

What does the hunger strike by Belfast shop stewards say about the trade unions?

By Steve James and Chris Marsden
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After six years and repeated hunger strikes by two former shop stewards, a group of workers sacked from Belfast's International Airport have finally extracted compensation from the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers Union (ATGWU) for the legal fees expended in pursuance of their claims of wrongful dismissal. Still contested is the workers' other demand for the ATGWU to mount an inquiry into its own role in setting up the workers to be sacked in the first place.

The ATGWU is known in the UK as the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) and operates in Britain, Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. It has recently merged with the Amicus union to form Unite, an organisation with around 2.8 million members.

In May 2002, 114 security staff at Belfast International Airport took strike action in pursuit of a wage rise. The workers were earning £5.20 an hour, forcing many of them to work 60 or 70 hours a week to bring home a living wage. The strikes began after six months of negotiations between the ATGWU and International Consultants on Targeted Security (ICTS), which ended with a proposed 18-pence-an-hour pay rise. The workers were demanding £6.00 an hour.

Workers planned a series of four-hour stoppages, which would cause significant disruption to the main commercial airport in Northern Ireland. After the first of these, the company sacked 23 of those involved, including shop stewards Gordon McNeill and Madan Gupta.

The workers were sacked for taking unofficial strike action. They had been assured by regional ATGWU official Joe McCusker that their strike, supported by an official union ballot and a 97 percent majority of the staff, with the company warned in advance of the action, was officially backed by the union. But it soon emerged that the ATGWU had repudiated the strike.

Repudiation of an unofficial strike is required by the anti-union laws introduced by the Thatcher government. But the ATGWU went far beyond its draconian requirements. McCusker passed letters of repudiation, signed by then-TGWU leader Bill Morris, to ICTS, in a secret meeting in a pub near the airport. None of the workers were informed of the meeting between ICTS and the officials and of the repudiation of their dispute—until they were sacked.

In the intervening six years, the workers, led by McNeill, Gupta, and another two stewards, Chris Bowyer and Malcolm Spencer (of the GMWU union), have been forced into a financially ruinous and physically dangerous struggle for compensation—and for the trade union to launch an inquiry into its betrayal of the dispute. Their homes have been remortgaged to pay legal fees. The stewards have repeatedly resorted to hunger strikes in attempts to pressure the ATGWU into implementing its own disciplinary code: Union rules demand an inquiry into events around the sacking of any shop steward.

In 2003, they rejected a deal worked out between ICTS and new TGWU General Secretary Tony Woodley, in which some of the workers would receive no compensation and the stewards would not be re-employed. Woodley informed McNeill that the deal on offer was the best they were

going to get. As the strike was illegal, said Woodley, a case for unfair dismissal could not be won.

Shortly after this, the stewards received death threats. Two of them were pushed into the back of a van and threatened at gunpoint.

In 2004, two years after the initial dispute, McNeill and Gupta went on a hunger strike outside the ATGWU headquarters, Transport House, in Belfast. McNeill said at the time, "My character has been blackened by the whole incident and now I can't even get a job and provide for my family. I am willing to be taken out in a box because, at the moment, I don't see a future. I only see blackness."

Shortly before the two shop stewards began their hunger strike, Woodley blithely professed himself unhappy that the workers "prefer to go down their own road." He went on to denounce them for being "opportunistic."

McNeill has a heart condition, while Gupta is an insulin-dependent diabetic. On this occasion, the ATGWU apparently backed down after nine hours, issuing the workers a written assurance that an inquiry would be launched. This assurance proved to be worthless.

In 2005, the workers won an interim ruling at a Fair Employment Tribunal case against ICTS, in which the tribunal accepted that measures taken by the ATGWU to repudiate the strike and inform its members had been "ineffective." The clear implication of the decision was ignored by the ATGWU. In May 2005, three years after the initial dispute, McNeill, Gupta and Bowyer held another hunger strike to demand the union mount an investigation into its actions. Once again, the ATGWU formally agreed to an internal investigation.

In the meantime, the workers had to raise their own funds to pursue their legal case in the Court of Appeal against ICTS efforts to have the tribunal decision reversed. Finally, in 2007, the Fair Employment Tribunal case against ICTS was upheld.

The tribunal found that ICTS "unlawfully discriminated" against the four shop stewards. It noted that "the dismissal of the four shop stewards was because of their political opinion as active shop stewards who had negotiated robustly with the respondent [ICTS] culminating in their refusal to recommend the respondent's offers to the workforce and who had been instrumental in leading their co-workers in lawful industrial action."

The tribunal accused ICTS witnesses of "untruthfulness and inadequacy of explanation." Crucially, it found that the strike action was legal and official and that ICTS was aware of this before it took place. ICTS was ordered to pay £750,000 damages to the sacked workers. McNeill commented, "We are angry...that even after the Court of Appeal ruled that our strike had not been illegal, the T&G still refused to fund our legal battle."

Once again, the workers threatened a hunger strike, demanding compensation and an inquiry. Woodley reportedly gave them personal assurances, but said that nothing could be done until the next ATGWU executive meeting. He did, however, agree to pay the workers' £200,000

legal bills, run up in pursuit of the tribunal case against ICTS. By April of this year, only half of the £200,000 had been paid, and there was no sign of the promised inquiry.

Gupta and McNeill again mounted a hunger and thirst strike on the roof of Transport House to try to extract their promised legal payments and an inquiry from Unite. Gupta and McNeill also demanded a face-to-face meeting with Unite's regional secretary, Jimmy Kelly. Unite responded by issuing a press released headlined "Protesters demand £1 million each from Unite," describing the hunger strike as "unreasonable pressure on the union and individual union officers."

The union called the police to remove the workers from the canopy of Transport House. Gupta, McNeill and Bowyer continued their protest from outside the building. After 48 hours without food or water, both Gupta and McNeill were taken to hospital. Doctors warned them that they faced a danger of "death with 24 hours if they do not start eating."

On April 12, after four days, UNITE finally agreed that it would pay the contested legal costs and conceded a date by which time all other issues *should* be resolved.

The ATGWU's behind-the-scenes deal with ICTS to stitch up the airport workers is far from being an isolated incident. It is typical of countless betrayals carried out year in and year out, overtly and covertly, by regional and local officials. Events at Belfast have only come to light because of the extraordinary determination of the shop stewards in seeking to improve the conditions of their colleagues. But in attempting to act, and risk their lives, in accordance with what they believe a trade union *ought* to do, they have confronted what, *in fact*, the trade unions have become.

They do not defend their members, much less the working class as a whole. Rather, the trade unions are controlled by a parasitic social layer whose interests lie in subordinating the working class to the needs of capital. They are now run largely as financial institutions with interests in pension funds and corporate shareholding, along with credit card and insurance schemes—sold to their members alongside their dues. To the extent that the unions find themselves in conflict with this or that employer, due primarily to the demands of its members, the overriding concern of the bureaucracy is always to safeguard and renew its own comfortable relations with corporate management.

Such is the daily experience of most every worker who comes into contact with the trade unions. This is why the ATGWU is so bitterly opposed to an inquiry into its role at Belfast airport.

The middle class radical organisations play a politically criminal role in seeking to conceal the full extent of the transformation of the trade unions into a tier of management. In this regard, a particularly venal role has been played by Jimmy Kelly, the ATGWU's regional secretary, the highest-ranking official in Ireland, who is the Socialist Workers Party's most prominent trade union member in Ireland.

While the SWP was making supportive noises about the airport workers' principled stand, one of its leading members was fully lined up behind the Woodley leadership—refusing to even meet with the shop stewards during their latest hunger and thirst strike and walking past them for five days as they protested outside the union headquarters.

Banners carried by protestors supporting the shop stewards' protest outside Transport House read, "Jimmy Kelly and Tony Woodley, UNITE in shame, Using police against your own members."

One of the shop stewards, Gordon McNeill, told a rally outside Transport House, "Jimmy Kelly attacked Margaret Thatcher for refusing negotiations with the H-block hunger-strikers in the 80's, but today he refuses to talk with members of the union who have been forced to go on hunger-strike to get justice. We were sacked after a union official, with the support of the leadership, repudiated our strike action in 2002 at a secret meeting with our former employers. The union seems happy enough to talk to the employers, but won't talk to its members."

An April 11 statement in *Socialist Worker* was a crude cover-up for the trade union bureaucracy and its own leading member. It mildly complained that the "ATGWU had let these men down," before adding that the decision to pay legal costs was "an important contribution to correcting past mistakes." It is all just water under the bridge.

Even so, the SWP insisted that the ATGWU had the right to query payments made by the stewards to their lawyers in pursuit of their defence, "as members' dues are at stake," thus attributing to the bureaucracy motivations based on a defence of their members and not their own cosy existence. The SWP did not even mention by name the workers' demand for an inquiry into the treachery of the trade union, instead referring elliptically to the need for "mediation on the outstanding issue in dispute."

Two of the stewards are members of the Socialist Party (Ireland), which has led the campaign against their victimisation while urging them against adopting a hunger strike as a tactic. The Socialist Party has criticised Kelly's actions, earning it savage criticism from various defenders of the bureaucracy. However, it too has repeatedly made clear that it wants the issue to be resolved and to restore the political authority of the union.

Writing on the Fair Employment Tribunal verdict, Peter Haddon, in *The Socialist* of September 7, commented, "Unless and until the union takes decisive steps to make up for their betrayal of these workers, the abiding memory that will linger of this dispute will be of that shady encounter in a pub near the airport where T&GWU official, Joe McCusker, handed ICTS directors the ammunition they needed to sack his members."

But that is precisely what the abiding memory of the dispute should be—epitomising as it does the real relationship between the trade unions, the employers and the working class.

Haddon's and the SP's prescription for preventing future betrayals is for "union officials to be elected," as if the ATGWU's actions in the Belfast dispute can be explained by the fact that its regional officials are appointed. The ATGWU's position was in fact defended by the elected TGWU national leadership under Bill Morris (twice elected general secretary and knighted as Baron Morris of Handsworth, having served as a non-executive director of the Bank of England). And this defence continued under Tony Woodley, who was elected as a supposed left opponent of Morris. Moreover, no one on the TGWU/UNITE executive has opposed the betrayal and victimisation of the Belfast workers, including someone who professes to be a revolutionary socialist.

The view that the trade unions can be revitalised by having a few more elected officials assumes they are essentially healthy workers' organisations that need only be made more accountable. It obscures the fundamental character of the transformation of the trade unions and the ossified, anti-working class social layer that heads them.

In the past, the labour and trade union bureaucracy, while still constituting an aristocracy of labour, was prepared to lead struggles for limited concession and reforms—so long as this did not threaten the survival of the profit system and the rule of the capitalist class from which they drew their own substantial privileges in return for policing the class struggle.

With the development of globalised production and the eclipsing of the nation state as the fundamental basis for economic life, this is no longer possible. The ruling class can no longer sustain the relatively higher living standards once enjoyed by workers in the major industrialised nations. It demands that wages and working conditions be pushed down ever closer to an international benchmark that is set in China, India and eastern Europe. The trade union bureaucracy, following the lead set by its political wing, the Labour Party, has responded by ditching any meaningful struggle for social reform in favour of seeking a stable flow of investment into their factory, town, region or country on the basis of offering a compliant and ever-more cruelly exploited workforce.

The class struggle must be waged on two fronts simultaneously—against

employers such as the ICTS and their agents in the trade union leadership. The fight against wage-cutting and job cuts cannot be conducted through the existing trade union organisations. It must assume an insurrectionary character, breaking the stranglehold of the union tops by the formation of rank-and-file committees through which to organise the struggle against big business. This can only be successful if it is based on a genuinely socialist and internationalist programme that takes as its point of departure an irreconcilable struggle against the nationalist and pro-capitalist nostrums peddled by the trade union leaders.

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