

## **Our main task : build internationalism, pursue the struggle for socialism**

by Jimmy Nolan

*Jimmy Nolan is the Chairman of the sacked Liverpool Dockers.*

### **Dear Brothers, Sisters, Comrades,**

FIRST, on behalf of the 500 port workers and their families: we thank all our brothers and sisters for your support during our 1995-98 struggle. Believe me, we remain convinced of the right of the principles at the heart of that dispute.

Special thanks go to all the longshoremen of the world. We will always be in debt to you for supporting us physically and sustaining us financially over 28 months.

As this article is being written, we are busy getting ready to welcome our friends and comrades to the official opening, early in 2001, of The Casa - the Liverpool Dockers centre for Dockers and working-class people all over the world. It is both a symbol of the tremendous international solidarity built during the 28 months of our dispute, and it is our contribution to building the independence and dignity of the working class for the fight ahead.

The history of dock workers has always been one of struggle. Port employers and ship owners were never prepared to concede decent pay and conditions unless they knew that the power of the working class was going to be used against them! Also, we could always identify with our brothers and sisters around the world because we knew that this was an international industry. The very fact of loading and unloading ships gave us that understanding.

But no strike is ever easy, because workers suffer. Also, it is understandable that in times when there is unemployment, the threat of redundancies, casualisation and speed-up, workers and their families experience economic fear. That's why within every working-class struggle we see the necessity to explain the truth -- that it is the scoundrels who exploit for profit who are to blame for provoking such actions. The only "crime" that we are guilty of is that we build our unions and our unity as the only way to defend ourselves, and the only process through which the progress of ourselves and our families can be sustained.

I would say that there is a need to understand that the best way to resolve our problems is to change the economic base of society from one of exploitation to one of socialism. While I participated alongside good comrades in negotiations with employers, I was always of the opinion, and I stated this at mass meetings, that it was obnoxious to be negotiating with employers. It is working class people who produce all the needs of all the people, and that is why our main task is to pursue the struggle for socialism.

It is capitalism that creates the tensions and conflicts within society and their actions are not only condoned, but assisted by politicians. That is why working-class people must understand capitalist political and economic structures and the way these structures in society are used against them. The more we understand this, the easier it is for us to understand who are to blame for the tensions and conflicts and the easier it is for us to work for, and create a socialist society to overcome these tensions and conflicts.

The social repercussions of modern technology in the hands of profiteers is disastrous. By 1995 in our industry a new situation had developed. Over a period of 30 years the development of

containerisation had changed the face of the industry. It meant speed-up, 12-hour shifts and the loss of thousands of jobs. Then, in 1989 the Tory government repealed the National Dock Labour Scheme, removing our rights to security of employment. But that was not all.

The Thatcher government had put anti-trade union legislation on the statute book. This took us back to the nineteenth century when the law classed a strike as a fundamental breach of contract. The working class sold its labour power, but did not own its labour power! Such oppressive laws reduce workers to slaves! It was against such laws that the trade unions had fought all those years ago. But now, here we were, at the end of the twentieth century and again workers were bound and gagged.

"Thatcherite" laws, among other things, render unlawful: workers' actions to persuade an employer to employ only union members and also make illegal: actions aimed at reinstating sacked strikers. In addition they only allow workers to picket their own place of work and not to act in solidarity with others. After 1989, our industry had been broken up into separate companies, and, although we all worked in one port, we were employed by different employers. This meant that we could not legally support each other.

It was against this background that we found ourselves in September 1995 being dismissed for acting in solidarity by refusing to cross a picket line. The Mersey Docks and Harbour Company immediately implemented the obnoxious political legislation and sacked the 500 port workers. We knew that this was the situation we faced, but we were not prepared to grovel. We had to make a stand for our rights, for our dignity, for the rights of the whole working class and for future generations.

We knew that the existence of anti-trade union laws meant that we were going into battle with our hands tied behind our backs. But we also knew, and continue to believe that the only way, ultimately, to break those bonds is to organise and fight.

And it wasn't only the 500 Liverpool Dockers who were making such a stand around that time -- so were the Hillingdon hospital workers, the Tame side care workers, the Magnets kitchen workers, the Critchley communications workers and the Lufthansa Skychefs workers at Heathrow airport. We were all dismissed for taking action in support of our trade union rights and our rights to decent wages and conditions. None of these disputes could be simply industrial actions. We were all fighting against the laws imposed on us by politicians.

That's why workers have got to examine the political side of life. Politicians are introducing local and global legislation in the interests of multi-national corporations and financial institutions. The effect of this on the working class locally and globally is that it disarms them from struggle against these multi-national corporations and financial institutions.

These same politicians are always telling us that they advocate democracy on a global basis, and particularly in the social side of life! But how can this be possible when, with regard to the economic base of society, there is no industrial democracy?

I have said that these were Thatcher's laws, but they have now become Labour's laws! A Labour government won the 1997 general election and has continued to introduce deregulation. This government has not removed the obnoxious anti-trade union laws which are used by the employers to dismiss working-class people. So how can we speak of "our democracy" when politicians and employers are insulting the nation's people by implementing an indictment against the very principles of democracy?

Who are responsible? The politicians. But there is a duty on the part of the trade unions to fight against these acts of violence against the working class, and not simply to accept bad laws. That is why the trade union leaders should revisit the history of our class, for only in this way will it become possible to achieve economic democracy. And this cannot be seen as purely a problem for workers in each country separate from workers all over the world.

Vulture capitalism has no fetters on its movement around the world, seeking cheap labour. But workers cannot roam the world. Even when some workers do find casual work in other countries they discover that they are not covered by health and safety legislation and have no pension rights etc. And then there are the asylum seekers, trying to escape war and economic oppression, but finding themselves caught in a trap, their rights and their dignity destroyed as they try to survive on vouchers and living in hostels or in virtual prisons.

What is required is the global implementation of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions. These lay down the right of people throughout the world not only to join trade unions, but to participate in unity alongside their brothers and sisters. However, politicians are always ready to accept these principles "at arm's length" for workers in other countries, but never for workers in their own country! It's a question of principles on paper, but not principles in practice.

The truth is that governments are moving more rapidly into the tradition of neo-liberalism. This is only in the interests of the multi-nationals and the financial institutions, not in the interests of working people. Our forefathers and mothers could distinguish between conservatism, liberalism and socialism, but today we have a Labour government carrying out such policies. They say "New Labour", but its real name is Betrayal!

Previous Labour governments nationalised industries and set up the National Health Service. This form of legislation did act in the interests of the British people, but don't let us forget that, at the same time the British people paid for them not just through the surplus-value society but through taxation and national insurance contributions. How unfortunate it is to witness a Labour government dismantling such progressive legislation today.

They tell us that democracy exists. Yes, so long as we confine ourselves to the "free speech" of discussions in the ale houses, and do not carry out the logic of our opinions by taking up the struggle to change society!

Over the years we have seen a tremendous development of modern technology. Today the working class can produce all these new techniques, but we have to ask ourselves, shouldn't this be enriching our lives? Instead of that, there is a widening gap between the rich and the poor. How can this modern technology be used when workers are more and more thrown onto the scrap heap?

The main lesson of this so-called globalisation is that working class people must pursue their own independent globalisation. No section of workers, no matter in what country they live, should be left to fight alone. International unity is the only positive way of organising opposition to the oppression imposed on us by the politicians and multi-national corporations. Workers can never overcome the tremendous contradictions of the profit system by giving up their rights and allowing themselves to be more and more exploited.

As this article is being written, news is coming in that Vauxhalls has decided to close down its plant in Luton. Workers have been making cars and trucks in that town for almost 100 years! The

whole town has been proud of the industry and the workers have done everything possible to increase productivity. What is their reward? Closure. Such setbacks must make us all realise that finally there are no benevolent employers, and there are no local or national solutions. The only way forward for the working class is to unite and fight internationally.

One of the things we can always be proud of as dock workers is that we always supported our brothers and sisters in all industries nationally and internationally. We acted in solidarity with the workers in South Africa against apartheid. In support of the Namibian people we refused to touch Namibian uranium. We refused the cargoes of Chile and other South American countries where there were oppressive regimes.

When it came to establishing trade unionism in some of the car factories in Britain, we assisted our brothers and sisters by refusing to load the cars until their union rights were recognised. We also came out on strike in support of the miners, and the nurses. And we supported European workers. One of the disputes I remember very well was when we supported our brothers and sisters in Teneriffe and Las Palmas. They went on strike and scabs loaded the citrus fruits coming into Liverpool. We wouldn't touch that cargo. I often think about Bella Maria, the young woman who was killed during that strike when she was run down by a scab truck.

I would think these acts of solidarity were the salient reason for the Liverpool Dockers winning global support when we were sacked in 1995. Our brothers and sisters knew us personally, and they knew our history and principles. I had worked with many rank-and-file Dockers' leaders over a long period from the late 1960s at international conferences. I remember the first one in Birmingham, and we met after that in Denmark, Spain, Sweden and other countries.

So when representatives of the 500 sacked Dockers travelled the world from the outset of our dispute in 1995, fraternal comradeship had already been built. Their problems were ours and our problems were theirs. This face to face comradeship and exchange of experiences is important - hearing our brothers and sisters' ideas about political and economic life in their various countries is vital.

It was also essential to utilise modern telecommunications, which speeded up and made easier the reports and exchange of ideas. Quite early on in our dispute the e-mail and the web site were introduced. It certainly showed us how positive it can be for working people to use modern technology.

The first international conference of our dispute in Liverpool Town Hall in 1996 laid the basis, not only for the remaining months of our struggle, but for the rest of our lives. The main point made by Liverpool Dockers at that conference was that the best lesson for our brothers and sisters to learn would be: not to allow their governments to impose upon them what the British government had imposed on us. It was out of this struggle, this comradeship that a new international Dockers' organisation was born. In fact the International Dockers' Council (IDC) was actualised at a conference in Spain in June 2000, two years after the end of our dispute. This is ample proof that the struggle continues!

And how necessary this continuous organisation is. Dockers in every port in the world are facing the same speed-up, casualisation and attacks on union organisation that we experienced. The fight against global "Thatcherism" goes on, but now with the tremendous experiences of those 28 months in which we never saw ourselves as an individual leadership, either here or on a world scale. There were mass meetings of the sacked Liverpool Dockers every Friday during the course of the dispute, and we kept our brothers and sisters informed locally and globally. Our meetings were open and democratic.

This also suggests that the working class of the UK must learn to build their own independence, and recognise the ineffectiveness of trade union leaders who are not prepared to oppose governments and their anti-trade union legislation. These trade union leaders tell us that they must operate within the law. But lessons must be learned from previous generations. The trade unions were not built by acting within the law.

I would suggest that the Chartist movement and indeed progressive movements since the Chartists had to be in opposition to governments and the implementation of obnoxious laws. This is the predominant reason why the working class and the trade unions formed the Labour Party in the first place. Workers sincerely believed in representative democracy and that's why they fought for their trade unions and their independent political voice. But these rights are now being removed by the present government which continues with the legislation of Thatcher and joins with multi-national companies to destroy all the past gains which were paid for by the nation's people.

Personally I have never put my faith in being able to reform the capitalist system. I am, and remain, a communist. What does that mean? The word itself is self-evident. Human beings should not exploit each other. Our dispute revealed the main question. How do we resolve man's inhumanity to man? How do we control the world's resources for the benefit of all? How do we build our own independent society free of exploitation?

We are against the politicians because we are witnessing a continuous struggle in which they represent only the exploiters. We have already seen the scandalous risks to safety by privatised Railtrack, and now the government is putting through legislation to privatise the National Air Traffic Control System. At the same time the London Underground workers are doing battle against the government's plans to privatise London's tube system.

So we condemn the politicians. But we cannot be non-political because we are still in the stage of human development towards socialism. The convincing concept of this reasoning is that the traditions of conservatism, liberalism and neo-liberalism still hold sway, and lock up the minds of millions of workers locally and globally. It is this image of such a society being permanent which must be changed. We can and must develop our own independence for a socialist society. There are signs that millions are breaking from the old politics and the politicians. They recognise that there is no representative democracy and they refuse to vote. So what does the politicians' boasting about "majorities" mean? They have no majority! One hundred million people cast their votes in the election for the president of the United States, but another one hundred million refused to take part in that poll. In Britain only about one third of the electorate bothered to cast their vote in the 1999 Euro elections. It was the same in France and other European countries. Even in South Africa, where black people have only recently got the right to vote the numbers taking part in the November local government elections slumped to below 50 per cent.

The people are becoming disgusted with politicians. These politicians have no mandate for privatising what the people built and paid for!. They are the small minority who try to impose the evils of exploitation and profit on the rest of us. That's why we must open up the widest possible dialogue between ourselves -- workers internationally -- so that we can become more and more aware of our humanity and our crucial place in society. We are the producers of wealth, and we must control that wealth. That's why it is gratifying for me to contribute to this dialogue. Let us go forward to 2001 with a spirit of optimism and determination to build our international unity and pursue our common struggle for socialism.

With best wishes and comradely greetings,  
Jimmy Nolan  
Liverpool, 19th December 2000

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