to let them know how strong we are.

Friday's meeting decided that there will be no mass meeting before the end of week 3, unless management come up with something substantial and new. This also is a sign of strength — we are not going to turn up to meetings in the hope that an offer has come from the managers.

Of course we have worries about money. Rent, mortgages, food and other bills are causing quite a bit of stress.

We've had our February pay, but no one is sure about how much we will get in March. Management will try to get away with ripping us off for as much as they can.

No one has yet got any strike pay from the national fund. The national union's hardship fund has £100,000 but us getting cash depends on the discretion of the national hardship committee. There are forms to fill out and you have to provide receipts and bills. It is a long business, and no money is given out until there have been deductions from pay packets.

So far we have collected £16,000 for the local hardship fund. Our local hardship committee will be allocating the money very soon.

A delegation went up to Sheffield and collected £1,260 in a day — £100 in front of the Town Hall in an hour. I think other public sector workers can see the importance of this dispute. I hope we help to stimulate others to take strike action against attacks.

No matter what happens now, Southwark College is not going to be the same again. A lot of the divisions between sites have been broken down.

And quite a lot of strikers have become more political and active in the union. For months now staff have been saying: I could run this place better than that shower. Now they really do believe it.

No, things will not be the same again. ■