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Winter 2023 The magazine for Unite construction sector membership

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unite Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians

First of all we would like to wish you a Happy New Year. Unite in construction's new year resolution is to ensure that the jobs, pay and conditions of our members are always defended and protected.

An area which is uniquely critical for construction workers is health and safety. Not only are construction workers at greatest risk of being killed at work but the sector has the highest level of ill health. Unite has long campaigned to reduce and eradicate these dangers.

While the prevention of exposure to asbestos rightly gets a lot of attention, due to its obvious deadly nature, other hazards get far less publicity.

On page 10-11 of this issue we highlight the dangers of musculoskeletal injuries that construction workers too frequently experience. Over 40,000 construction workers suffer notable injuries every year due to the failure of employers to ensure that lifting, carrying and other workplace activities are conducted safely.

What is important to note about musculoskeletal injuries is it is not just about preventing immediate injury but if physical tasks aren't carried out safely, the cumulative damage on workers' bodies is massive and is likely to result in them being crippled in old age and potentially forced out of the industry prior to retirement.

As a union it is essential that we take a stand and ensure that such poor practices are rooted out of the industry and our members are spared a miserable and painful old age.

Prior to Christmas our members at Fawley oil refinery took substantial strike action as they sought to increase the bonus payment they received in order to try to partially offset the cost of living crisis. It is disgraceful that wealthy employers at a site, which is making eye watering profits, have been so reluctant to pay our workers a fair wage.

The dedication and commitment of our members at Fawley must be applauded. It is almost certain that with the cost of living crisis continuing to bite during 2023, that more and more construction workers will reject real terms pay cuts. Rest assured if members are prepared to stand up and demand decent pay Unite will back them all the way.

The huge profiteering currently occurring and the need for a grassroot campaign to fight back against a system rigged against workers is why our union has launched Unite for a Workers Economy campaign (page 14-15).

Also in this issue we report on the recent sector conference, where construction activists from across the UK and Ireland gathered together and set out the sector's policy priorities for the next two years. With a specific focus on Unite ensuring it becomes an even more powerful presence across the construction industry.

Jerry Swain and Jason Poulter
Unite national construction officers

Contents

3 Editorial

4 National news

6 Regional news

8 Pay and Bargaining

9 International news

10 Musculoskeletal advice

12 Musculoskeletal poster

14 Unite for a Workers Economy

16 *A Very British Conspiracy* Reviews

17 Builder workers strike 50th anniversary meeting

18 Unite sector conference report

20 Construction economy forecast

21 Rift

Front cover credit: Mark Thomas

Fawley construction workers on strike

Engineering construction workers based at the Fawley oil refinery took substantial strike action prior to Christmas in a dispute over bonus payments.

The 130 workers operate under the National Agreement for the Engineering Construction Industry (NAECI) and are employed by various contractors including Altrad, Bilfinger and Enerveo. They are employed in construction maintenance roles and play a critical role in ensuring that the refinery operates safely.

The workers are seeking to partially offset the cost of living crisis by ensuring that the bonus payment at Fawley is increased to the maximum possible under the agreement of £2.37 an hour.

The workers claim is fully affordable, the Fawley refinery is operated by ExxonMobil, the company recently recorded a quarterly profit of £17.3 billion.

Tensions in the dispute increased dramatically at the end of the first week of strike action, due to excessive and heavy handed policing. Approximately 60 police officers appeared at the picket line and prevented a lawful picket from taking place on that day.

The excessive policing occurred after a representative for the construction contractors wrote to the police making a series of unfounded allegations about the conduct of the pickets.

Unite general secretary **Sharon Graham** said: "ExxonMobil, is making eye-watering profits. Paying our members the bonus they are seeking will not make a single dent in its overflowing coffers. But instead of coming to the table, the employers at Fawley have been spreading untruths about our members. This is yet another case of irresponsible employers acting on greed not need. Unite will not stand for company lies or interference by the police. "In total the workers took 18 days of strike action prior to Christmas in the dispute.

Unite regional officer **Malcolm Bonnett** said: "The strike action is causing considerable disruption and delays across Fawley but this dispute has been caused by the contractors and client refusing to pay a bonus, to counteract the cost of living crisis."

Unite has been picketing at the Fawley oil refinery over bonus payments

Thank you Gail

Since Unite has been publishing the *buildingWorker*, **Gail Cartmail** has been its editor in chief. Gail has been promoted to become Unite's executive head of operations (Sharon Graham's deputy) this means that Gail no longer has day to day dealings with the construction sector and therefore has decided to step back from her role with *buildingWorker*.

The sector won't be losing touch with Gail completely as she will remain deputy president of the Building Workers International (BWI see page 8 for details).

Unite's national construction officers **Jason Poulter** and **Jerry Swain** will now step into the breach.

Everyone involved with *buildingWorker* would like to thank Gail for her support and commitment to ensuring that the magazine has gone from strength to strength.

Gail Cartmail is stepping back from her role with *buildingWorker*

NATIONAL NEWS

Government fails to do its homework as workers face pension rise

Construction workers are bracing themselves for more bad news early next year, following a little reported aspect of Conservative chancellor Jeremy Hunt's autumn budget.

Hunt slipped into his statement that he would bring forward a review of state pension age to early 2023, which almost inevitably will result in workers having to work even longer.

The state pension age is currently 66 but this will increase to 67 between 2026 and 2028 and then to 68 from 2044 to 2046.

The review of the state pension age could result in the already announced increased state pension ages being introduced sooner or for younger workers to be required to work even longer, beyond 68, before they qualify for the state pension.

This is especially bad news for construction workers as due to the physical nature and the long hours culture of the industry, many suffer injury and ill-health and are forced out of the industry. before they reach state pension age.

Despite the problem of being forced to leave the industry early being well-known, this is not on the government's radar.

A freedom of information request to the Department for Work and Pensions, asked: "What assessment/ research has been taken on the average age that construction workers are forced/choose to leave the industry (prior to state retirement age) and what are the factors relating to those decisions?"

The DWP replied: "Following a search of our paper and electronic records, we have established that the information you requested is not held by this department."

Unite national officer **Jerry Swain** said: "This is a travesty, the government is guilty of throwing construction workers on the scrapheap, too old and too injured to work but too young to get a pension.

"Construction workers will be living in dread of any changes to the state pension age resulting in workers being expected to work even longer."

Red book workers prepare for local pay disputes

Local government craftworkers covered by the red book agreement are preparing for local disputes to increase pay.

The decision to focus on local disputes comes after Unite reluctantly agreed to accept the local government employers' offer of a flat rate increase of £1,925 and 4.04 per cent on allowances for 2022.

Although members rejected the pay offer, Unite's sister unions accepted the pay offer for the larger local government green book agreement. Unite reluctantly decided to accept the offer in order to provide members with a pay boost and also to ensure that employers could not simply impose the deal.

Unite is now actively pursuing local disputes, where red book workers are well organised and prepared to undertake an industrial dispute to improve pay and conditions.

The local dispute strategy began in 2022 and there were a number of notable victories including several in Northern Ireland, where distinctive red book disputes increased pay and improved conditions.

Unite national officer for red book craftworkers **Jason Poulter**, said: "Unite is now focussing its energy on supporting red book workers who are prepared to launch disputes in local councils. Where local members have clear issues and are willing to take industrial action they will have Unite's total support."

Mark Thomas

All construction workers regardless of age will fear an increase in pension age

• Update on Scottish local government craftworker pay on page 6-7)

REGIONAL NEWS

Unite secures lodge payments on HS2

Unite has secured lodge payments for workers building HS2. In 2022 Unite was contacted by workers employed by TG Tunnelling who were employed on the HS2 Align joint venture who are building the line through the Colne Valley and the Chilterns. The workers were not receiving lodge money despite working away from home. Under the terms of the CIJC construction agreement, which applies throughout the HS2 project, workers unable to return home at night due to living too far away from home should receive a lodge payment.

Unite construction officer **Mark Soave** visited the main site at South Portal, Denham near Rickmansworth, Hertfordshire. Having begun a recruitment campaign and following a series of meetings with TG Tunnelling and the joint venture company an agreement was made to pay the lodge payments. The workers are now around £300 a week better off.

To date Mark Soave has recruited approaching 100 workers on the site and a Unite shop steward has been elected to represent the workers.

- If you are working away from home and believe that you should be receiving a lodge/overnight payment. Contact your Unite representative or regional officer for further advice and information.

Unite officers Mark Soave (right) and Declan Murphy (left) have secured lodge payments for HS2 in the centre is a Gordon Ramsay lookalike

Unite construction activist **Colin Young** has been distributing copies of the *buildingWorker* on construction sites across Dundee. Distributing *buildingWorker* helps to increase awareness of key industrial issues as well as assisting to recruit and retain construction workers in Unite. If you would like to get involved in distributing the *buildingWorker* please contact your regional officer

McGinley in HS2 wrong pay shame

Unite is assisting many workers operating on several sites across the HS2 who have been paid the wrong wages.

The workers are employed by labour agency McGinley Support Services and were suffering delays and incorrect payments throughout the autumn. The problem was blamed on McGinley's introducing a new payroll system.

The problems became so severe that Unite was required to write to the main contractors on HS2 to demand they intervene and force McGinley to sort out the problem.

Unite national officer for construction **Jerry Swain** said: "The workers are fed-up with not getting their correct money or wage slips. "This sort of thing shouldn't be happening in the industry today and certainly not on the country's biggest site. Receiving the right wages is the minimum our members expect on a job of this profile."

London protest following sacking in Ireland

Unite members from across the UK and Ireland came together in October in London to hold a protest following the sacking of several Unite members.

The workers comprising a Unite rep and three members were sacked by Murphy International for holding an onsite meeting.

However, Unite believes the true reason for their dismissal was a previous campaign when Unite organised the mechanical and electrical workers at the company and forced them to begin paying the correct pay rates and pension contributions.

Due to the company's refusal to reinstate the workers a protest was held on Wednesday 12 October at the company's headquarters in London.

The protest was well attended as it coincided with the sectors National Industrial Sector Committee (NISC).

Unite officers are working with the union's organising department to draw up a strategic plan in order to place further pressure on the company and to ensure that the Unite members are reinstated.

Workers from Ireland and the UK join together to protest at the actions of Murphy International

Scottish craft workers reject pay deal

Over 4,000 Scottish craft workers have rejected the proposed pay offer for 2022. The workers who are employed by local authorities, primarily on housing maintenance work, were offered a five per cent pay increase by Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA).

The offer was rejected by 80 per cent of Unite members, with the vast majority supporting strike action.

The committee of local authority workers led by Unite's regional co-ordinating officer Steve Dillon will now meet to decide the next stages in the dispute.

One issue that is a particular sore for the workers is regarding tool allowance. The workers are expected to have their own tools. For a carpenter this would cost around £2,000 while for mechanical trades the cost of tools is up to £6,000.

It is an issue that COSLA has not been prepared to address.

Steve Dillon highlighted how the COSLA negotiating team are provided with mobile phones and laptops by their employer but the same does not apply to craftworkers and their tools.

Managers get free mobile phones but workers have to pay for their tools

Unite supports food banks

Unite's members at Hinkley Point, like many other construction branches, made a donation to a local food bank prior to Christmas.

The branch donated £200 worth of food to the local food bank and were also able to negotiate with the local Lidl to provide an additional £100 worth of food.

The donation was given to the food bank in Bridgwater which is the closest major town to the Hinkley Point development.

The members of Unite were shocked by how many customers the food bank had when they delivered the donation. The branch now intends to make further donations to the Bridgwater food bank on a regular basis.

Pay and Bargaining

Scaffolders employed by Altrad secured a large pay increase

Altrad workers secure pay increase

Last autumn workers employed by Altrad maintaining the chemical plant operated by Venator Materials Ltd in Hartlepool secured a substantial pay increase.

The scaffolders on the site were balloted for strike action and recorded an overwhelming vote in favour of industrial action. At this point local officer **Neil Howells** returned to the negotiating table and secured an 11 per cent increase for the scaffolders.

At the same time a similar pay dispute had been brewing for the mechanical trades that Altrad supplies to the site and as part of the negotiations Neil Howells was able to negotiate a 7.5 per cent pay increase for these workers.

Crawley council workers get pay boost

Over 40 Unite members on outsourced Crawley council contracts have secured a six per cent pay increase after Unite threatened to take industrial action.

The workers who include roofers, fencers, plumbers, carpenters, gas engineers and electricians, are employed by Mears, Wates and Liberty Group.

In addition to the pay increase the workers will all now receive 25 days holiday, plus bank holidays, a year.

Unite is also working with Crawley council to introduce a banding system on pay, this will harmonise rates and properly reward skills.

Scottish painters get pay lift

Workers covered by the Scottish Painting Council agreement saw their pay increase from Monday 9 January.

Pay increased by four per cent and the workers will receive a further three per cent increase from 3 April 2023.

The increases will fully apply to overtime and night rates. The negotiations were led by **Steven Dillon**, Unite's regional co-ordinating officer for construction workers in Scotland.

Ainscough Cranes

Unite national officer **Jason Poulter** negotiated a mid-deal cost of living crisis, recruitment and retention package for Unite members, at mobile crane operator Ainscough Cranes.

The workers will receive three non-consolidated payments. They will receive £500 in December 2023 and then will receive two payments of £1,000 in April and August 2024. In addition Poulter secured additional holiday entitlement linked to service.

Workers will receive one additional days holiday after completing two years of service, two additional days after completing five years and three extra days having completed 10 years of service.

HS2 site access

Unite has recently secured a full site access agreement with the joint venture company EKFB (comprising of Eiffage, Kier, Ferrovial Construction and Bam Nuttall) for access to their sites on the HS2 construction project.

EKFB are responsible for building the track, tunnels and viaducts across the southern Midland section of the project between the Chiltern Tunnel and Long Itchington Wood.

The formal site agreement with EKFB means that it is only the joint venture company SCS (made up of Skanska, Costain and Strabag) who are undertaking the London section of the line who has refused to enter into a proper site access agreement with Unite. However Unite national officer **Jerry Swain** has secured a meeting with the managing director of the joint venture company to discuss the matter.

Stop Press: Unite has now secured a site access agreement at Old Oak Common with joint venture company BBVS.

Getty Images

Unite delegates stand in solidarity with fellow activists from the Palestinian construction union

Unite make their mark at BWI Congress

Unite made a major impact at the Building and Woodworker International (BWI) congress that was held in Madrid in October.

The BWI is the global federation of construction unions and brings together construction unions from around the world.

The Unite delegation was formed of seven lay members, **Paul Mooney, Stuart Grice, Samantha Jones, Malcolm Davies, James Hart, Tracy Whittle** and **Tony Seaman**. They were joined by Unite national officer **Jason Poulter** and Ireland construction officer **James McCabe**. Also part of the delegation was **Gail Cartmail**, Unite's executive head of operations, and the BWI's deputy president, As well as **Steve Craig** Unite's national development officer.

The theme of the congress was VAMOS (let's go) Organising Beyond Borders, for the people, for peace, for the planet. One of the notable factors of the congress was that despite construction being a traditionally male dominated industry, 31 per cent of delegates were female.

Unite alongside unions from Italy, France, Jordan and Kuwait submitted an emergency motion on Palestine. As part of this debate the Unite delegation stood in solidarity with their comrades in the Palestinian construction union.

There were powerful contributions from several nations. Delegates from Myanmar told harrowing stories about how workers were being killed for trade union activities.

A construction worker from Ukraine spoke about the ongoing war and how when it began employers ran away and left workers high and dry without pay.

The congress also heard from a member of the Hong Kong construction union who described how the Chinese authorities are increasingly cracking down on any form of protest no matter how large or small it is.

During the Congress elections were held for a number of senior positions within the BWI. **Ambet Yuson** was re-elected unopposed as the BWI general secretary. While, Gail Cartmail was re-elected as deputy president.

In a further significant boost for the international standing of Unite, both Tracy Whittle and Samantha Jones were elected to the world board of the BWI.

One of the Unite delegation Malcolm Davies said: "I would like to thank Unite for giving me the opportunity to attend the congress. The chance to meet and discuss construction on the international stage was a real eye opener. I met with trade union leaders from the United States, Australia, Philippines, Norway, Canada and so many other countries.

"I was able to discuss construction at length while gaining a new understanding of the issues especially, health and safety and collective bargaining and the challenges and solutions applied in other countries."

The Unite delegation with senior figures from the BWI

Musculo-skeletal Disorders (MSDs)

Making construction workers lives a misery

by **Rob Miguel** national health and safety advisor

What's the problem?

Around 40,000 construction workers every year suffer injuries to muscles, bones, joints and nerves, serious aches, pains and strains and can affect every part of someone's life.

Lifting and moving heavy objects on construction sites is harming the health of thousands of construction workers, to such a degree that every aspect of their lives is affected. Experts at the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and Unite are warning construction workers are picking up injuries and conditions that can stop them working and leave them struggling to stand, walk, or sit down.

MSD is a massive issue UK wide

- Two million people in GB suffered work related ill health in UK
- Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) are the biggest cause of occupational ill health in GB 470,000 in 2021.
- Broken down as: 45 per cent neck, 212,000
- 39 per cent back, 182,000
- 16 per cent lower limbs, 76,000
- 8.9 million working days were lost due to MSD's

Construction is the worst sector for injuries

- It has the highest rate of MSDs
- These are mostly back and neck injuries
- 74,000 of construction workers suffer illness caused by work this is broken down as 54 per cent MSD, 27 per cent stress/mental health, 18 per cent other
- MSD rates per 100,000 workers in high risk sectors: Construction: 2,000. Health and Social care: 1,500, Other: 1,000.
- Cost: £848 million ill health £646 million due to MSDs.

The law

There are various pieces of legislation and duties under civil and common law. However the bottom line is that the law requires employers to prevent the ill health of their workers, which includes injuries to muscles, bones, joints and nerves that can develop over time, known as musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs).

However, the fact that around 40,000 construction workers suffer an MSD each year, causing years of agonising aches and pains, is a contradiction of what is legally required. Example of relevant H&S law: The Manual Handling Operations Regulations 1992.

Practical examples of what causes MSDs and the impact on the worker:

- Routine lifting of heavy objects
- Daily exposure to whole body vibration
- Routine overhead work
- Work with the neck in chronic bending positions
- Performing repetitive forceful tasks
- Pushing and pulling activities
- Static postures (sitting and standing for an excessive length of time)

Impacts

- Sprains, strains, and tears
- Back pain
- Carpal tunnel syndrome
- Hernia
- 'Frozen shoulder'
- Chronic symptoms / niggles
- Depression
- Osteoarthritis

What's needed

Moving and handling risks should be considered and prevented where possible at the design stage. Once on site and before work starts, employers should talk to workers about controlling existing risks to make sure that the right training, aids and equipment are there to prevent injuries.

Whole lifecycle safety

Going forward Unite must challenge suppliers and designers to better consider the safe design for manufacture, transportation, lifting and assembly. Positive and rated lifting points should

Correct manual handling is essential to prevent muscular skeletal disorders.

Mark Thomas

be available as default. Here are some examples:

Design
The full lifecycle of a product is considered, thus identifying opportunities to eliminate or reduce risk so far as is reasonably practicable especially when it is installed

Manufacture
Reduction of exposure to occupational health risks such as noise, dust, vibration & manual handing, as well as reduced safety risks such as working at height and confined spaces.

Transport
Design considers the safe storage, loading, transportation and unloading of products which may be subject to different workplace environments along the products lifecycle.

Lifting
Every product is designed to be lifted, manipulated and moved at all stages of the lifecycle and has positive rated lifting points engineered in wherever reasonably practicable.

Assembly
Design considers how the product is to be moved around a construction project and how it is to be safely installed as well as maintained and dismantled at end of design life.

Risk assessment

A specific manual handling risk assessment should be undertaken prior to an object being lifted which takes into account four risk factors. See reps check list below.

Reps check list:

Task: (1) Can the work be mechanised or handling/lifting aids used?
Altered to reduce the risk from twisting stretching or bending?

Individual: (2) Have workers been **trained** in the use of equipment and safe handling?
Is the worker disabled? Are reasonable adjustments needed?

Load: (3) Can loads be **changed** to reduce weight or improve grip?

Environment: (4) Can work area be **improved** to make room for handling? What are the floor conditions? What are weather conditions?

MAC tool

Construction work, by its very nature, involves many lifting, carrying and handling activities.

The MAC tool was developed to help the user identify high-risk workplace manual handling activities and can be used to assess the risks posed by lifting, carrying and team manual handling activities. https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg383.htm

For more information on musculoskeletal disorders manual handling at work: **www.hse.gov.uk/msd/index.htm**

Mark Thomas

Lifting aids should be used wherever possible to prevent injury

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Oil companies are making record profits but workers are being told they have to pay more

Getty Images

Campaigning for a Workers' Economy

On a rainy September day in Glasgow, hundreds of trade unionists and campaigners gathered to stage a protest at the headquarters of Scottish Power – one of the UK's biggest energy giants. Spearheaded by Unite, it was testimony to the green shoots of a new movement beginning to take shape across the UK.

It's clear our economy is not working for workers and their families. In Glasgow, for example, tens of thousands suffer from food poverty and can't pay their bills. A Unite survey conducted by top pollsters Survation, revealed that 152,000 Glaswegians – 24 per cent – are living in food poverty.

Construction workers are at the sharp end of the broken economy. Work is often short-term and dominated by agencies, false self-employment and umbrella companies. Workers are constantly looking over their shoulders for the next job and to preserve their pay rates, worried they won't be able to provide for their families.

The survey across seven Glaswegian 'battleground' Westminster constituencies found more than 82,000 people – 13 per cent – can't afford their household bills and they are piling up credit debts by using plastic to pay now for what will become crippling debt later.

Meanwhile, back at Scottish Power, in the first six months of 2022, profits zoomed to £925 million – that's touching a billion pounds in six months. And the chief executive's pay was £1.35 million - up £200,000 in one year. Food and fuel fears, rampant inflation, poverty wages and poor pensions, are key concerns for construction workers and they plague our towns and cities – and it's only getting worse. The very workers who kept our nation running throughout the pandemic face choosing whether to heat or eat this winter.

While we are confronted daily by these nightmares the gas and electricity giants have plundered our energy networks. In 2021 energy sector companies made more than £15 billion in profits. Unite's research shows that at least 30 per cent of Ofgem's price cap increase is made up of profit guarantees for big energy while millions fear the energy bill arriving.

Corporate greed isn't industry specific. It's a systemic issue impacting all sectors of the UK economy. The profit margins for the UK's biggest listed companies are 73 per cent higher today than they were

pre-pandemic. In that same timeframe, wages only rose 2.61 per cent, and actually fell by 0.8 per cent after accounting for inflation. Construction employers have been unwilling to increase wages in line with inflation, making workers poorer in real terms.

In the face of the current cost of living catastrophe comes the third coming, the latest messiah to save us all – Rishi Sunak the new Tory prime minister.
When Hunt and Sunak talk about 'difficult choices' that's code for a second wave of crippling austerity. Their aim is to make workers pay for this crisis that was not of their making.
So what is to be done? The gerry-mandering of the Conservative party in forcing Sunak on the British people as premier is a democratic disgrace. Of course there should be a general election. Of course we want a Labour government in Westminster.

But, it cannot be a Labour government that is pledged to austerity-lite the way the Labour party was last time around when workers paid for the greed of the city in the financial crash. And workers must demand that the devolved governments face up to the same huge questions. The days of "It's all Westminster's fault" have to end.

We don't want a Labour government which will say that the best way to do battle with energy profiteering is by creating a British Energy company. As the general secretary of Unite's Sharon Graham said in a recent media interview: "We want some straight talking from Labour. Not dancing round the handbags".

We want a Labour government that faces up to the fact that it needs to move from talking about energy tax windfalls to confronting the reality that taking the whole energy sector into public ownership is a necessity if the looting that is going on is ever to be stopped.

We already know that when workers join together and organise they can win. Where construction workers are organised pay rates are higher, overtime rates are paid, and holiday pay is properly applied.

Over the past year, Unite has won over £150 million in extra pay for our members in more than 450 pay disputes. 75,000 workers took action to fight for a better deal. That historic advance was built on the central understanding that we had to get back to what it says on the trade union tin – fighting for jobs, pay and conditions. And that struggle goes on.

But those workers referred to in the open paragraph of this commentary, linking the union with local communities to protest about Scottish Power profiteering on its own doorstep, represent the early stirrings of bringing Unite's campaign for better wages, justice, and a fair deal, from the workplace to our communities.

There has never been a more important time to fight for an economy that delivers a fair deal for workers and their families - A Workers' Economy. By taking the struggle for a better deal, from fighting for jobs, pay and conditions on construction sites, and factories into local communities we aim to create an awakening. An awakening that links the workplace struggle for a better deal with the struggle in local communities for a better deal can create a movement that, in time, can win real change.

We are tired of the politics of disappointment. Our aims to link the industrial struggle with the struggle of local communities are bold. Our beginnings, in Glasgow, are modest. We aim to make them grow from a trickle, to a flood then to a tsunami for change. For a better deal for all.

For further details on Unite for a Workers' Economy go to www.unitetheunion.org/campaigns/unite-for-a-workers-economy-campaign/

The economy is stacked against construction workers

Mark Thomas

BY BARCKLEY SUMNER

Remembering the past building for the future

Unite's London region held a public meeting in October to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the 1972 building workers. The only ever national building strike.

Terry Renshaw who was a painter and a shop steward in North Wales at the time of the strike, he talked about how the strike was called within a year of the formation of the construction union Ucatt. Ucatt labelled the strike "as a baptism of fire."

Renshaw described the strike being a result of a combination of low wages and a terrible safety record, with on average a worker being killed every day.

Renshaw's involvement in the 1972 strike has stayed with him for a lifetime, he was one of the Shrewsbury pickets who was convicted on false charges for picketing during the strike and it took until 2021 for the convictions to be quashed.

Linda Clarke from the University of Westminster, gave a presentation on the nature of construction in the 1970s, highlighting how there were 400,000 lump (self-employed) out of a workforce of 1.2 million.

Clarke demonstrated how bonus payments had got out of hand and were often 100 per cent of wages, which led to safety being cut and contributed to the terrible death rate.

Paul Routledge the industrial editor of *The Times* in the 1970's provided the meeting with an overview of how the media viewed the strike and the industrial climate of the time, "The 1970s were the heyday of industrial and union militancy", "union politics were front page news."

Routledge explained that prior to the 1972 strike the building unions didn't have a media profile as workers didn't go on strike. The strike was underreported as it was a private battle between the unions and the employers, and "there was no inconvenience to the general public". "The flying pickets closed down construction sites and not power stations".

The dispute only became serious news after the strike ended, "the government wanted revenge and made an example of building workers. They didn't have the guts to take on the miners (who had been on strike earlier in 1972)"

Tony O'Brien was a convenor on a development in Mile End, East London at the time of the strike. He recalled: "The 1972 strike was forced on the union leadership by the rank and file.

O'Brien described how the union's leadership initially called selective strikes but when there wasn't any movement. "Stewards in London and other big cities got sites to stop work. Flying pickets were launched and the union leadership had to accept a national strike."

With a pay rate of £30 a week being achieved in two years, O'Brien described the dispute "as a huge victory".

The final keynote speaker was **John McDonnell** MP a huge supporter of trade unionists and a key supporter of the Shrewsbury Pickets.

Speaking about the dispute and the case of the Shrewsbury pickets he said: "People deployed courage, to stand up to employers, politicians and the whole might of the state."

McDonnell said that the two greatest lessons from the strikes are still applicable today. Firstly, that when capitalism goes into crisis it makes workers pay and secondly, the state isn't neutral it is in the hands of capitalism and the ruling class.

Paul Routledge speaking at the meeting

John McDonnell MP "workers stood up to the might of the state"

Shrewsbury the story of their fight for justice

A Very British Conspiracy

The Shrewsbury 24 and the Campaign for Justice

by Eileen Turnbull

In a very minor way, I have been involved with the Shrewsbury pickets justice campaign since 2007, 15 years seems like a long time but it pails into insignificance compared to the 47 years quest for justice the pickets endured.

My loose involvement in the campaign meant that I felt that I had a reasonable grasp of the events that led to the pickets' convictions. This book put me straight, my knowledge was limited.

It is split into five parts, the early chapters (the one's where my knowledge was weakest) were in my perspective the strongest.

They detail the circumstances that led to the 1972 Building Workers strikes, what conspired on the 6 September when a group of construction workers from North Wales undertook peaceful picketing in Shrewsbury and Telford and which resulted in 24 of them being convicted and six of them going to prison.

The scale of the conspiracy by the state including the government, the judiciary, the police and almost certainly the security services is horrifying.

On several occasions while reading about the effect the trial and the fight for justice had on the pickets, I had tears in my eyes.

It would be highly remiss to write a review of *A Very British Conspiracy* without referencing the incredible work of **Eileen Turnbull**, the author.

Eileen had recently retired when she became fully involved in the campaign, I knew that she discovered the crucial piece of evidence that led to their convictions finally being overturned in March 2021.

What Eileen was too modest to tell people about was in order to have sufficient research skills she undertook a masters degree and in order to access the critical documents that would eventually prove the pickets innocence, she also undertook a PhD.

While undertaking this incredible research work she was also the campaign's treasurer and was constantly balancing funds and looking for financial support to keep the campaign going. As this involved numerous legal challenges including a judicial review of the Criminal Cases Review Committee's (CCRC) initial decision not to refer the pickets case to the Court of Appeal, this was not cheap.

What is absolutely as plain as day is without Eileen Turnbull the pickets would have never won justice. Whatever you do buy this book.

Barckley Sumner

Billy Parry adds

This book starts off with a stark resemblance to the *Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* inasmuch as, just like in the fictional town of Mugsborough, the politicians and civic leaders all had fingers in the pies of the profitable companies.

Just as in the 1970s many of the ministers and politicians had financial interests in the construction companies. So it comes as no surprise that when it came to unleashing their revenge on the building worker leaders of the strike of 1972, it was ruthless and vindictive. Designed to send a message across not only the construction industry, but to all workers. This magnificent book highlights the collusion, the deceit, the conspiracy, and the coming together of the politicians, the police, the construction employers and the judiciary. It casts a very dirty stain on the very people who profess to be the pillars of society. To say " shame on them" is an understatement.

The Shrewsbury pickets and their supporters outside the Royal Court of Justice in 2021 ***(Eileen Turnbull central)***

Setting out Unite's stall

Unite staged its biennial construction sector conference in Birmingham in November. Construction activists from across the UK came together to discuss and agree the sectors priorities for the next two years. The conference was very lively as construction submitted more motions than any other Unite sector.

Construction organisation

The conference's primary focus was on ensuring that Unite is securing access to a greater number of construction sites.

A motion from the National Industrial Sector Committee (NISC) called on Unite to tackle companies that don't allow union officials on their sites, despite construction industrial agreements clearly stating they have the right to access welfare facilities and meet workers.

The motion demanded that where an officer was denied access to a site it: "Should be met with a robust action organised at regional level" with national officer support. Such campaigns should be adequately resourced to ensure their effectiveness.

Moving the motion **Stuart Grice** from the East Midlands said: "We get nowhere by standing still and doing nothing." He also highlighted that officers need to be more robust in using existing agreements. "Our agreements give access and officers don't know about them or don't use them to our advantage."

Also speaking in the debate **Bill Parry** from the North West said: "We are too low profile. Anti-union companies need to have it rammed down their throat."

The concerns about improving organisation in construction was heralded by a motion from Scotland which recognised the needs to grow the sector.

The motion committed the sector to ensure that members of the NISC take the lead in working with regional full time officers.

Speaking in the debate **Tam Darwin** (Scotland) said: "New sites start every day and the same problems start every day. We need to make Unite a force to be reckoned with."

Sizewell and joint agreements

The government recently gave the green light for a new nuclear power station to be built at Sizewell in Suffolk. This will become the largest construction project in the UK.

The London and Eastern region put forward a motion calling on Unite to negotiate a national agreement for all construction workers on the project, to ensure that everyone secured the same welfare benefits and holiday entitlement.

This would be building on the agreement which is in place on the Hinkley Point development.

Moving the motion **Trevor Simpson** (London and Eastern) said: "The CIJC (Construction Industry Joint Council) agreement is not fit for purpose for a development like Sizewell or Hinkley.

Speaking in support of the motion **Darren Goldstone** (London and Eastern) said: "We want an even better agreement than at Hinkley. Anything short of that is unacceptable.

A similar motion was put forward by the South West region. This argued that on major projects when the NAECI agreement is used (National Agreement for the Engineering Construction Industry) a construction officer should also negotiate the same terms for civil

Unite activists delivering the *buildingWorker* in Birmingham. From left to right: Stuart Grice, Darren Burrows, Tracey Whittle, Trevor Simpson, Darren Goldstone, Damian Brennan (not in photograph Lewis McAulay)

construction workers, to increase pay and improve conditions.

Moving the motion **Malcolm Davies** (South West) said: "We need to work together, one team, one dream. When a major project is proposed. All sections of construction need to be included. We need a powerful stance and we can't accept minimum standards."

Mobile Elevated Work Platforms (MEWPs)

The Scottish region raised an important motion about the safety of MEWPs. Despite MEWP operators officially requiring specific ipath training, MEWPs are involved in a large number of serious construction worker accidents.

There is growing concern that this training can be bypassed by employers willing to ignore safety rules and is made far worse as they are operated by generic keys that can be easily purchased online.

The motion called on Unite to work with the industry to ensure that all vehicles have individual keys.

Graham Jenkins said: "Generic keys can be bought on Amazon, non-trained people can get hold of them. MEWPs should have their own unique keys and these should be retrofitted to vehicles.

Kenny Wallace added: "£5 can buy you 10 keys." Steven Geekie also warned that generic keys can also be purchased cheaply for excavators and diggers.

First time delegate **Zoe Longley**, told conference that she had recently completed her ipath training. She said: "It is too easy to bypass security measures we need to start challenging workers to protect our members."

Heat stress

The South East region put forward a motion seeking Unite to build a campaign to introduce a maximum temperature for construction workers, following the record temperatures recorded in 2022.

Moving the motion **Tracey Whittle** (South East) called for extra measures to protect construction workers. She said: "We need extra paid breaks for the heat and also for lower temperatures we need extra breaks to keep warm.

Kenny Wallace (Scotland) said: "Climate change is putting workers in jeopardy. Workers were badly affected (in July 2022) and we need to go further to protect workers as this is life threatening.

"Clime change conferences discuss emissions but not workers."

Bright and early in Birmingham

During the sector conference some of the construction delegates visited the Robert McAlpine, Hockley Mills site in the city's jewellery quarter as an early morning excursion to distribute copies of the *buildingWorker*. Following the initial incursion from the activists the local lead construction officer will be following up with visits to boost recruitment.

BY BARCKLEY SUMNER

Unclear road ahead for construction

The government is the construction industry's biggest client, with talk about huge cuts in public spending, there was extreme nervousness in the sector prior to chancellor Jeremy Hunt's financial statement/budget in November.

Prior to the announcement there was talk that either or both HS2 or the new nuclear power station at Sizewell C could be pared back or scrapped altogether. Thankfully in both cases this proved incorrect.

Hunt confirmed that HS2 will be built to Manchester, with a total cost for the project, standing at least at £72 billion. Although the decision of Boris Johnson's government to scrap both the eastern spur of HS2 which would have run to Nottingham, Leeds and York to link up with the East Coast Main Line, and the Western Spur to link up with the West Coast Main line, have not been reversed.

However, Hunt did commit the government to the building of a scaled back Northern Powerhouse Rail, which will eventually establish a high speed rail network from Liverpool in the West to Hull and Newcastle in the East including Sheffield, Manchester and Leeds.

The government's contract to support the development of the new nuclear reactor at Sizewell was signed at the end of November. The government has become a joint partner in the project with French energy firm EDF and has committed £700 million to its development.

In the short to medium term the continuation of both projects is good news for construction workers. Both projects are very long-term and will provide tens of thousands of jobs during their lifetimes.

If either project had been cancelled it would have proven disastrous for the sector and caused an immediate downturn. Especially at a time when the UK is entering recession and there is a slowdown in private sector construction work.

The budget was not all good news for construction workers and some dark clouds are building.

Principally as a result of Liz Truss' disastrous tenure as prime minister, the Sunak government has decried that it needs to reduce government debt and "balance the books".

This will result in wholesale government spending cuts. Although infrastructure spending will not be cut it will instead grow at a slower rate than the economy at one per cent in real terms, between 2025 and 2028.

While this doesn't mean that the funding taps will be turned off, it does mean that they will be reduced to a trickle.

The other area of uncertainty is the state of the housing market. Governments for decades have failed to invest anything like sufficient money in public sector (council and social) housing resulting in the private sector housing market being grossly over inflated. With interest rates rising, demand in private housing is likely to decrease, impacting on the health of the entire construction sector.

Going forward construction workers' pay and job prospects will depend on how the private sector is faring. A high level of business confidence is, the key barometer for largescale private sector developments.

The Old Oak Common station in North London along with the rest of HS2 has been given the green light to proceed

Getty Images

Construction workers should make New Year's resolutions to stay financially healthy

Getty Images

Make your RIFT Resolutions for 2023

We make them every year with the best of intentions, but somehow life always seems to get in the way of our New Year's resolutions. With the skyrocketing living costs the last year has thrown at us, it's a tall order to stick to any promises about how we handle our money. As we push ahead into 2023, though, there are a few simple resolutions that won't prove too taxing to live up to. In fact, a couple of the easiest ones could even see you and those close to you getting a healthy chunk of tax back.

Make a budget

Okay, so this probably doesn't sound like a lot of fun – but it's much easier than it sounds and can make everything else you do with your cash easier. For a simple start, try the 50/30/20 system. All you need to do is add up everything you've got coming in each month and divide it up like this:

- 50 per cent goes toward essential costs you really can't live without
- 30 per cent gets allocated toward your "fun" spending
- 20 per cent is left over to save.

You can play with the numbers a bit to suit your circumstances, but the main point is just to understand exactly where your money's coming from and where it's going each month. That's the most important step towards taking control of your finances.

Tackle debts before you save

It's a sad fact that the interest on what you owe will almost always pile up faster than it will on what you save. It might feel good to be able to stash a little away each month, but if your credit card balance is out of control then you're still losing money overall. We're not suggesting you hurl every spare penny at bringing down your debts. Just keep an eye on what those debts are costing you and get into the habit of paying off a chunk of them before you save the rest of your extra cash.

Don't let the taxman walk off with what he owes you

Here's where you'll really start to reap the benefits of your New Year's resolutions. Every year, HMRC ends up sitting on literally hundreds of millions of pounds in unclaimed tax refunds. In the building trade, those refunds can add up to thousands per claim – and far too many people are missing out on their pay outs.

We're not fond of talking about our money troubles in the UK, but there's never been a more critical time to make sure you and your workmates aren't losing the tax refunds you're owed.

Get the conversation started, then get in touch with RIFT to start your claim. Our Refer a Friend scheme offers cash rewards and free prize draw entries, just for helping to spread the word about tax refunds. Rewards start at £50 per successful referral, and there's no limit to what you could earn.

Contact RIFT on 01233 628648 or visit our website at www.riftrefunds.co.uk/claim/unite We are pleased to offer a disounted fees to UNITE members.

unite **Recommends**

This page is a counterpoint to the mainstream media and reviews important pieces of work for Unite members.

TV

The Walk In

Stephen Graham stars as Matthew Collins in the *Walk In*

If you missed the *Walk In*, which was shown on ITV last autumn, find it on catch up it is a must see drama.

It tells the real life story of how **Matthew Collins** from the anti-racist organisation Hope Not Hate was able to recruit a mole within a fascist organisation National Action and in doing so prevented the murder of the Labour MP **Rosie Cooper** in 2017. What makes the story even more remarkable is that Collins, who is played by the excellent **Stephen Graham**, was as a young man a leading member of the National Front and the BNP, before seeing the error of his ways.

The drama is not only compelling in the action needed to prevent a fascist murder but also on the strain that Collins work puts on his family.

The background to the drama's production was also startling. ITV was so concerned about threats from the far-Right that its existence was kept hidden until the last minute, only Stephen Graham was given the full script and there was a long discussion about whether the programme should include credits in order to protect the identity of the cast and crew.

Watch this drama and join Hope Not Hate at https://hopenothate.org.uk/

Barckley Sumner

Books

Prisoners of Geography
by Tim Marshall

Tim Marshall's book demonstrates how a country's or a continent's geographical characteristics shape its foreign policy concerns and heavily influence its economic success.

Africa's development has been restricted by a lack of deep water ports and inaccessible river

NASA

For example in 2015 when the book was first published Marshall correctly predicted the current war with Ukraine. Marshall argues that while Russia is a vast country, the only area where it is potentially threatened by a land invasion is across the relatively flat North European plain which extends through Poland and into Ukraine and that its best defence is a sizeable buffer zone, hence its desire to control Ukraine.

Marshall also describes how Russia's obsession with Crimea is in order to secure a warm water (able to operate all year round) port.

Marshalls other key thesis is that geography is a major factor in the success or failure of a nation/continent. For example he contrasts how Europe and the United States aided by a host of natural harbours and navigable rivers, could successfully trade and flourish. While Africa which lacks natural harbours and whose rivers while spectacular, contain many waterfalls which means they aren't navigable, has struggled to independently trade.

Marshall's final key point regards China, which is rapidly becoming a world power, it is creating a deep water navy to control Asian sea lines and is using soft power to give it a foothold across Africa, Central America and Asia to increase its influence

Stephen James

Your Recommendations

Unite members are encouraged to send ideas for future recommendations. We will cover film, television, DVDs and books. The only stipulation is a recommendation needs to be easily available. If you would like to write your own reviews please do but keep your contributions to 250 words. Send recommendations and reviews to barckley.sumner@unitetheunion.org

MEMBERSHIP FORM GB

Please use capitals

This address will be used for the purpose of ballots

Forename _____ Title _____

Surname _____ Gender _____

House No./Name _____

Street _____

City/Town _____

Postcode _____ – _____ Date of Birth ___ / ___ / _____

Home Tel _____ Mobile _____

Email _____

About Your Job

Employer/Company Name _____

Job Title _____

Work Address _____

Postcode _____ – _____ Work Tel. _____

Which membership do you require?

- ☐ Enhanced full time (more than 21 hours per week)
- ☐ Enhanced part time (up to 21 hours per week)
- ☐ Enhanced low pay
- ☐ Enhanced apprenticeship
  - ☐ Year 1 ☐ Year 2 ☐ Year 3 ☐ Year 4
- Date apprenticeship started _____
- Date apprenticeship due to end _____
- ☐ Driver Care (a separate Driver Care application form will be sent to you.)

- ☐ Basic full time (more than 21 hours per week)
- ☐ Basic part time (up to 21 hours per week)
- ☐ Basic low pay
- ☐ Other (eg Unemployed member of the community, under 18, full time student, retired members or permanently disabled members who are not in paid employment)
- ☐ Basic apprenticeship
  - ☐ Year 1 ☐ Year 2 ☐ Year 3 ☐ Year 4
- Date apprenticeship started _____
- Date apprenticeship due to end _____

Authorisation of deduction of your trade union contribution from your pay (check-off)

Note: Not all employers operate check-off. I hereby authorise the deduction of Unite the Union subscriptions from my pay of such amounts as shall be notified to my employer on my behalf from time to time by Unite. I authorise my employer and Unite to share personal data necessary to operate check off and for my employer to inform Unite of any changes of address.

Are you paid? ☐ Weekly ☐ 2-weekly ☐ 4-weekly ☐ Monthly

Payroll No. _____

I agree to abide by the union's rules. (Rule Book is available online)

NI No. _____ Signature _____ Date _____

Political Campaigning

Unite fights for our members' interests through political and industrial campaigning on issues affecting you – from pay, pensions, and broader workplace rights to housing, equality issues and our NHS.
If you would like to be part of this, opt-in to our political fund for just 10p per week. (tick here) ☐

Those who choose not to opt-in will not be disadvantaged in any way compared with members who do opt-in, except in relation to control of the political fund.

I support Unite in campaigning on our policies and members' priorities in the Labour Party and I would like to be a Labour Party Affiliate Supporter* (this is free for political fund payers). I authorise Unite to share my personal data with the Labour Party for this purpose. (tick here) ☐

* I agree to the terms listed at https://support.labour.org.uk

Equal Opportunities *The provision of this information is to ensure equality for all and is not a requirement*

Unite campaigns for equality for all and to ensure that women, black Asian ethnic minorities, disabled members, lesbian gay bisexual trans - LGBT+ and migrant workers are fully represented within the union. To find out more go to www.unitetheunion.org/equalities. Confidentiality is protected. Please complete:

Please tick your ethnic origin: Black/Asian ☐ White ☐ Please tick if you are LGBT+ ☐

Please tick if you are a disabled person: ☐ Please tick if you consider yourself to be a migrant worker ☐

Direct Debit Details – Instructions to your Bank or Building Society to pay by Direct Debit

DIRECT Debit

Service User Number | 9 | 7 | 1 | 4 | 6 | 7 |

Name of bank/building society _____

Town of the Bank _____

Sort Code _____ – _____ – _____

On the selected day of the month: ☐ 7th ☐ 14th ☐ 21st ☐ 28th

Account Number _____

Name(s) of Account Holder(s) _____

Instruction to your Bank or Building Society

Please pay Unite the union Direct Debit monthly from the account detailed in this instruction subject to the safeguards assured by the Direct Debit Guarantee. I understand that this instruction may remain with Unite the union and, if so, details will be passed electronically to my Bank Building Society.

I authorise the payment above. I agree to abide by the union's rules. (Rule Book is available online)

When you join Unite, you are also authorising the Union to deduct an additional amount for your subscription to your local branch fund.

Signature _____ Date ___ / ___ / _____

For Office use only

Mem. No. _____ Employer Code _____ Workplace Code _____ Branch No. _____ Job Code _____ Recruitment Code _____

Please send completed forms to: Freepost Plus RTZC-HKGG-RZBY, Unite the union, 2nd Floor, 160 Falcon Road, London SW11 2LN

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