

# Nationalism and the British trade union strike

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The strike at the Lindsey Oil Refinery in Lincolnshire, Britain, on the basis of a nationalist program of defending "British jobs for British workers" raises fundamental issues for the working class internationally.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and Socialist Equality Party have opposed the actions and denounced the role of the trade union bureaucracy in pitting workers of different nationalities against each other. The strike was called to protest the arrival of 100 Italian and Portuguese workers, employed by an Italian subcontractor that won a contract at the refinery.

The workers involved in the strike have legitimate grievances about the destruction of their jobs, and they, along with workers throughout the world, are being devastated by the economic crisis. However, these concerns are being consciously directed by the unions and their political supporters along a reactionary path that is a complete dead end for British workers.

The appeal to nationalism is not a monopoly of the British trade union bureaucracy. It is a common feature of trade unions throughout the world. In the United States, for example, the AFL-CIO has promoted "America first" chauvinism for decades. In alliance with sections of the US corporate elite, the union bureaucracy is campaigning heavily for the inclusion of a "buy American" provision in any economic stimulus bill passed by the Obama administration.

Leo Gerard, president of the US United Steelworkers union, expressed the sentiment of the bureaucracy in a recent column. He called for Americans to "assert themselves as economic patriots" and denounced the US Chamber of Commerce—the American business organization—for "wanting to spend the tax dollars of unemployed Americans to create jobs in China and Indonesia, Korea and India." Aside from the demagogic rhetoric directed at the US corporations—with which the union bureaucracy has in fact worked quite closely—the statement is a clear declaration of hostility to Asian workers.

The nationalist orientation of the trade unions has a definite logic. The unions gained strength following the Second World War during the heyday of Keynesian policies.

Workers organized in trade unions were able to win certain concessions from employers and from the state in the form of higher wages and benefits. The perspective of national reform retained a certain feasibility under conditions of nationally-regulated economies and general global economic expansion—neither of which exist today.

The trade union bureaucracy tied workers to the development of national corporations, accepting the private profit system and—particularly in the US—purging its ranks of socialists. The implications of this perspective began to show themselves as early as the 1950s, when trade union membership in the US began to decline.

Transformations in the character of capitalist production, beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, initiated a period of rapid degeneration. The globalization of production and the dismantling of industry—particularly in the United States and Britain—undermined the ability of the unions to pressure capital for concessions in the national labor market. Indeed, the globalization of production produced a global labor market, allowing corporations to shift production around the world in search of cheap labor.

Under the impact of these global transformations, the union bureaucracies have retained their allegiances to the national state and the corporate structure into which they have been steadily integrated. Nationalism and corporatism are sister ideologies. The various campaigns to defend "British," "American," "German," etc., jobs have been invariably combined with the acceptance of major concessions and wage cuts for British, American or German workers.

Writing in 1993, the US Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, took note of these developments and their implications. In a perspectives resolution, *The Globalization of Capitalist Production & the International Tasks of the Working Class*, we noted, "The basic orientation of the old labor organizations—the protection of national industry and the national labor market—is undermined by globally integrated production and the unprecedented mobility of capital. The role of these bureaucratic apparatuses in every country has been transformed from pressuring the employers and the state for concessions to the worker, to pressuring the workers for

concessions to the employers so as to attract capital."

While undermining the old organizations, the developments in world economy have also vastly increased the global division of labor. Revolutionary advances in communication and transportation have undercut national barriers. There is virtually no commodity or economic process that does not involve in some way the integration of productive systems and labor from far-reaching corners of the globe—production of energy, extraction of raw material, food production, manufacturing, communications, etc. With the development of the transnational corporation, the different stages in the production of commodities may take place in different countries. Finance is globally integrated, with trillions passing through world markets on a daily basis.

Maintaining economic life in any particular nation-state is inconceivable except on the basis of this global integration. And this does not yet take into account the enormous development in production necessary to elevate the standard of living of the world's six billion people.

In this sense, the nationalist perspective of the trade unions is a totally unviable and reactionary dystopia. Figures such as Gerard attempt to stoke anger against Chinese workers, while neglecting to note that much of American economic activity is dependent upon inflows of capital from China. There is an element of stupidity and backwardness that is typical of the petty-bourgeois outlook of the trade union bureaucrat, largely ignorant of the actual functioning of world economic activity.

Within the framework of capitalism, globalization and the development of the productive forces have been the basis for a massive increase in the exploitation of the working class. These same productive forces, however, are the necessary foundation for the establishment of an egalitarian world society that provides for the needs of the world's population. The problem is not global production; it is the capitalist system of private profit.

At the same time, globalization has brought with it a vast expansion of the working class, increasing its objective economic strength and unity. The fact that workers of different nationalities—British, Italian, Portuguese—are all being exploited at the British refinery is, in fact, an example of this unity. The nationalist response of the unions cuts across the basis upon which these workers could carry out a united struggle against their common exploiters.

The corollary of nationalism is militarism. On the eve of World War I, the giant trade union bureaucracies, increasingly influenced by nationalist tendencies, supported their respective nation-states in the ensuing mass slaughter of the European working class. The eruption of the world wars of the 20th century, like the escalating tensions

between the great powers today, was a product of the contradiction between world economy and the system of competing nation-states.

Out of the present economic crisis, national governments throughout the world—representing different and competing sections of corporations—are once again flirting with protectionism and beggar-thy-neighbor policies. However, unable to solve their problems within the framework of the nation-state, and deeply dependent on world economy, competing sections of capital will lash out. Writing in 1934, just five years before the beginning of World War II, Trotsky warned of the implications of economic nationalism: "The fact is that the breeding places of nationalism also are the laboratories of terrific conflicts in the future; like a hungry tiger, imperialism has withdrawn into its own national lair to gather itself for a new leap." ("Nationalism and Economic Life").

To the extent that the defense of workers is posed within a national, or for that matter, regional framework, the results will be catastrophic. The working class must impose its own solution to the economic crisis, one that breaks free of the organizational and ideological straitjacket of the trade union bureaucracy.

The capitalist crisis is feeding off and intensifying the enormous divisions and imbalances in the world economy, exacerbating conflicts between nation-states. Only the international working class—united on the basis of its common interests in the struggle against the capitalist system—is objectively positioned to resolve the crisis confronting mankind through a fundamental revolutionary organization of the world economy.

The alternative to the capitalist nation-state system and private ownership of the means of production is international socialism. The building of the *world* party of socialist revolution—the International Committee of the Fourth International—emerges therefore as a pressing historical necessity.

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