

D 'PICKET' IS A FRAUD



Tony O'Brien at a Community and Union Action Campaign/Unite conference a couple of years ago

negotiations this was whittled down to seven whose work is mainly on the sites where Botes have their contracts.

Some days before the new contracts were due to start there was a mass meeting in Southwark Civic Centre to report to members the outcome of negotiations. We recommended acceptance of the proposals and explained:

■ The seven workers to be transferred could decide for themselves, but that if they refused, they would be walking away from their employment.

■ The fight against privatisation would continue, but at this point there would be no industrial action.

Nobody at the mass meeting moved for industrial action.

There was a meeting of the seven workers who were to be transferred to Botes. Five of them voted 'for' and two, John Jones (a shop steward) and Terry Mason, voted 'against'.

A further mass meeting agreed that in the case of the two workers who did not want to transfer, their right to take that decision must be recognised, but they would be dismissing themselves from their employment.

If they wished to campaign full-time against the abuse of CCT under the direction of the DLO trade union organisation, their wages and fares would be paid by that organisation.

Trade unionists against 'picket'

JONES and Mason voted against the resolution and have since mounted the Frensham Street Depot picket

supported by the 'Building Workers Group'. We — the DLO shop stewards' committee — led the workers across their picket line.

The two went to see the Islington council building workers' representatives seeking support. The Islington shop stewards arranged a meeting a week later at which Jones argued his case and we argued ours. The Islington trade union organisation voted to support the Southwark shop stewards' proposals on the two workers.

They then called upon the London Regional Council of UCATT, to support them. This is an elected lay body which makes decisions in the London area. The council would not take a decision until they had heard from us.

Southwark trades council has also voted to support us. The UGO25 branch of UCATT has called upon the union's regional council to discipline three members who are taking part in the 'picket' for breach of the union's democratic practice.

DLO wages and conditions prevail

THE 'picket' leaflets claim that the TUPE agreement does not give the transferred workers the same wages and conditions as the DLO. Our leaflet shows that the opposite is true. We quote an extract of the agreement: 'Botes Building will maintain the present level of terms and conditions as determined in the current contract of employment with Southwark Direct as follows: 'Salary/wages, leave, hours of work, sick pay and other terms and

conditions as determined in the current contract of employment with Southwark Direct.

'Botes recognise the right of trade union membership and representation at any meeting with management. Botes will include all employees in broadly comparable pension schemes with no loss of benefit. A wage of £350 a week (pending a productivity scheme) plus £10 meal allowance will be paid.'

We also say:

'We are well aware that neither Southwark council or contractors are prepared to give indefinite guarantees for workers' terms and conditions of employment. This fight cannot be separated from the overall struggle for political change.'

In the meantime the Southwark Trades Council Trade Union Resource Unit will monitor the Botes' TUPE agreement on behalf of the transferred workers.

Shop steward should stay with workers

HOWEVER unsatisfactory CCT is, since the DLO could not remove government legislation on its own, the outcome of negotiations was the best that could be obtained. It kept the workers' jobs and trade union organisation.

Jones was a DLO shop steward. He should have transferred to Botes with the other workers in order to represent them, and he should have assisted us to persuade Mason to also transfer.

Instead of that these two have dismissed themselves from their jobs,

broken with their trade union organisation and mounted the picket — an individualist and sectarian action — with their friends in the 'Building Workers Group'.

Our leaflet explains they never took up their right to oppose and move alternative action at our stewards' meetings or the mass meetings:

'At no time have Jones or Mason moved at the two mass meetings or the stewards meetings that preceded their picket that a vote should take place for strike or any other form of industrial action.

'At no time had they proposed a picket of our depot. Why then place a false picket on our depot?

'No one has the right to impose what they think is best for workers. The principle of not crossing picket lines cannot be separated from the practice of "workers democracy".

'In the context of our particular situation, to suggest a picket line exists, when no such decision has been made, is a fraud and is an abuse of the principle of "workers' respect for picket lines".

Even before the 'picket' was set up, our DLO shop stewards' committee complained to the secretary of the Broad Left in UCATT that at that organisation's October meeting the 'Building Workers Group' members spent half the time attacking the Southwark DLO organisation.

We would like to know in whose interests the 'Building Workers Group' acts and we have pointed out in our leaflet that information circulating London from this group 'is full of blatant lies, scapegoating and witch hunting. As such it discredits a fight for principles and undermines the struggles of workers.'

But we have also said to John and Terry:

'It is not too late to retain your job, take the advice from the shop stewards' committee.'

Compare this with the 'Building Workers Group' whose leaflets call for my removal even though they know that Southwark council has given me a redundancy notice!

(The DLO shop stewards have decided on a ballot for industrial action to oppose my sacking.)

Unity and solidarity against sectarianism

WHEN does a picket become a principle? You cannot separate picketing from the actual struggle at any given time. The main question is the resistance of workers. In some circumstances it can be right to have a minority, or even only one of the workforce on a picket.

Picketing has to do with the context in which the workers are struggling.

For instance, when the Liverpool dockers refused to cross the picket line put up by the Torside dockers they were supporting workers who had already democratically decided on an industrial dispute and it was a principled act of solidarity.

In the case of the 'picket' put up outside our depot, it is against the democratic decisions of our trade union organisation and we are acting in a principled way to cross it.

Here are two examples of the relation of a picket and the actual struggle of workers:

I was sacked after only three days on the Langs YMCA site in Tottenham Court Road because management realised that I had a history of trade union struggle.

I refused to leave the site and sat in the canteen until I was physically removed.

Then I stood outside the gate with a placard round my neck saying that I was being victimised.

I never said 'this is a picket and you must not cross'. I said to the other building workers: 'I am being victimised. Could you please discuss my case.'

They called a meeting and threatened to take action if I was not reinstated. I got my job back.

The other example was at the William Willets site in Mile End. There were about 400 building workers. We got towards the end of the job and the painters came on.

Their shop steward said that they were earning less than us and wanted parity. They voted for strike action, but before they put up the picket line, they consulted the other stewards on the site.

We agreed to stay on the job, but collect £5 per head from the other workers to maintain the painters. We all agreed: we would not work with sub-contract painters and the pickets would only stop painters. Parity was won.

The Frensham Road 'picket' is a fraud. But, as with all experiences, there are lessons to be learned.

For trade unionists at work, a picket is traditionally mounted to ask workers to join a strike action taking place after the democratic decision-making procedures have been observed.

Neither the strike nor the picket can be separated from the democratic processes. This is not the case with the 'Building Workers Group' standing outside our depot. It is against the decisions of two mass meetings.

Nobody has the right to impose a decision on the workers. Those who shoot off from workers' decisions are substituting themselves for the workers' organisation.

