

Safety and skills in Manchester under a Labour Council.

Locked-out Manchester Electricians



'The most unskilled shower of shits on site', says DAF boss Dave Fahey above, of the locked-out Manchester electricians.

Donation to Manchester electricians: £1.00



Pickets cursed by Mr Fahey for trying to frame-up DAF electrical. 'They manufactured bad work to try to discredit company', he said.

Donation to Manchester electricians: £1.00

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Safety & Skills in Manchester

Editorial:

This pamphlet is backed by the Manchester Fire Brigades' Union, Tameside Trades Union Council, Oldham Trades Union Council, Manchester Social Forum and Greater Manchester County Association of Trade Union Councils (though the opinions of individual contributors may not reflect the positions of these organizations). It aims to capture the essence of a small but important dispute: the Manchester lockout of the DAF electricians. It is important because it reflects a decline in the standards of workmanship in Britain by bringing in of semi-skilled workers to do skilled work and a willingness to run risks with safety at work through corner-cutting and casualisation. For this reason we include an article by Tim Jones, the brother of Simon Jones: a young student killed working on the docks by an illegally modified grab crane. The Simon Jones Campaign seeks to hold employers fully responsible corporate killing through their workplace neglect and irresponsibility. N.V.

MANCHESTER: SCARFACED CITY or 'Delivering Urban Renaissance'?

The dispute of the locked-out electricians in Crown Square is a scar on the face of Manchester City and on the Regional Economic Strategy for the area (Regional Economic Strategy: pages 8 and 15).

We publish here some articles, most previously issued in other journals, that deal with the industrial dispute of the locked-out Manchester DAF electricians: which is now approaching a year in duration (see statement by locked-out electrician: page 12). These electricians were sacked while working on a site—One Piccadilly Gardens—just after they formed a trade union shop. They were also concerned about the employment of unskilled workers doing electrical work and the safety of the work done. Their former boss, Dave Fahey, has accused them of 'false whistle-blowing' on the company by photographing 'contrived' badly wired work on the site.

The Manchester City Council gave the contract for One Piccadilly Gardens to Carillion, which subcontracted the electrical work out to DAF electrical. This Labour controlled City Council is signed-up to the pretentious Regional Economic Strategy, which promises an 'Urban Renaissance' for Manchester (see 'Locked-out Electricians'). The locked-out electricians and trade union bodies, such as the Greater Manchester Trades Union Councils, wrote to the City Council querying its position on the dispute which has now spread to another Carillion site in Crown square.

The dispute is small, involving only 12 electricians to begin with; now reduced to 6. Some may call it an hole-in-the-corner dispute, but because it is about improving standards of work and the quality of skills in the building trade it has enormous significance. *N.V.*

~Locked-out Manchester Electricians ~ The TGWU Union case:

Our members, all skilled electricians, were faced with a redundancy of 4 electricians that was unjustified for a number of reasons -

- * There was still enough work on site to sustain all 12 electricians.
- * The company had been using unskilled workers to carry out the work of skilled electricians.
- * Our members sought consultation with their union the Transport & General Workers' Union [TGWU], to ensure that these problems were to be discussed properly before anyone was dismissed as redundant.
- * It is highly significant that our two shop stewards were amongst those to be made redundant.
- * Despite our member's right to consult, the company declared it did not recognise the men's union, and refused to consult with the TGWU.
- * Though none of the electricians on the site were members of Amicus [AEEU], the company declared that it had a recognition agreement with a union named Amicus [AEEU], and that it had consulted with them prior to announcing the redundancies:
- * In protest at the company's refusal to consult with their union the TGWU electricians waked out in protest.
- * Their union, the TGWU tried to negotiate a return to work, but the company refused to negotiate and declared it would not let TGWU members back on the site.
- * Within 4 days of the protest all the electricians were sacked.

N.V.

Manchester Electricians' Dispute by Bob Pounder.

Skilled electricians members of the Electrical Plumbers Industrial Union (EPIU) a section of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) employed at the Piccadilly Gardens site Manchester are now entering their sixteenth week of industrial action. This follows an employer's lockout by DAF Electrical.

Graham Bowker one of the twelve striking electricians said: "We formed a shop in order to consolidate our right for direct employment this would give us the opportunity to challenge the contraventions of health and safety legislation and also our own national agreement. The contravention of or national agreement was the employment of unskilled labour being utilised to undertake electrical work for which they had no training. After forming this shop the Employer refused to consult with either us, or our area official because he said he paid £2-18 for every one of us to belong to AMICUS. Nevertheless by May 8th we managed to secure direct employment status but on May 9th the employer had made representation to AMICUS with a view to dismissing the shop rep and the skilled electricians."

Steve Acheson the EPIU shop steward told News Line: "Shortly after this we were taken off the pay system and the management side said that they could give no explanation as to why we were receiving no pay. By May 16th the management side precipitated a strike by sacking one of the EPIU electricians.

When I confronted management on this issue they said that this had been done in consultation with AMICUS. When I replied that AMICUS was not our trade union they responded that I too was now redundant. It is this sequence of events that led to the spontaneous walk out on that day. We are now seeking redress for grossly unfair dismissal. We have had fantastic support from the whole trade union movement especially the FBU. Our intention is to fight on indefinitely, solidarity will win!"

(Newsline)

Northern Voices asks

Locked-out Electricians~ Is it Manchester's Morecambe Bay?

Daily we seem to experience a decline in standards in English workmanship. On February 5th, the locked-out Manchester electricians addressed a meeting of over 70 trade unionists in the Manchester's' Friends Meeting House about the complacency of Manchester City Council and the controlling Labour Group. this meeting was called by the Greater Manchester Trade Union Councils and the Manchester Social Forum.

As usual the local politicians are passing the buck! With Labour's Council Leader suggesting that the cancer of unskilled workers being imported onto city centre building sites to complete work such as 'Number One Piccadilly', and the new Manchester Magistrates' Court - Crown house, in Crown Square, is something that should be left to the Industrial Tribunal to sort out.

This represents an all too typical dereliction of responsibility by the local Council boss Richard Leese. It seems the Council leaders are happy to allow a dispute over questionable working practices and unskilled labour to continue, so long as they get a cheap tender.

Notwithstanding the Chinese cockle pickers in Morecambe Bay on £1 a day; here in Manchester, a company DAF Electrical - with no electricians of its own, is cheerfully sub-contracting work to an assortment of agencies: Euro-national; Team Up; NRL of Newcastle. It's a Magic Roundabout of sub-contracting swindles in which the workers concerned must be confused as to who is actually employing them.

Although recently the Manchester Labour Council has asked the Greater Manchester Trade Councils for suggestions as to what it might do to help solve the dispute; for months the City Council seems to have been fiddling while Rome burned.

This dispute started last May 2003, over what the men's union cite as a disagreement over the firms use of unskilled, and unqualified cheap labour, non-payment of wages and holiday pay, victimisation. The union say: 'the use of unskilled workers for skilled tasks... is becoming such a widespread practice that the stand being taken in Manchester is of national importance and is being undertaken on behalf of all skilled workers.'

The dispute by a handful of locked-out electricians is seemingly being ignored by the local political bosses, because they are seen as representing a curmudgeonly crew who stand against the ethos of city centre progress. The shift in the slogan after 1987 from 'Defending Jobs and Services' to 'Making it Happen' as a corporate logo, reminds us of Mussolini's slogan 'Getting Things Done'.

In November 1996, Richard Leese issued a press statement on behalf of the Manchester City Council: 'we promised to rebuild the city centre in a way that befits the 21st century. We wanted a centre with more shops, more leisure activity, more housing and more jobs. One that is greener and friendlier to pedestrians but with first class transport access.'

Alas, P&O, which owned most of the Arndale wanted to keep it largely as it was. Hence the Arndale 1970s horror story in the grand EDAW design remained 'largely untouched, but the Arndale Tower will be reclad and sections of the roof and walls will be replaced with glass to allow more natural light into the shopping centre.'

The 'Urban Renaissance for Manchester' of Richard Leese and the Labour Party, is built on fast-buck entrepreneurialism and city council managerialism. According to Adam Holden, at the University of Durham: 'Manchester's political "revolution" has almost exclusively relied on the hope that a new "architecture" - a new form of governance, a new quality in the built form, and a newly restructured image - will of itself provide the seeds for radical and progressive change.'

It's a ramshackle concept presumably dreamt up by Richard Leese over a pint of Best Bitter in the City Arms. He probably thinks 'Earth Faults' in the 16th Edition of the IEE Regs. (Institute of Electrical Engineering Regulations), refers to a horse running at Aintree.

Safety & Skills in Manchester.

In her essay 'Hypocritical City' in 'City of Revolution: Restructuring Manchester', Rosemary Mellor (University of Manchester) says: 'There is more to a city than "hot" money, investment fervour, image of some ill-defined international stage or the latest fashion in civic design.'

In the City Council's view the electrician's picket in Crown Square is an eyesore. These electricians live in suburbs like Denton. And yet, as Rosemary Mellor remarks, it is the 'promotion of the entrepreneurial city-region serviced by the business community, property capital, the construction industry...' that the City fathers worry about most. She says: 'the poor cannot and should not be exiled from their city's public spaces at the dictat of speculative developer or the reluctance of the majority to countenance their existence.'

We know now that the Chinese cockle pickers in Morecambe Bay risk their lives for £1 a day. The unskilled electrical workers on One Piccadilly Gardens were on £5 an hour. The trouble with electrical work is that much of it is out of sight, and for our Council politicians, it seems, 'out of mind'. What the eye doesn't see; the heart doesn't grieve! Or so it seems.

In 1844, Engels said of Manchester: 'I know very well that this hypocritical plan is more or less common to all great cities... I have never seen so tender a concealment of everything that might affront the eye and the nerves.'

After the 1987 victory of the Conservatives, the Manchester City Council, under Graham Stringer, went from half-baked 'Municipal Socialism' to 'city centre chauvinism' says Steve Quilley (Dublin University). Quilley writes: 'Setting out explicitly to garner inspiration from cities such as Baltimore and Barcelona, local policy-makers began to think in terms of a package of measures which focused... on the rehabilitation and re-imagining of Manchester as a major European city-regional capital.'

An officer of the GMB Union commented in 1994: 'I couldn't believe it ... I'm astounded at the political change - how far it has gone! The swing across the pendulum! It was incredible because the attack then came on us. [The Council] became anti-trade union!'

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Take that, you locked-out electricians!

Then out came the *spiel*. One council officer described it as being 'punch drunk': [We produced report after report] and in the end you don't know really what you are doing. It is like a word game ... mixing all the buzz phrases up together ... and producing another piece of paper' (Manchester City Council Member 1995).

The Manchester script ran that the city has been reborn as a 'post-modern, post-industrial and cosmopolitan city', standing in Europe's 'premier league'.

It is easier to make up scripts and *spiel*, that it is to construct and wire buildings. Stringer and Richard Leese may want to copy Barcelona and the Ramblas, or even create a Barrio Chino on the banks of Rochdale Canal, but where is Manchester's answer to Catalan architect Antoni Gaudi?

There is nothing to suggest his influence at work on One Piccadilly Gardens. We can't wait to see the new law courts project! Of course, Gaudi was the son of artisans, and always thought of himself as a man of his hands, not a theoretician. He got his ideas watching his father work metal, beating the iron and copper sheets, curving and pleating and distending them; making miraculous shapes and volume of form from the banality of flatness.

Gaudi, it is said, often worked without drawings fashioning his buildings with vernacular materials. 'One should', he said, 'work with materials from the area, used as they can be gathered by peasants...'

What would Richard Leese, the urban and suburban Manchester City Council Leader, say of this approach? More post-modern mumbo jumbo, no doubt! We are poorly served by our leaders; who give us a fancy sterile style rather than imagination and design, such as Gaudi gave with all his faults.

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But Gaudi was the son of an artisan and a craftsman. Mr Leese is a more or less professional politician. Moreover, Gaudi once declared: 'Central government goes from violence to penny-pinching. Its art goes from rhetorical didacticism to abject naturalism ... Its business runs from monopoly to usury. And so government is always unjust ...'

Mr Richard Leese, in his attitude to the Manchester electricians and the contracts his Council has put out to tender to firms like Carillion, is rather like one of those absentee Andalusian landlords whom Gaudi would have so despised. In effect, he has washed his hands of the locked-out electricians. And, he is seemingly in the pocket of cost-cutting firms like Carillion.

In the light of the electrician's dispute Hilda Palmer of the Greater Manchester Hazards Centre said: 'I think there are potentially serious health and safety risks for the unskilled workers acting as electricians; for other workers on site, for the general public and possibly the future occupants of the building.'

The Manchester electricians have become whistle blowers for the general public amid the growth of unskilled work, bad building practice and cheap labour. *N.V.*

NORTH WEST REGIONAL ECONOMIC STRATEGY 2003:

Skills and Employment:

'Employers need to make more effective investment in developing their workforce.'

'An effective skills base is an essential element of a successful economy. The skills and Employment objective impacts significantly on all aspects of the Regional Economic Strategy, particularly on Business Development and Regeneration.'

The Manchester Labour Council, which is signed up to the above declaration in the North West Economic Strategy, still gave the contract to the company who the locked-out electricians claim: employed unskilled labour on electrical work in Piccadilly Gardens.

Safety & Skills in Manchester.

BIG ISSUE report by Dave White

The Manchester electricians' dispute over the use of casual labour is continuing to gather support. But how long will it take until the Government issues its long promised Corporate Killing Bill to make companies more safety conscious?

Safety First

Deaths and injuries continue to occur on Britain's building sites at an alarming rate.

Official figures reveal that 71 people died in the construction industry in Britain last year, while in the North West the number of employee deaths in construction showed a marked increase. Figures show that for 2002/3, 10 workers were killed on North West building sites, compared with 3 in 2001/2.

Health and Safety Executive (HSE) figures show that if you work on a building site in the North West, you are around 3 times more likely to die or be seriously injured at work compared with the average worker. Many argue that the official construction death figures include only a small proportion of the total numbers killed in the building trade.

The sacked workers say
this is creating a
series of risks to
worker and public
safety at those sites

John Bamford of the Greater Manchester Hazards Centre says the official figures are only the tip of the iceberg: 'There are hundreds more who die days or weeks after sustaining their injuries, or who die of exposure to toxic substances and they aren't counted in the official figures'.

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The Trade Union congress estimates that 5,000 people die every year from asbestos-related diseases. Around a fifth of all asbestos deaths are due to exposure in construction sites. This means we can add at least 1,000 a year to the building trade toll nationally; giving a total that is greater than the annual rate of murders in the UK.

Building site safety is currently at the heart of an industrial dispute in Manchester that has been running for over 30 weeks. The dispute between the Manchester electricians, employed on the city flagship regeneration developments at One Piccadilly Gardens and a new law court building comes after sacked workers were replaced by unqualified and casual labour assigned to carry out critical electrical work. The sacked workers say this is creating a series of risks to worker and public safety at those sites.

The state of workmanship at One Piccadilly Gardens is not only a question of worker safety. It has led some to question the public safety of other buildings erected by the major contractor Carillion. Recent public construction contracts in Manchester acquired by the firm are worth a total of £150 million. If those buildings are being thrown up using unqualified labour, there may be a future price to pay.

One of the sacked workers, Steve Acheson said: 'We have been approached by officials in the PCS [Public & Commercial Services] Union, who are concerned about how safe the new court building will be when it is completed in April. They have written to their national union to say they are not willing to enter a workplace if the electrical systems are unsafe.'

It's a concern that seems to be shared by the general public in Manchester as 20,000 have signed a petition demanding justice for the sacked workers. Signatories include Manchester United Director Bobby Charlton and Coronation Street star Michael Le Vel.

Safety & Skills in Manchester.

But the reasons behind the Manchester Electrician' dispute are not just limited to their safety concerns for buildings in Manchester. Health & Safety Executive [HSE] research concludes the casualisation, the denial of trade union rights and a lack of adequate safety representation are features across the industry that creates greatest job risks.

HSE reports since the 1980s have concluded that between two-thirds and three-quarters of all accidents at work are not accidents, but are the fault of management for failing to ensure necessary safety standards or safe conditions. Only when workers are properly trained, or are given the power to stop unsafe work, will injury rates fall.

A new law to deal with management and corporate culpability for workplace deaths has been promised by the Government since Labour's election in 1997.

The bill, if it does appear soon, will send a clear message to employers like Carillion that they must take their safety responsibilities seriously.

(The BIG ISSUE ~ December 2003)



Statement by a locked-out electrician.

Manchester electricians have been in dispute with DAF Electrical since May 2003. Steve Acheson the local strike leader explains:

'...we are still fighting the grossly unfair dismissals as a result of forming a Transport & General Workers shop on the site of Number One Piccadilly Gardens (last May). I believe we would still be employed if we hadn't done so.

'As part of our campaign for trade union rights and with the continuing support from every other trade union in Britain, we have addressed numerous meetings including Regional meetings of the FBU, T&G, NUJ, PCS, RMT, and various trades councils in Blackpool and Manchester. We have also lobbied the recent TUC Congress and spoke also at a fringe meeting where we shared a platform with John McDonnell MP; he has helped to ensure that we receive continuing support.

'The trade union movement has got to grasp the fact that the employers are continuing to undercut the nationally agreed rates of pay agreed by the Joint Industry Board, the board which governs pay and conditions within the electrical industry. The reason that this is occurring is because the employers are tapping into a vast reservoir of cheap labour from Eastern Europe, and are also using unskilled workers without qualifications to carry out work they are not qualified to do. In fact our dispute apart from anything else, centres on our displacement as skilled electricians by unskilled labour.

'The standard rate of pay for a skilled electrician is £10.32 per hour, hardly a king's ransom. Indeed it remains the lowest rate of pay in the European Union. Unfortunately these rates are not low enough for the greedy bosses who are prepared to put profits before safety. The construction industry consistently records the highest number of injuries and fatalities amounting to a third throughout all of the UK industries.

'Our dispute began at Number One Piccadilly Gardens, a £30 million project, which comprised offices, retail outlets and a large restaurant. We spent seventeen week on the picket line until the building was completed. Our picket has now moved to Manchester's new law courts, a huge development where we should now be employed as pledged by our employer.'

(Statement first appeared in Newslines)

Casualisation still kills

By Tim Jones.

Has the government learned anything from the deaths of numerous untrained workers in unsuitable jobs? Apparently not. When Simon Jones was killed working for Euromin at Shoreham docks, his friends and family fought to stop more people being killed in similar circumstances.

After years of struggling for a prosecution, the company escaped a manslaughter conviction, aided by an incredibly biased judge. Despite writing to every MP, and meeting several of them in person, a change in the law to hold employers accountable is little closer than it was when Simon was killed in 1998, and enforcement of current safety laws is lacking: the HSE has only enough inspectors to investigate a small fraction of deaths and serious injuries at work (5% at the time Simon was killed; little more now - imagine the police only investigating 5% of violent deaths outside the workplace).

Even if a new law is passed (despite promises dating back to 1997, corporate killing legislation was absent from the queen's speech), it is likely to be watered down to pander to CBI demands, making the chances of jailing directors who kill employees even smaller than they are now.

Many other cases serve as warnings about putting undertrained workers in dangerous places, both before and after Euromin killed Simon. Some have been publicised: Michael Mungovan, a casual worker killed on a railway after only minimal training (as is the case with many job agencies, cutting corners on training and putting people into jobs regardless of their suitability), and the Chinese workers recently drowned in Morecambe Bay - an entirely preventable mass killing which would never have happened with adequate training and supervision. Many earlier cases should have sounded warnings too: after Paul Elvin, a trainee window-fitter was electrocuted whilst working at Euston Station in 1988, his mother, Ann Elvin, wrote a book (*The Invisible Crime*), which outlines a series of scandalous shortcomings that should have been rectified long ago.

Safety & Skills in Manchester.

Recent years have seen widespread dissatisfaction from a variety of workers, with the PCS staging strikes in the last few weeks, forcing some government departments to reconsider (but not the Home Office, who say a 1.3% pay "rise" is fair when combined with job cuts and a 1% increase in National Insurance contributions). Persuading employers and politicians to change their minds is hard work, but it has to be done sooner rather than later, before even more people are killed. The Simon Jones Memorial Campaign has shown that a small group of people can achieve a great deal if they try hard enough, and that it is futile relying on the government and their official agencies to put things right. Confronting your boss could threaten your job, that is preferable to losing your life, and could protect you and others from untimely violent death. *N.V.*

UNSKILLED SPARKS ~ FIRE RISK

Fire deaths could increase because sub-contractors are employing unskilled electricians to wire new buildings, the EPIU union warns.

Defective wiring is the main cause of death by fire. Yet unqualified workers are being employed on wiring up buildings for as little as £5 an hour, to save money on multi million projects.

This national scandal has been highlighted in Manchester where skilled and fully qualified electricians were sacked by sub contractors DAF [based in Cheltenham] and replaced by unqualified workers on a £25 million prestige project, *paid for by the local Labour Council.*

The main contractor on the site [at One Piccadilly, Portland Street] is Carillion, which has just doubled its profits, and is expecting contracts worth £3.8 billion, many in the public sector.

Rival contractors have recently benefited by the bad publicity of the Manchester dispute as public authorities have switched contracts away from Carillion.

Safety & Skills in Manchester.

'The use of unskilled workers for skilled tasks is of paramount importance and must be stamped out,' declared T&G regional industrial organiser Colin Carr.

The dispute started in May 2003.

'The issues of disagreement were non-payment of wages and holiday pay, renegeing on a promise to take the members on as directly employed, victimisation of our activists and the use of unskilled cheap labour to undertake skilled electrical work,' added Colin Carr.

The use of unqualified electricians has been taken up by the director of the regional public health authority, Professor John Ashton.

'It is alleged that skilled electricians have been sacked because they have raised concerns about unskilled operatives carrying out electrical installation work without appropriate training, qualifications or supervision,' stated Professor Ashton.

He produced evidence photos to show the claim that 'faulty electrical wiring has been installed at the construction site as a result of this situation'.

Calling for a full investigation Pro. Ashton stressed that 'defective electrical wiring is indeed the biggest contributor to deaths by fire.'

REGIONAL ECONOMIC STRATEGY SUMMARY ACTION PLAN:

2003—2006: 'Develop and maintain a healthy labour market':

Key Activity ~ 7.1 'Ensuring practical and measurable commitments to workforce development by employers and trade unions' as part of the implementation of the Framework for Regional Employment and Skills Action (FRESA).

7.2.1 'Ensure integration fully with the key regional skills priorities identified...'

7.3.1 '...achieving an increase in employer engagement in business support services and growth in the numbers of employers recognizing and investing in skills development activities.'

Rhetoric, rhetoric and yet more rhetoric?

Safety & Skills in Manchester.

Council Project puts lives at risk.

Striking Transport & General Workers' Union (TGWU) members staged a silent protest against workplace deaths outside Manchester Town Hall on 3rd, December. The event's centre-piece was the release of 400 black balloons, each representing a workplace death in the UK during the previous 12 months.

The [locked-out] TGWU members have been on strike since May 2003 over the refusal of their employer Daf Electric to recognise their union and right to collective bargaining. The highly qualified electricians had been working on a £25 million office development, in which the city council is a major stakeholder.

The [locked-out] workers have been replaced with agency staff, and argue that the low skills and cost of agency labour are major contributors to compromise health and safety in the workplace.

Local TGWU branch secretary Steve Acheson said: 'Today's release of black balloons offers us a very sad but highly poignant reminder that cutting corners for profit costs working people's lives.'

Speaking of the Daf [lock-out], Acheson said: 'The electricians involved in this dispute have devoted their entire working lives to ensuring that very high standards are met, only to see their professionalism criminally sacrificed to the bottom line. Let us be clear: cheap labour seriously compromises the basic human right to safety at work'

(Red Pepper - January 2004)



Locked-out electricians 'sacked themselves by walking off site', says Dave Fahey.

Electrician's Fighting Fund: 07813 456 831

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