

Sacked Magnet Workers Battle On

Anarchist Communist Federation

1997

Almost eight months into their dispute, and the workers sacked by Magnet, manufacturers of kitchens, in Darlington continue to battle on for reinstatement. Outside of the north-east little has been heard of the dispute. Yet action has continued: one example being the angry demonstration which met shareholders on their way to a meeting of parent company Beresford in London last January. The events led a spokesman for the group to describe the battle as “the most vicious dispute in history”.

It all started last August when management turned down demands for a pay rise. Workers, some of them with over 30 years of experience, saw this as the last straw in a game of patience which had been going on since their last pay deal in 1992. As nearly 300 workers walked out, the unions (T&G, UCATT, GMB and the AEEU) set about trying to arrange a compromise. Instead, bosses at the firm’s Yarm Industrial Estate gave the strikers an ultimatum: they could return to work within one week or else face the sack. Seeing this as an opportunity not to be missed, the company also attached the condition that anyone returning to work must sever their union membership.

Surprised, but undeterred, many of the strikers dismissed these threats as hollow and set up camp outside the plant. With no back down in sight, the company fulfilled their promise and on September 3rd 1996 all 300 were sacked, while the firm promptly began recruiting scabs.

Clearly shocked, the unions attempted to return to negotiations cap in hand, only to be shown the door by the bosses. Since then, round the clock pickets have continued, including several mass pickets. Marches through town have received a good deal of support among locals, even extending to staff at the town’s main Job Centre, who initially refused to display cards from magnet targeting potential scabs.

Indeed, the firm has only been partially successful in endeavours to find replacements for the skilled men and women it off-loaded. Despite Magnet’s claim of being up to full production levels, most agree that this is little more than bluff, with the number of scabs providing only a skeleton operation, compounded by the fact that most have come to the job unskilled.

They do, however, provide Magnet with the kind of workforce which the capitalists increasingly desire as we near the millennium. Union ties have been broken with the company as it introduces that terrible watchword for the nineties: “flexibility”. This, combined with other trends such as short-term contracts, casualisation and the growth of de-skilling in many sectors, all

serve to drive down labour costs, pitting worker against worker. In this environment it remains difficult to see how a negotiated settlement can be reached for the folks in Darlington.

If there's one thing which the pickets have proved as they continue urging the public to boycott the company's goods though, is their resilience. Bosses at Magnet were surprised that the pickets had continued beyond ninety days, let alone eight months. With no sign of outside support waning either, there could be further surprises in store for the company, whose parent shareholders are very keen indeed to see an end to this protracted dispute, even if it means a dreaded back down. We await further developments but in the meantime: The Magnet workers are in desperate need of financial help if they are to continue their fight, a fight which represents a crucial battle against capitalism's continual assault on workers, seen also in the sacking of the Liverpool dockers. It's about time we won one!

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