

The World is our picket line

Liverpool dockers buck the “Free Market”

Workers Solidarity Movement

1996

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LIVERPOOL DOCKERS take their trade unionism seriously. On 28th September 1995 the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company (MDHC) locked out 500 workers for refusing to cross a picket line mounted by dockers employed by Torside Limited, who were in dispute over sackings and attempts at casualisation. The subsequent fight by the Liverpool dockers has turned into a massive international display of solidarity against casualisation of labour and against the “rationality” of a so-called free market economy which dictates that workers’ rights should be sacrificed on the high altar of profit and uninhibited capital flow.

The Liverpool dockers’ plight has echoes in Ireland in the Dunnes Stores’ workers fight against zero-hour contracts and for permanent jobs and in the decision of Packard Electric — a subsidiary of the giant multinational General Motors — to close its Tallaght plant with the loss of 800 jobs.

As such, the massive advances of the dockers in terms of building international solidarity for their fight has important lessons for all workers. As Jimmy Nolan, chair of the Mersey Port Shop Stewards Committee, wrote in the May 1996 ‘Dockers Charter’ (a newspaper published by the strikers):

“...we have confirmed that globalisation of capitalism necessitates the global action — international solidarity — of the working-class.

Throughout the world workers are exploited by the same companies and face casualisation and anti-trade union laws....It is imperative that the international working class continues to recognise that we are the producers of all products and all wealth.”

International Solidarity

From the early days of their dispute, the dockers in Liverpool — the only British port where trade union organisation was maintained following the defeat of the 1989 national dock strike — recognised that international solidarity would be the key to victory. They called for support from the entire Merseyside working-class, pointing out that casualisation of labour and the denial of trade union rights are issues of concern to all workers, employed and unemployed. But in addition, delegations of strikers and appeals for support were sent to dockers around the world.

Financial donations and practical support in the form of a boycott of shipping lines doing business with the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company and their scab labour have come from all over. In December 1995 three strikers’ representatives went to the USA and placed pickets — which were widely respected — on the docks in Baltimore, Norfolk and Newark.

This forced Atlantic Containers Ltd. (ACL) to issue a statement saying that if MDHC hadn’t settled its dispute with the dockers by January 15th it would switch to discharging and loading its vessels in another British port — a significant victory for the strikers. When the January deadline passed, continued action against ACL, including a go-slow by Swedish dockers, eventually resulted in an announcement by ACL on June 21st that it was to pull out of Liverpool with immediate effect.

Meanwhile, support for the strike came from Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Poland, Greece, Russia, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and many other places.

All of this support came about as a result of tremendous work on the part of the Shop Stewards Committee and ‘Women of the Waterfront’ — a support group established by the dockers’ wives

and partners. The Internet was also widely used for the spread of information and the strikers set up a World Wide Web site which carries regular updates on the dispute's progress and lists messages of support.

In February, an international dockers conference met in Liverpool and attracted 53 delegates from 15 countries. The conference was called not simply to discuss how solidarity could be organised for the 500 Liverpool strikers but also how dockers around the world could join together to support each other in the fight against anti-trade union laws, privatisation and casualisation.

The “Market Economy”

As the dockers have consistently pointed out, theirs is not an isolated dispute. In ‘Dockers Charter’ (March 1996) they point out some of the results of the “market economy” — “...a world market dominated by a handful of financiers, speculators and big business chiefs...

- Of the world's 5.6 billion people, one in five live in povertyafter 50 years of World Bank ‘development plans’ over 1.5 billion lack access to clean drinking water or basic sanitation.
- London has 40,000 registered homeless; nearly a quarter of a million New Yorkers have stayed in shelters over the last five years, including more than one in 12 of its black children. Over 26 million people in the US are on food stamps — one in ten of the population.
- Of the planet's nearly 3 billion labour force, there are 120 million people actively looking for work without result or hope. Technical changes in production, dominated as they are by the needs of capital, far from bringing the ‘affluent society’ nearer, are destroying jobs in the ‘rich’ and the ‘poor’ countries alike.”

The name doesn't matter!!!

Call it Thatcherism, call it monetarism, call it neo-liberalism. The name doesn't matter. The effects of capitalism's latest phase are to be felt by the working-class throughout the world. The tactics needed to combat it are the same worldwide and indeed the solidarity shown globally for the dockers has proven that “old-style” trade unionism is by no means a thing of the past. As Irish trade union bureaucrats attempt to stitch up yet another so-called ‘social partnership’ deal with government and employers, this is a lesson that should be remembered by trade unionists here.

As the dictates of the “free market” mean that multinational firms shift production and capital from country to country and from continent to continent as it suits them, trade unionists must look to the establishment of international networks controlled by shop stewards and the rank-and-file to strengthen industrial muscle. Would General Motors have been so quick to close down Packard Electric if it was faced with the threat of industrial action in its European or indeed worldwide plants in defence of the jobs of Irish workers?

Finally the dockers in Liverpool have not allowed anti-trade union laws to blunt their fight. Here too is a lesson for all trade unionists — where the law stands in our way, it must be broken. Victory to the dockers!!

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