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Grangemouth and the need for rank-and-file solidarity

Anarchist Federation of Scotland

November 6, 2013

There has been a lot of speculation about how ready and willing workers at Grangemouth have been to take industrial action. Looking at the actions of the Ineos bosses, Unite the Union, and the politicians we can start to see how much of these three groups vested interests are tied up in making sure workers on the ground are given the thin edge of the wedge.

First, Ineos themselves – as expected from the bosses – have been lying through their teeth. On one hand they have claimed the site is making a loss, though when the economic analyst Richard Murphy looked through their books he was stunned to find they were £7million in the black while at the same time the costs to the company for site assets and a public loan they were paying back have been written off. Money from the site is also being moved into an offshore tax haven. All of this makes the future of Grangemouth look hugely profitable. The only other way Ineos can squeeze more money out of the plant would be to cut staffing costs and benefits, and that is just what they are doing.

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Michael Connarty, the Labour MP who covers Grangemouth, claimed on the BBC's Daily Politics show that Unite had been "conned" and that it was "quite clear [Ineos] prepared for this conflict quite well". However, the workers of Grangemouth have not been outsmarted by their bosses as much as they have been ill-represented by the Unite bureaucracy and their tired and predictable way of reacting to negotiations. The union's willingness to keep the peace by giving a three year no-strike deal means the bosses can do what they want for that time with no real way for workers to come back at them; that is unless the workers take the decision to act outside of Unite's hands and back into their own.

Some have claimed that rank-and-file action may not have been possible, but if that's the case then it raises the question of how the workforce got into that state, and what was the union's role in creating this situation? Back in 2000, workers at Grangemouth were striking in solidarity with truckers blockading the plant as part of the fuel price protests, then again in 2009 hundreds of Grangemouth workers took wildcat strike action to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with striking oil refinery workers at Lindsey. Have they really given up this strong will to fight in just four short years? Or have Unite (and the other trade unions) been quick to dampen any militancy in an attempt to show the bosses that they are in control of militancy and keep their own slice of the pie?

However, The Scotsman reported that 665 workers did not sign the survival plan agreement, indicating that workers on the shop floor are still up for a fight. How has Ineos reacted? They are going to sack these workers and have them rehired as new employees, putting them on contracts with lower pensions than those who were forced into giving in. Those who did sign the contract will also get a "sweetener" of between £2,500 and £15,000. Unite, rather than fighting this blatant attack to divide the workforce, had already tied their hands in preparation by signing that no-strike agreement and are complicit in worsening conditions for its mem-

bers and breaking the bonds of solidarity between different workers. It is clear that they have no interest in protecting the working class, just so long as they get their place at the bosses table.

Over in Holyrood, the SNP have been only too willing to play into the hands of the bosses, giving Ineos support in the calls for compromise to be reached. The thought that a Scottish government (either further devolved or fully independent of Westminster) will be any friendlier to workers, the unemployed or anyone else is an assertion without any backing. The state will always behave in the interests of the state. Holding hope that someone else can fix things for us is only going to lead to half-measures and disappointment. It is only by building up our ability to take action together at the heart of the problem that will give us any real measure control of our lives.

The way in which the unions and the politicians have behaved is not the victory for common sense that is being billed; it is a stitch-up against all of us as a class. Bosses are pitting worker against worker while the trade unions and politicians are only too happy for this to happen as long as their power remains intact. The people on the shop floor know their business better than anyone else. We should learn the lessons from past fights such as the 2009 Lindsey strikes where worker stood in solidarity with worker and won the reinstatement of 698 workers and an agreement of no retaliation from the bosses: a victory through shared struggle. By helping to empower one another by showing support when action is called for we can take a degree of power for ourselves, and to hell with the bosses, union bureaucrats and politicians who stand in our way.