

# Introduction

Vestas wind turbine blade workers occupied their factory at St Cross, Newport, on 20 July. They demanded that Vestas hand over its two Isle of Wight factories to the Government, and that the Government nationalise them and continue production.

The factories were not unionised: attempts to recruit workers into the Unite union had been repressed by management. But, after a campaign of leafleting and meetings, the workers acted.

The occupation made Vestas central to two big issues: the fight for jobs, and the fight to save the planet from destruction generated by profiteering.

Geographically, Britain is specially well placed to use wind energy as a renewable, zero-emissions alternative to fossil fuels. On 15 July, Energy and Climate Change minister Ed Miliband published a White Paper about renewable energy which called for 7000 more wind turbines to be built.

Yet the Vestas sites were Britain's only wind-turbine blade factories.

After telling workers in 2008 that they would be re-equipping the factories for a more advanced production process in 2009, on 28 April the bosses of Vestas, a big Danish-based multinational, announced that they were ending production on the Isle of Wight, keeping only a research and development operation. 600 jobs would go.

The workers occupied. Vestas refused to negotiate. On 6 August Government minister Joan Ruddock met workers and the RMT union, which many workers had

joined after the occupation started, but offered only warm words.

On 7 August Vestas finally got and enforced an eviction order against the workers. It sacked 11 of those who had occupied, thus depriving them of their redundancy money.

After 7 August workers and supporters — local people, environmentalists, socialists from AWL and SWP — maintained a 24-hour picket at the St Cross factory's front gate, and later also at the marine gate, the gate through which blades and other large items have to be moved in order to go on barges and be taken to Southampton.

On 22 September, large numbers of police finally steamed in to clear the marine gate and open the way for Vestas to remove blades which had been trapped in the factory since the occupation started.

Many Vestas workers, however, remained committed to carrying on, with a broader labour-movement campaign for jobs — green jobs, unionised jobs, jobs with decent pay and conditions, and jobs with openings for young people.

## **Vestas worker: Chris Ash**

**Chris Ash was a worker at the East Cowes Vestas factory, and one of the occupiers in Newport. He talked to us in mid August.**

**T**he last three weeks have not just changed my views, but changed my life. Before, I was just a normal worker. I came into work, I did the job. I didn't really care what I was building. I got paid and I went home.

Now I understand that we're doing something for the future, for our kids and our grandkids. It's going to help change the future of the world if we can get this factory nationalised or we can keep it open.

I have no regrets about taking part in the occupation. I'm proud of myself and what I've done. Everyone calls me a hero. I don't feel myself to be a hero, but I certainly wish I could do it all over again with what I know now.

I think a lot of unions have got involved in this because it is a green issue. They haven't been able to speak out before because they need the workers to step in. It has brought a lot of unions together, where before they were just out for themselves.

We need to build up a lot more support, and get a lot more people campaigning to push the Government and the councils.

Wind turbines are important for the future. We're certainly not giving up the fight.

I didn't know much about socialist and environmental activism before. I thought it was a matter of "tree-huggers" and "eco-warriors". Now I have a lot of respect for the campaigns and the actions of the people who have come to help.

**"To the management, you are just a number; you're not an individual.. You get screwed over at every opportunity."**

I've worked for the company for three years. You get treated like rubbish. To the management, you are just a number; you're not an individual.. You get screwed over at every opportunity.

In the occupation, they sent us our termination of contract notices with a slice of pizza. When they served the injunction, they went round posting it through people's letterboxes, harassing people's families.

They made no attempt to talk to us directly.

When I first came across people talking about resisting the closure, I didn't think much of it. I only got involved in the two or three weeks before the occupation. I think a lot of other workers' views changed in the same way.

We came to be friends rather than just colleagues, to stand together and to look out for each other. It's brought the island closer together. Five of the other people who were in the occupation I didn't even know before, and now I would count them among my best friends.

# How Vestas workers became a power

**Martin Thomas**

**I**t all started on 15 June, when a small group of young members of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty set off for the Isle of Wight. They had read in the press about the planned closure of Britain's only wind turbine blade factories, operated by the Danish-based multinational Vestas at Venture Quays, East Cowes, and St Cross, Newport, on the Isle of Wight.

They had discussed it among themselves and with other AWL members. They had cast around for contacts to give them a first foothold on the Isle of Wight.

It wasn't easy. The Isle of Wight — both a local-government county and a parlia-

mentary constituency — is a safe Tory seat, and has been nothing but Tory or Liberal or Lib-Dem back to 1832. The Labour Party has never had a strong presence on the Isle of Wight. The Labour vote there has dropped as low as 2.4% (1983), and has recovered only to 17%. The towns are small (Ryde, the biggest by a slight margin over Newport, has 26,000 people). There has been no recent activist-left presence. There is no active local Green Party.

The island has many advantages as a base for industrial production. The wind turbine blades from the bigger Vestas factory at St Cross — 40 metres long, difficult to transport by road — can be loaded straight from the factory onto barges to go up the River Medina and over to

Southampton docks for shipment all over the world. But prisons are among the island's biggest employers; an unusually large proportion of the population is retired; unemployment is high; a lot of local jobs are seasonal in the tourist trade; and many enterprising young people leave to seek wider opportunities on the mainland.

The young AWL members pitched their tents on a campsite. They made contact with some elderly activists who kept the Ryde and Cowes Trades Councils ticking over, and with the island's one Labour county councillor.

They began visiting the factories at the shift changes, handed out leaflets, talked to the workers. They found a lot of anger against the Vestas bosses, but as yet little confidence that any fightback against the closure was possible.

The AWL members made it clear that they were not there to substitute for the workers' own action, or to push workers into doing anything that they did not want to do. But they did want the workers to have a chance to discuss collectively what they might do, with all the options before them — rather than each one, individually, feeling helpless in face of the collective, organised power of the bosses.

With a wider circle of Workers' Climate Action activists mobilised to come to the island, they leafleted in the main towns as well as at the factories for a public meeting on 3 July, co-sponsored by Cowes Trades Council and Workers' Climate Action.

A hundred people came. Ron Clark, a former convenor of the Visteon Enfield plant, spoke about the gains made by the workers' occupation there. But many of the other speakers, established labour movement officials, thought workers could do no more than join the Unite union — there was a handful of members in the factories, though Vestas had stamped on all attempts to unionise seri-

ously — and write letters to the Government.

The campaign still hung in the balance. About half a dozen workers gave contact details to the AWL members saying they were interested in further discussion about how the closure should be thought. Over the weekend 4-5 July AWL member Ed Maltby emailed and phoned them. Only one replied. He agreed to meet and talk, and then pulled back, saying he wasn't ready for that yet.

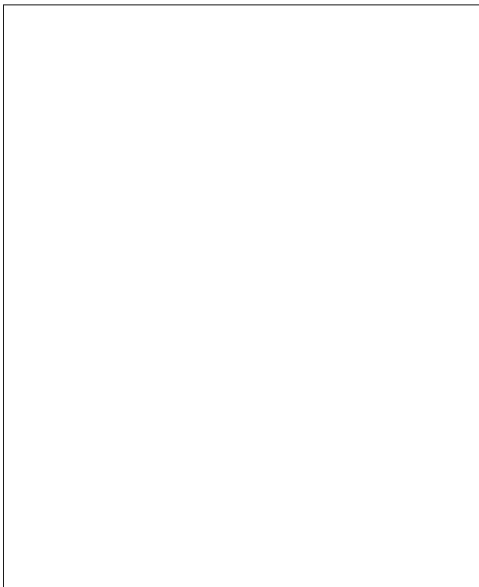
By Tuesday 7 July Ed was phoning the AWL office to say that he was returning home for a bit to recoup his energies. The half-dozen workers had his contact details, and messages from him, and he would return to the island if they showed interest.

As his train approached Waterloo station in London, Ed got a phone call from a worker asking for a meeting that evening between him and a number of workers from his shop. Ed got off the train at Waterloo and took the first train back to the Isle of Wight in order to make the meeting. A group of workers who wanted to discuss active resistance to the closure had been formed, and gradually grew by passing the word on individually.

Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) members came to the island to join the campaign against closure. On Saturday 11 July some workers joined a session of leafletting and petitioning in the centre of Newport. After AWL summer school on 11-12 July, where Vestas was a big theme, more AWL members came to the island.

By now the Vestas bosses knew that something was afoot, but not what.

More and more workers got involved. But the dominant reaction at the factory gates to our leafletting was still — and would continue to be, right up to the day the St Cross factory was occupied — that it was "too late" to do anything about the closure; or, putting a brave face on the big



blow to Island jobs that the Vestas closure would be, that they were glad no longer to have to work under the Vestas regime, and just wanted to take their redundancy money and go; or that in principle some action might be a good idea, but they didn't want to risk losing their redundancy money.

On 15 July Energy and Climate Change minister Ed Miliband published a White Paper about renewable energy, and calling for 7,000 more wind turbines to be built in the coming years. (Britain currently has about 3,000 in operation or under construction). The Vestas closure looked even more absurd and unscrupulous.

The redundancy money was poor — twice the statutory minimum. The St Cross factory has only been open nine years, and only a handful of workers have been there since the start, so most workers have had only a short time with the company and stand to get only a few hundred pounds in redundancy pay. But, at that stage, even that small pay-out seemed a lot to risk.

A positive, but still uncertain, gathering of workers on 19 July got closer to discussing definite plans. We brought in AWL members with experience of working as trade-union organisers to give workers information on the legalities and logistics of different tactics.

That meeting also formulated demands. Although leaflets had been headlined "Save Vestas", that was not really what the workers wanted. They were glad to be rid of the Vestas bosses. The demand was formulated for Vestas to hand over the plant to the Government, and for the Government to continue production by nationalising the plant under new management. Workers who still wanted to leave should get better redundancy pay.

That meeting also featured a bizarre cross-purposes argument. Someone seemed to suggest hanging a huge Union Jack over a factory building. Socialists immediately responded that it would not be good to repeat the "British Jobs For British Workers" stuff that marred the engineering construction strikes. Workers shook their heads. No, no. The East Cowes factory has a huge Union Jack painted on its waterfront wall, and the discussion was about hanging a banner against the closure over it, to cover it.

On Monday Vestas's top boss, Paddy Weir, got wind of the plans for occupying at least one of the factories, as eventually he was bound to. Evidently he didn't feel sure of himself, so he did not do what a confident boss would have done, and immediately sack the workers whom he suspected of organising action (shrugging at the thought that Vestas would eventually have to pay them money for unfair dismissal, after an industrial tribunal). He just bawled them out, perhaps thinking on the basis of previous experience that would be enough to intimidate them.

However, there was now a clear risk that Vestas bosses would make new secu-

## **Vestas worker: Ian Terry**

**Ian Terry was a worker in the finishing shop at the Vestas Newport factory, and one of the occupiers. He spoke to us in mid August.**

I'd say that the views I have now have always been there, but now I've see the chance of a fightback, rather than giving up. I've always thought the way things are run was wrong, but before, I'd never seen a chance for people to stand up together and change things.

It's a matter of organising workers to stand up for themselves. The anti-union laws are against us, but the numbers are in our favour, and we have to make sure we get those laws changed.

The main priority now is building people's confidence, highlighting to people that they are not on their own, and that together we can be much stronger.

I knew, working for Vestas, that the management were wary of unions. I don't think I realised just how important unions are. After the miners were smashed in 1984-5, a lot of people's confidence in unions went down. But there are still good unions out there, willing to organise the workers and take up the fight for them.

Unite, I think, has been poor because it is too closely affiliated with Labour. They didn't want to rock the boat. *But that can't be all of it. You've had unions affiliated to*

*Labour who have supported you well, and unions that aren't affiliated to Labour who haven't. Isn't it also a question of the degree of democracy and accountability in the union, and the strength of the rank and file?*

Yes, you have to make sure the people making the big decisions in the unions can understand the workers' struggles rather than being paid big salaries. The same goes for politicians, doesn't it? They'd be reined in a lot more if they were in the same economic position that we're in. At present there is obviously a big gap between the full-time union officials, and the lives they're able to live, and the workers they represent.

In this campaign, a combination of many different reasons to fight has brought everyone together. People have started to realise that everything is affected by the rule of profit — how profit dictates how things go.

The reason why Vestas have been able to do what they've done is that the market is run for profit, not for people. As in the unions, the people at the top are comfortable. They don't have to think about the people who are being affected by job losses or wage cuts. Human beings aren't brought in to the equation.

When industry is run for goals other than profit — when it is run for the usefulness of the things it builds and the good of the people it employs and of the environment — that is much better. More money would be delivered back into the community.

rity moves to block an occupation. In preparation for the factory closing down the bosses had already changed the normal shift patterns as from Monday 20 July, telling both night shift and day shift to come in days and then sending out a lot of workers to do courses or job-search while the remainder worked on finishing the remaining blades and on clear-up.

They might tell more workers to stay away. There was already talk of the bosses bringing in new, extra security guards from 20 July. They might change the locks and security codes.

So on Monday evening, 20 July, a group of workers started the occupation, entering the St Cross factory between shifts and taking control of the management offices. There was no extra security to block them.

Because the occupation started earlier than the workers had expected, some who had wanted to take part were unable to join in. In the event, that wasn't so bad, because it left a group of more determined and confident workers to organise the majority of the workforce outside the plant.

On Monday evening, Paddy Weir soon turned up at the factory, in a rage. Very quickly there were masses of police there. Weir spoke of getting the police to throw the workers out, and had to be convinced that legally he couldn't do that.

From then until the Wednesday the bosses tried one hoax threat or ultimatum after another to try to throw the workers off balance. Time and again the workers were told that they had "one hour" or "two hours" to leave, or else they would suffer terrible reprisals.

The occupying workers stood firm. At 7.45am on Tuesday morning, the rest of the workforce turned up for the start of the shift. Some had been phoned and told to stay away. Those who arrived — at the Venture Quays (East Cowes) plant as well as at St Cross — were told by managers standing on the police line to take the day

off (paid) and come back "as normal" on Wednesday. The bosses were scared that if they let the workers into their workplaces, they would face another occupation in the East Cowes plant, and a bigger one at St Cross.

At that point the managers thought they could end the occupation within one day. They did not have the measure of their workforce at all. In disarray, Vestas bosses would say nothing to the media until the end of the week. One reporter, from the *Times*, had the phone put down on him when he tried to get a comment.

Some workers arriving on Tuesday did just go home, saying that they did not believe that the occupation could achieve anything, and that their only concern was to keep their redundancy money. But a large number gathered outside the front entrance at St Cross.

**Time and again the workers were told that they had "one hour" or "two hours" to leave, or else they would suffer terrible reprisals. The occupying workers stood firm.**

The mood there was sympathetic to the occupying workers, but also, at that stage, uncertain about what could happen next. Although AWL people had never sought to push workers into doing anything they didn't want, only to create opportunities for them to discuss collectively and to have all the options before them, one worker told us: "I'm just here to see that no harm comes to my mates inside as a result of them being riled up by people like you".

Over the next day or so, the mood changed. Eventually, on the Tuesday

## **Vestas worker: Tracey Yeates**

**Tracey Yeates worked in the finishing shop at the Vestas Newport factory, and is a member of the RMT workers' committee. She spoke to us in mid-August.**

The last three weeks have taught me that if people work together, we can get things done, and we can, as a group, make a change. Perhaps before I would have turned away. I think it's changed me as well as my opinions.

I've come to realise how much of a bad employer Vestas were. Before, I tended to believe what the management said and not what the workforce was saying. But now that is changed.

What's made the difference? I suppose at the start it was because you, the activists from outside, showed us how we could do something. Then we had our own way of doing things. If everyone puts their own unique bit in, it makes a bigger picture, doesn't it?

With Vestas, it is the first time I've ever worked for a company. I was always self-employed before, and I worked on my own — I was an area manager for Betterware UK — so I looked at things a different way. It suited me when the children were younger, because I could work from home, but then when they grew up, I looked for something else, and since I'd always been green-minded, I came here.

I don't believe the company should be allowed to do this. They have no regard for their workers or for the community.

It's difficult for me to say how this has changed my view of unions, because my husband used to be an active trade unionist, a TGWU branch official, at Ford in Southampton, and it seemed to me like he was always out on strike.

The RMT seem to be quite well-organised. My husband is a prison officer now, and he is in the POA, and they don't seem to be well organised or have any clout.

Myself, I don't think I would work again for an employer that didn't have a union. I would definitely make sure I was in a union before I worked anywhere else.

Now, we've got to make sure that the lads who were in occupation get reinstated. That has got to be number one priority. I want see green jobs on the island, of some sort — if it can't be Vestas, then somebody else.

I worry for the future of the island community. We already have an ageing population here. As jobs go, young families will move away, and before we know it, schools will be closing.

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morning, we were able to get a meeting of the workers outside the factory entrance to elect a committee. We tried to help the workers to organise a rota — so that each worker would have set times to be outside the factory — though at that stage it didn't really work.

Workers went off to buy food to take in to the occupiers, and a gazebo to provide some protection from the rain to workers and supporters outside. (It rained a lot from Monday evening onwards, and throughout the week!) After some thrashing around to find an office for the workers' committee, one of the committee members brought his camper van to the site, and de facto that became the committee office.

Gradually, the minority action of the occupying workers generated an active majority among the workers outside, a collective will to resist. On Wednesday evening, at what became the regular 6pm rally at the factory entrance, we heard of yet another ultimatum to the occupiers. The speaker asked the rally: "What do we want to say to the lads inside? Stay, or go?" All the workers, including those who the previous day might have said that their only real concern was to get the occupying workers out safe and sound, yelled: "Stay!"

On the Tuesday, a rush at the police lines had got a few extra workers into the occupation. After that, the police were even more vigilant, and stopped food being taken in to the occupiers.

That police blockade was eventually broken on the Wednesday, on the initiative of some Climate Camp activists who organised a large number of people to walk calmly through the lines of police and security guards to below the balcony of the management offices and throw the food up.

The police knew that when it came down to it they had no legal authority to

use violence against people peacefully walking across the factory forecourt, and there were not enough of them to block everyone by just standing in the way.

After that, the police put up fences around the front entrance. Ironically, they were fencing the management in as well as us out. In disarray, the Vestas bosses were paying their own workers to picket them and erecting fences to reinforce the picket lines!

On Thursday morning, 23 July, the dispute reached the national press front-page headlines (the *Independent*). That same day, Ed Miliband felt under sufficient pressure to write a letter to the *Guardian* making excuses. The police and the Vestas security guards changed tactics, becoming much more low-profile.

The gathering in front of the the factory entrance was settling down. The roundabout opposite the factory entrance filled up with tents. The Socialist Party was arriving to join the AWL and the SWP in supporting the workers. Climate activists, and a miscellany of other people, turned up too. Local RMT activists had been there since the start, and other unions were quick with support. The local FBU arrived on Tuesday morning with an immediate donation of £150. On Thursday, RMT general secretary Bob Crow came down; on Friday, the RMT started recruiting Vestas workers; by the weekend, a number of full-time organisers from the RMT national office had been posted to Vestas.

The workers' committee got more organised. Increasing numbers of people went out from the factory entrance to leaflet and visit workplaces and campaign in the towns. Increasing numbers turned up to the 6pm rallies. Confidence grew. From that point on the outcome depended on the debate among the workers about extending the picket into a proper blockade, and on what support they could get in the broader labour movement.

## **Vestas supporter: Jackie Hawkins**

**Jackie Hawkins is a local environmental and peace activist. She spoke to us in mid August.**

What's most surprised me over the last three weeks is that people have remained solid, that they have stuck together and not drifted away.

The main priority now is new ideas; keeping the campaign fresh so that it does not stagnate; staying positive and keeping in mind that we can win.

In the Isle of Wight, the [Tory] council have an "eco-island" policy, and keep bleating on about how they want it to be a world-re-knowned green island. They should grasp this opportunity and keep the factory open, as well as bringing more green jobs to the island.

This campaign has got a community together. All sorts of people have contributed by donating food or equipment for the picket.

There is a community building, and I'm hoping that when the planning application for [wind turbines on] Cheverton Down comes up in October, we can outnumber the Nimbies. I would like to see a lot of people turn up at County Hall that day.

In the last couple of months, there have been a lot of socialist and environmental

activists coming from the mainland to support the Vestas workers. What do you make of what we've done?

It's been great — something I've wanted to see for a long time. The island is a very conservative area. I don't mean only politically conservative: people tend to be wary of mainlanders.

I was nervous at first, because I'm originally an outsider myself, and I know the attitudes you can encounter. But in fact the people from the mainland have been

very well received. I haven't heard any negative comments. That's brilliant, absolutely brilliant.

This is not just an island issue. It's not just nationwide. It is international. Yesterday I heard that we'd had support from young people in Australia.

It's fantastic, the way it has gone international. Maybe the revolution is going to start on the Isle of Wight. I wouldn't have dreamed it.

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# Why wind turbine production should be publicly owned: a confrontation with Joan Ruddock

Joan Trevor

**T**he Climate Change Minister, Joan Ruddock MP agreed to meet supporters of the Save Vestas campaign during her constituency surgery in Deptford, south London, on 7 August, the same day that the last Vestas occupiers left the plant on the Isle of Wight.

She was standing in for Ed Miliband, Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, who was away in Brazil lecturing them on their responsibilities as a developing nation to mitigate climate change — but that's an aside.

The previous day Ruddock had met two Vestas workers together with union officials from the RMT, Unite, and the TUC.

**Q:** What has the government done to save the jobs at Vestas?

**R:** I'll tell you what I told a delegation of

Vestas workers, the RMT, Unite, the TUC yesterday. We've done a lot. Months ago we had notice of the potential closure. We asked Vestas, what help can we give you as a government?

There was no help that we could give them. They did not want money. They wanted to move the factory for their own commercial reasons. Let me tell you about their product. The blades they make are 40 metres long, they are not suitable for use in the UK...

**Q:** But they can convert the factory to make blades that are suitable...

**R:** They can convert the factory. There was discussion about that. The workers told us that until recently the conversion was going to go ahead. I don't know the details of why that did not go ahead.

It is not just here, they have made a large number of people unemployed in Denmark as well, where they are based.

**Q:** Why not nationalise the plant? You have stepped in to nationalise the banks because there was a need to shore up the financial system. The government has set very high targets for expanding renewable energy, and very high targets for cutting carbon emissions. Is that not a similar emergency that would justify the government stepping in?

**R:** It's not up for sale! We can't just nationalise a whole company.

**Q:** Not the company, the plant. We cannot let meeting the targets depend on the business decisions of private companies. We will not meet the targets if we do that...

**R:** We will meet these targets!... We are not going to nationalise. You have a different model.

We have offered Vestas £6 million to develop the R&D facility on the Isle of Wight. That will be 150 jobs — it's not 600, but it is something. Vestas will accept £6 million for that.

We will meet the targets on the present model of letting the market do it. We do agree on the general point of keeping manufacturing jobs in the UK. We are having ongoing discussion about how we keep and develop the skilled manufacturing jobs here.

**Q:** Closure of the plant is devastating for the Isle of Wight employment situation which is already bad, with 100 applicants for each job. What will you do to save this community?

**R:** We have set up a taskforce, with the South East England Development Agency, we are putting in place the support structures, and continuing to work to maximise business start-ups. Vestas might keep the plant and reopen again when conditions are right.

**Q:** Why should progress rely on business decisions of private firms?

**R:** You all have a different philosophy from me about what is the best way to

produce jobs.

**Q:** Can we subsidise travel between the Island and the mainland, so that young people can have more mobility? Travel is very expensive at the moment.

**R:** I don't know, that is not my department.

**Q:** You have a belief in the market — that's your philosophy. But what about being practical? Have you done a feasibility study into whether it would be better economically overall to nationalise the plant?

**R:** There has not been a feasibility study because we are not going to nationalise, because we are sticking to our principles.

**Q:** Your belief in markets is like a religious belief.

**R:** We live in a market economy, all the advanced economies think the same.

**Q:** We live in a mixed economy, there is a lot of state intervention in the economy and the balance shifts back and forth depending on politics. These companies do not do what they do out of a love for the people who make the profits for them. They go where profits are highest. What do you think should happen to the workers who occupied, who drew our attention to this issue?

**R:** We will look at all the issues raised by workers about their jobs. I've asked my opposite numbers in the Department of Work and Pensions to look at what can be done for the workers.

**Q:** Will you undertake a feasibility study?

**A:** It's not appropriate! The government does not want to be producers of wind turbines, and we did not want to be bankers.

**Q:** Not even to save the environment?

**Q:** The Tories nationalised Rolls Royce...

**R:** That's another story...

**Q:** Nationalisation is what happened with East Coast Mainline. You nationalised it while you look for another buyer.

Can't you do that with this plant? Nationalisation doesn't have to be like the nationalisations of the 1970s.

**A:** We are pulling out all the stops — short of nationalisation!

Ruddock's basic argument is that the capitalist market can provide the solution to climate change. She says that not nationalising Vestas is a matter of "sticking to our principles"!

The government claims that the shift that we need to make to using renewable energy, including wind energy, is best achieved by helping the market in renewable energy to grow, and private companies involved in this sector to make profits.

"The market" is really only the right of capitalist companies to seek maximum profits where they can. Companies like BP can shift into "renewables" if that looks more profitable, or out if it doesn't.

The government is prepared to juggle with taxes and to offer incentives, such as the £6 million it gave to Vestas to invest in research and development on the Isle of Wight. But if the market does not allow companies like Vestas to make as much profit in the UK as they can make elsewhere — eg, Colorado, USA, where most of the "Isle of Wight" work is going, and the government's attempts to bend the market fail, then that's it. The government will not nationalise the industry or take on the development of renewable energy in the public sector. That, for Ruddock, is "principle"!

The contrast with the government's attitude to the banking sector is stark. The financial system must be shored up, even if that means nationalisation. But the climate? Leave that to the market.

Ruddock insists that the UK will meet its targets for CO2 reduction by continuing on the tracks that it is going down now. But the figures so far do not bear that out.

Ruddock's statement that the government does not want to make wind turbines or run banks begs the question, what does the government want to do? On this trend, it is only a matter of time before Ruddock states that the government doesn't want to run hospitals or schools either. The government will regulate private trade, and commission public services, and that is all.

In other words, vital services will only be provided as, when, and how they make a profit for private companies.

Companies relying on public contracts will obviously try to get away with providing as little as they can for the money they are paid. Meanwhile, when the government accepts private companies as partners it implicitly takes the side of those companies in any disputes it has with its employees.

That is very clear in the Vestas dispute. Of all the questions that we asked Ruddock, the one she seemed most hostile to answering was whether the government should press for reinstatement of the Vestas workers who were sacked for occupying their plant.

All she would say was that she would talk to her opposite numbers in the Department for Work and Pensions. About what? The workers getting the dole they are entitled to anyway, without her talking?

Vestas workers are adamant on that: they want to continue making wind turbine blades, but do not want to continue working for Vestas. They want to work for the good of the whole community instead, in a nationalised plant, with a management accountable to them.

They can see that "the market" will provide neither decent jobs nor the necessary transition to a sustainable economy. Joan Ruddock cannot because she has blinded herself with New Labour "principle".

# An activist's diary: how the Vestas campaign started

Daniel Rawnsley

I remember first hearing about a wind turbine factory on the Isle of Wight being shut down at the Workers' Liberty conference back in May.

We decided that someone should go down there. Why did I volunteer? We'd been talking about "voluntarism" — the necessary element in socialist politics of making things happen by will-power and initiative.

I travelled to the island on 15 June with two other AWL members, Ed Maltby and Pat Rolfe, and stayed for a couple of days to make contact with local labour movement activists.

Members of the local Trades Councils had been campaigning around Vestas, but without making much headway. Local Labour councillor Geoff Lumley offered his support, but was unwilling to get involved in very militant action. We met the local Unite full-time official, Brian Kent. When we raised the idea of holding a public meeting he told us we were "pissing in the wind".

We also stood at the factory gates trying to figure out what the shift times were and talking to anyone we could find. Eventually went back to London to work from the AWL office to mobilise activists to bring to the Isle of Wight to build for the public meeting which we had decided on despite Brian Kent's advice.

We all had very little experience building industrial campaigns, but it was good to know that we could phone the office for

practical advice from older comrades.

We returned to the island again with a list of people who would join us over the coming days. I think there were as many as eight people at one point and we managed to cover a lot of space, leafleting in towns and at both factories in Newport and Cowes.

As we stood outside factories, I began to learn how to talk to people about their work and that it's most important firstly to listen. In many cases you start just by repeating back to people what they've already told you, and convincing them that it's important and useful to be angry about mistreatment.

Our initial activism had already put management ill at ease. Paddy Weir, the boss at Vestas, had come out one day to try to intimidate me and another activist, Benny. I think he was honestly surprised to see someone standing up to him, and he had absolutely no reply to the fact that

he hadn't provided adequate health and safety gear for the workers, some of whom were suffering from skin disorders because of the resin they worked with.

The day of the meeting approached, and I began sleeping less and less. I didn't know what to expect.

In fact, over a hundred people came and the majority were workers. Four police officers came to stand outside the meeting; they had been warned to expect a "breach of the peace". Management had put extra security on at the plants over the weekend after the meeting.

But in some way the meeting was very disheartening. It was overly weighted with union bureaucrat speakers who went on for too long about joining a union... so that the workers could be helped to find other jobs.

Ron Clark, former convenor at Visteon Enfield, and Ed Maltby spoke from the platform and offered a straightforward message on the importance of an occupa-

tion. When a discussion at the back amongst the workers began, independently of the chair, it was quickly quashed.

We attempted to speak to as many people as possible, but we ran in to the same perspective time and again; "I'm up for it, but no one else will do anything, it's not possible".

We managed to get contact details for a few workers, mostly young people who were getting very low redundancy payments. Eventually a small group of five workers began to meet and discuss tactics — and to grow.

At the AWL summer school on 10-12 July Pat Rolfe said he thought there was a twenty percent chance of an occupation. Only eight days later, the occupation was on. I returned to the island hours before the occupation began. I rushed down to the factory to see what was going on and found a group of people milling around outside and banners hanging from windows inside.

# Timeline of a campaign

**28 April:** After telling workers, in 2008, that they planned to re-fit the factories in 2009 to produce larger blades with a better production process, the Danish based multinational Vestas announces instead that it will close the Isle of Wight wind turbine blade factories, the only such factories in Britain.

**15 June:** Workers' Liberty activists arrive in the Isle of Wight to start leafleting and talking to workers about the Vestas factory closure and ways to resist it.

**3 July:** Workers' Climate Action and Cowes Trades Council call a public meeting to discuss campaigning against the closure of the Vestas factories.

**Two weeks starting 6 July:** A minority of workers begin to discuss action. As the conversations spread, the idea grows that there are alternatives. Meanwhile public campaigning against the closure continues on the streets of the Isle of Wight.

**Wednesday 15 July:** Government publishes a White Paper calling for 7000 extra wind turbines in Britain in coming years. (3000 are currently operating or being installed).

**Monday 20 July:** Vestas management hear about the conversations and try to forestall action by threatening workers. 7.30pm: workers decide that they should move before the management try further pre-emptive action, and occupy the St Cross factory.

**From Tuesday 21 July:** Vestas bosses tell all other workers, at Venture Quays as well as St Cross, to stay home (on full pay) instead of working. Workers rally outside the St Cross front gate. They elect a committee to organise their campaign. Management make repeated empty threats against the occupiers. They also refuse to let in food. Support comes in from FBU, Unison, CWU, GMB, PCS, and especially from the leaders of the

Portsmouth RMT branch, which organises the Portsmouth-IoW ferries.

**Wednesday 22 July:** A Families and Community Campaign is set up to back the Vestas workers.

**Thursday 23 July:** The Vestas story reaches the front page of the national press (the Independent). Ed Miliband writes an evasive letter to the Guardian about Vestas. Vestas bosses start supplying food to the workers, but serve summonses for a court hearing on 29 July for a possession order. RMT leader Bob Crow comes to Vestas and offers RMT lawyers to help the workers.

**Friday 24 July:** Many Vestas workers join RMT so that it can represent them with the Vestas bosses. 300 people march from Newport town centre to the St Cross factory.

**Saturday 25 July:** Vestas bosses start giving the occupiers hot food.

**Tuesday 28 July:** Vestas bosses issue notices of dismissal to eleven workers.

**Wednesday 29 July:** Court hearing on Vestas bosses' claim for a possession order. Case adjourned to 4 August.



**Saturday 1 August:** Police and Vestas bosses allow RMT to take extra food into the factory. (However, this proves to be a one-off).

**Monday 3 August:** Workers' Climate Action activists show solidarity with workers by supergluing themselves to block the entrance



to the government Department of Energy and Climate Change. The TUC puts out a statement calling on the Government to intervene to save jobs.

**Tuesday 4 August:** Sixteen union leaders publish a stronger statement of support: leaders of Unite, Unison, GMB, and CWU are not among the sixteen. Vestas bosses win their “possession order” in court. Activists occupy the roof of the Vestas factory at Venture Quays in East Cowes, and use its prominent waterfront position to display solidarity banners.

**Thursday 6 August:** Climate change minister Joan Ruddock meets RMT and Vestas workers (and TUC and Unite reps). She offers warm words but no commitment; claims that Government tried to buy the Vestas factories, but Vestas refused. Government agrees to continue talks with RMT.

**Friday 7 August:** Occupiers evicted, despite Workers’ Climate Action mobilising 25 activists from London to join the Isle of Wight picket from 3am. Occupiers remain defiant. At the 6pm rally at the St Cross factory gate, they call for the pickets to be continued and built up into a blockade.

**Saturday 8 August:** Workers and supporters, marching from a rally in Newport town centre, briefly reoccupy the factory grounds.

**Sunday 9 August:** Well-attended meeting of Vestas workers and supporters in Newport debates strategy for the next phase.

**Monday 10 August:** Workers and supporters start a presence at the back gate of the Newport factory. Vestas bosses responded by erecting fences all across the back of the factory.

**Wednesday 12 August:** National day of ac-

tion. Five rallies on the Isle of Wight; meetings and protests all over the country; Workers’ Climate Action activists occupy South East England Development Authority offices.

**Friday 14 August:** The East Cowes occupiers come down from the roof. Back pay and redundancy money goes into workers’ bank accounts. The workers continue the campaign with a continued picket, a demonstration in Ryde on 15 August, and plans for a national day of action on 17 September.

**Monday 17 August:** Vestas brings in its “clean-up” team, but workers picket the factory gates in protest. Workers and supporters stage “sit-in picnic” protest at local Job Centre

**Tuesday 18 August:** Vestas bosses announced their latest financial results. They expect revenue to rise by 20% to 7.2 billion euros this year, and the operating margin (of profit) to be between 11% and 13%.



**Friday 4 September:** Vestas ships blades from the Venture Quays factory (East Cowes), but, seeing a sizeable blockade at the “marine gate” of the St Cross factory (Newport), holds back there.

**Wednesday 16 September:** Isle of Wight council gets legal letters delivered to the blockade at the “marine gate” warning about action to move people from there.

**Thursday 17 September:** Second national day of action.

**Tuesday 22 September:** 120 police raid the camp set up by workers and supporters at the “marine gate”, and clear the way for Vestas bosses to move the blades.

# We will build the sustainable society!

**Patrick Rolfe**

**T**he action taken at the Vestas wind turbine plant demonstrates a realisation on the part of two social movements that they are inextricably linked.

The environmental movement has realised that the only system capable of making the economic changes required to achieve sustainability is one of democratically controlled, social production.

In parallel, the socialist movement has realised the imminence of environmental destruction — we cannot wait until the democratisation of production before we build a sustainable economy. The seeds of a new society — socially and environmentally sustainable — must be germinated in the rotting corpse of the old.

Capitalism can't save the climate — it couldn't even eradicate poverty, provide decent education for all, or make the trains run on time.

We may have only a few years to transition to a low-carbon economy. We have an ageing population, and persistent levels of poverty here and all over the globe.

Yet, at a time when there is so much work to be done in society, factories, offices, shops and other workplaces are closing. Unemployment is on course to hit three million next year. Debates in the mainstream press only consider how many social programmes and research programmes will have to be cut in order to pay for wasteful PFI schemes, bankers' bailouts and inflated military spending.

The government are handing money to those who have been destroying the planet and exploiting its people for the last three decades, while taking from those who have the capacity to save both from oblivion. The logic behind this is simple: the state will seek to maintain the rule of capital at all costs.

Shareholders and company bosses, who can pay to protect themselves from the effects of climate change will take whatever they want from the state, will squeeze whatever they can from the worker and the ordinary consumer, and will oppose any productive technology that challenges centralised capitalism, high profit margins, and easy exploitation of labour. The recent CBI report, which supported "clean" coal and nuclear power, using outdated assumptions that a National Grid report released a week earlier had thoroughly debunked, confirms this.

From Vestas to Total, corporations seek the highest profit margin — there is no necessary link between this aim and sustainable production for social need.

We, the workers, can and should decide what is socially useful, and only we can build a sustainable economy.

We have to use our own social power to change the way production occurs. The source of all power lies ultimately in production — products are just as often used as tools of oppression as they are "goods" for consumption, and the profits made in production are split between ensuring on the one hand the luxury, and on the other hand the power, of individual capitalists. Profits not are not only used to buy ivory

backscratchers and cocaine, they are also used to re-arrange workplaces and society to make social change more difficult, and to devise complex strategies and systems to squeeze the most out of every individual worker.

It is only by seizing control over production — by deciding what is produced, and how it is produced that we can take back control of society, and defeat the destructive logic of profit.

The Vestas workers have taken the first step towards this — when their jobs were threatened by management, they answered “why do you get to decide who is useful and who is not?” The workers occupying their plant, all the people on the picket lines, and everyone demonstrating and supporting the campaign have taken action that questions the right of a private owner to determine what society produces.

Workplaces are closing all over the

country — on the say-so of bosses, bank managers, or the government — workplaces that could be doing some of the vital work that needs to be done over the coming decades. Corus faces closure when

steel will be needed for turbines and tidal power stations, Nortel closes when thousands of call centre workers are needed to give medical advice about the flu virus, car-plants at Visteon close when they could be converted to producing wheelie bins and recycling technologies.

**It is only by seizing control over production — by deciding what is produced, and how it is produced — that we can take back control of society, and defeat the destructive logic of profit.**

“Green jobs” are not just jobs in wind energy or conservation — a green job is any job that we, as the vast mass of ordinary, rational, working-class people decide is useful to society. The only way we will obtain such jobs is by occupying our workplaces, and by planning with each other to build a sustainable future, fighting the boss, the bureaucrat and the capitalist every step of the way.

# Developing the resistance into a political campaign

**Martin Thomas**

Chairing a Vestas workers' rally in Ryde, Isle of Wight, on 15 August, Mike Godley, one of the workers who occupied the Newport factory from 20 July until evicted on 7 August, read out web postings which attacked "outsiders" in the campaign.

The postings claimed that socialist and other activists who have come to the Isle of Wight from the mainland had manipulated the workers.

To great applause, Mike Godley refuted the attacks. The socialists and environmental activists have been welcome, he said, and they have provided valuable help to a struggle which continues to be the Vestas workers' own.

Before the Vestas campaign started, no socialist or environmental-activist groups were visible on the Isle of Wight. Activists from the Alliance for Workers' Liberty arrived on the island on 15 June, to leaflet and talk with workers at the Vestas factory gates, and to make contact with the not-very-strong local labour movement. (Vestas had blocked union organisation in its factories). With other Workers' Climate Action people, the AWLers built a public meeting, jointly sponsored by Workers' Climate Action and Cowes Trades Council, on 3 July.

From soon after that, as discussions among workers about a factory occupation developed, members of the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) from the mainland started spending time on the island.

From the first hours of the occupation,

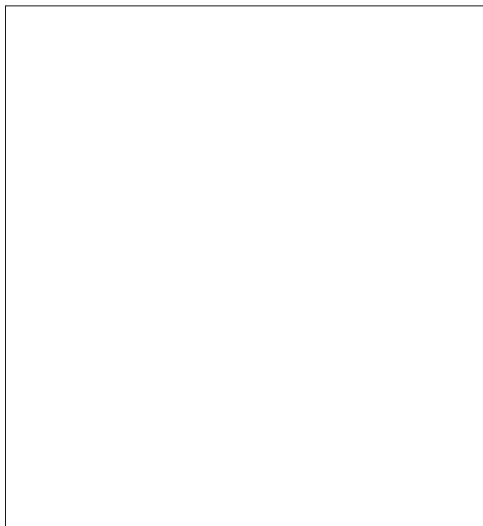
on 20 July, the roundabout outside the Vestas Newport factory front entrance became a gathering-point for workers and supporters. Local people from a range of backgrounds joined the crowd.

A group of four Climate Camp activists arrived for a day on Wednesday 22 July, and made a very useful contribution. As time went on, more climate-camp and other environmental activists arrived, especially after the Big Green Gathering set for 29 July was cancelled. The biggest single influx of mainland supporters, a contingent of 25 socialists, anarchists, and environmentalists from London, was organised by Workers' Climate Action on 7 August, the day the occupiers were evicted.

Five main elements (with many overlaps and exceptions) made up the roundabout "community": workers; local supporters; AWL; SWP; and climate-camp people. It did well at combining diversity with unity in action.

The SWP at Vestas was in a different mode from elsewhere. It worked chiefly at proving itself the "best builder" of the campaign, putting much energy into leafleting and organising for demonstrations of support on the island, and using contacts through the Campaign Against Climate Change (where SWPers hold leading positions) and the unions to set up solidarity meetings round the country.

AWL members did a lot of leafleting and visiting workplaces too. Climate-camp activists, on the whole, were less interested in that sort of activity, but they made a contribution which the socialist or-



ganisations, at our present level of development, probably could not have made.

It was the first four climate-camp activists to arrive who organised the first successful “rush” through the police lines to get food to the occupiers, on Wednesday 22 July. At that time the Vestas bosses and the police were trying to block all food supplies.

Climate-camp and other non-violent-direct-action people organised many other successful actions, most spectacularly the occupation of the roof of the East Cowes Vestas factory from 4 to 14 August. Soon most of the workers active in the campaign recognised that prejudices about these people maybe being “eco-terrorists” were misplaced. The courage, imagination, and skills of the environmentalists made an irreplaceable contribution, helping to enlarge the workers’ (and maybe some socialists’) tactical ideas — and doing it with very few arrests.

Such cross-fertilisation of workers’ and environmentalist struggle is one of the main aims of Workers’ Climate Action, a group in which AWL has been active from the start.

One of AWL’s chief concerns throughout has been to promote and help facilitate self-organisation: self-organisation of the workers initially interested in occupying; election and organisation of a committee by the workers outside the factory; organisation of a Families and Community committee; organisation of local support groups in the different towns of the Isle of Wight; general meetings of supporters, or supporters and workers, at the roundabout.

To our mind, organisation is not just organisational. It is political. The way the working class transforms itself from a scattering of atomised individuals, each one largely powerless in the market economy and in the workplace, into a force, is by organising, discussing, and establishing an independent collective purpose and will. Self-organisation does not happen automatically. Workers have to be convinced of it.

Organisation requires collectively-decided direction. So we have also tried to assess things, without defeatism but soberly, at each stage in the campaign, to deduce best policies, and to promote debate around them.

At the same time, we have tried to educate ourselves and others, with reading and discussions about lessons from working-class history.

None of that stopped us from having friendly unity in action with activists who have other priorities.

When we proposed having general meetings at the roundabout, a couple of climate-camp activists first responded: “What’s the point? The SWP goes leafleting, we do the cooking. Everyone is happy doing what they want. Why have meetings?” But once the meetings started, the climate-camp activists were very constructive. There was more of a problem with the SWP, often quick to say: “No more talking! There’s leafleting to be done! Let’s

go!”

At Vestas, the SWP has made a good positive contribution. The deficiencies of the SWP here as a serious socialist group have been not lapses such as any group is bound to make, but limitations of the SWP *at its best*.

It has been much more concerned about using its SWP machine to prove itself the “best builder” than to argue for or promote wider working-class self-organisation. Few of its leaflets and speeches have got much beyond a combination of a few populist ideas: capitalism bad, bankers bad, anger good, action good, SWP brilliant.

The whole method was epitomised by the SWP’s “big campaign”, pushed at Vestas for many weeks, to get people along to a demonstration at Labour Party conference on 27 September. The demonstration had originally called by the college lecturers’ union UCU as a lobby for “jobs, education, and peace” but was re-branded by the SWP as “Rage against Labour”.

Rage against Labour? The Tories and UKIP dislike Labour. Obviously this was meant to be a different “rage”. So the SWP clarified, by stressing specific, reasoned objectives? No. The organised socialists, the SWP, were less specific about their aims and strategies than the UCU union bureaucrats!

In the end, the 27 September demonstration — maybe 1500 strong, mostly SWP members plus others they had brought along from union branches or campaigns they are involved in — was loud and had lots of banners. But it plainly had no effect on Vestas or the Government.

A demonstration of that sort could have been useful in rallying for specific, sharp, demands, and thus helping to organise a fight for those demands in the labour movement. In fact, however, it was a catch-all effort — a demonstration about having a demonstration, rather than a

demonstration for anything in particular.

At Vestas the SWP ventured distinctive ideas on three main occasions.

- For 29 July, the first court hearing on the Vestas bosses’ move to get a possession order, they effectively advocated a general strike on the Isle of Wight: “every bus worker, every council worker, every worker on the ferries [to] show up at the courtroom instead of going to work”. Such talk just fills the space for proper strategic debate with unrealistic noise.

- The Vestas workers and the RMT got talks with the Government on 6 August. Workers’ representative Mike Godley initially reported back, rather despondently, that as far as he could see the Government was sympathetic, doing all it could, but unable to do anything. SWPer Jonathan Neale told the factory gate rally that we were “halfway to victory” and needed only to clinch the commitments.

- At a strategy meeting on 9 August, shortly after the occupiers were evicted, the SWP put all its emphasis not on picketing, or any activity at the factories, but on a “long campaign” of meetings and demonstrations round the country centred on two “days of action”.

The “days of action” were not a bad idea, though the second one (17 September) was surely scheduled (on SWP insistence) for too late a date. But the idea that they could ever be decisive, and the practice of pulling the central organisers from among the workers away from the factory with the justification of “building for the days of action”, did not help. Mostly the SWP dismissed all strategic debate.

The Green Party’s response was poor. The Green Party Trade Union Group turned up with a stall for a day or so, but that was about it.

Smaller left groups did little about Vestas. Maybe you can put that down to lack of resources.

With the Socialist Party you could not.

Though not a large group, the SP has areas of strength in nearby Southampton and Portsmouth.

The SP turned up in some numbers to the Vestas picket line for a short time once the occupation had got going. Then, soon after the occupiers were evicted, they stopped doing so, sending only occasional individuals to occasional demonstrations.

Like AWL and SWP, they promoted their own papers and leaflets. Fair enough. Unlike AWL and SWP, they showed little interest in leafleting and so on for the broad campaign.

Maybe the SP leaflets were so insightful that this matters little? On the contrary, they reflected the idea that “Marxism” means switching off your brain and using stereotype phrases like “mass action” as cure-alls. For example, when climate-camp activists got food to the occupiers, and thus forced the Vestas bosses to start providing food, the SP rebuked them. It should be done “not through short-term stunts, but by mobilising hundreds of people... to put pressure on everywhere we can”. Aha! Now we know the answer to the problem of no dinner in the St Cross factory! Mass action, “everywhere”.

Mostly, the SP leaflets were about urging us to vote SP, or for some coalition including the SP, at the coming general election. The cited grounds: that workers need a “political party [that] has sent its leaders to the picket and stands shoulder to shoulder with the Vestas workers”.

On that criterion, the SP comes out no better than the Lib-Dems. One local councillor — a maverick Lib-Dem, but a Lib-Dem — was very active supporting the pickets. The local Lib Dem parliamentary candidate turned up from time to time, offering vague sympathy. The Lib Dem parliamentary front bencher for Energy, Simon Hughes, came to the picket line, and (initially, at least: I think later debate swung opinion) got a favourable response

from some workers and some climate-camp activists. One of the most active climate-camp people from the mainland at the roundabout is a Lib-Dem councillor in her home town.

Yet this is the same Simon Hughes that boasted when standing for London mayor that he would see off the RMT; the same Lib-Dem party that has policy to ban all strikes in “essential services”; the same Lib-Dem party that is positioning itself to form a coalition government with the Tories in case of a hung parliament.

Oddly, when workers’ committee members were questioning Simon Hughes, and local Tory MP Andrew Turner, they addressed them as representatives of “Government”, despite both representing opposition parties. Hughes and Turner did not contradict them much, since they do not disagree much with Government policy on Vestas. But that a view of “Government” as a sort of joint affair of all the parties, more or less indistinguishable in their distance from everyday life, seems plausible shows how far democracy in Britain has withered.

The local Labour Party has related to Vestas as if it is overwhelmed with shame about the Labour government. A number of local Labour Party members were very active in supporting the workers. The local Labour Party gave a big donation to the workers’ fund, and brought its members to the demonstrations. But there was no Labour Party “profile” at all. The Labour Party people never identified themselves as “Labour”.

The Vestas campaign should feed into a broader battle for jobs, for workers’ rights, and for green policies, on the island. For that, a socialist organisation on the island is needed, one that can set itself to studying and educating as well as agitating, and one that promotes the self-organisation of a broader local labour movement and working-class unity in action.

## **Vestas supporter: Mark Chiverton**

**Mark Chiverton is secretary of the Isle of Wight Unison local government branch, and the Labour prospective parliamentary candidate for the Isle of Wight constituency. He spoke to us in mid-August.**

**W**e've had good support for strikes and industrial action on the island before, but certainly not this kind of campaign. This is unique, both in its national and international profile, and in the sheer courage, persistence, and commitment of the Vestas workers themselves.

We need to continue to build support, and get more island people involved.

This campaign can be a catalyst for some very positive things on the island. It shows that a group of relatively unorganised workers can achieve great things. A key lesson is that the unions need to be organising and recruiting more, and not just in our traditional areas of strength; and rebuilding links through Trades Councils.

Our local Unison members have been very supportive. We have had quite good numbers attending rallies and demonstrations, and beyond that a huge amount of interest and support behind the scenes. There's been no criticism at all of the branch's position of support for the Vestas workers.

We need to keep up the pressure on the local [Tory] council and the Government. The local Labour Party can have a role to play here.

In some ways it has been a difficult time for the Isle of Wight Labour Party. We have had large numbers of people at the demonstrations, as well as working behind the scenes to get channels of communication to Ed Miliband, but it's been embarrassing for the Isle of Wight Labour Party to be in a position where the Government comes out with a commitment to lots of new green jobs but won't save the wind turbine blade factories from being closed.

The Isle of Wight council and the local [Tory] MP have been lamentable in terms of pandering to Nimbyism.

**Huge sections of the thinking public see the Government's stance on green jobs and on Vestas as a contradiction.**

The Government has invested strongly in terms of research and development, but in terms of manufacturing jobs, the response is inadequate. I'd like to see public ownership of the Vestas factories to tide production over until such a time as wind turbine demand picks up.

If the Government is set against that strategy, I think it's essential that there is urgent dialogue between the council, central Government, and the business community, to make sure that the Isle of Wight can continue to show a strong level of employment in green jobs and can preserve the skills that the Vestas workforce has got.

I'd call on other Labour Parties across the country to come on board for this campaign. I know a number of Labour MPs have signed an Early Day Motion [supporting the Vestas workers, initiated by John McDonnell], but it would be good to see one or



two Labour MPs come to the island and talk to the Vestas workers.

It is very important for the credibility of the Labour Government that it responds positively to this campaign. Huge sections of the thinking public see the Government's stance on green jobs and on Vestas as a contradiction.

I'm sceptical about the Lib Dems claiming to support this campaign. I think they are quite opportunistic, saying different things in different places and at different times. I would recognise that one or two local Lib Dem activists have spent a lot of time on this campaign, but I believe that the wider labour movement needs to be spearheading the campaign.

I want to see a Labour government rather than a Lib-Dem government, but I want to see a very different sort of Labour government from this one — one that is in touch with its grass roots and one where there is much more vibrant and active grass-roots and trade-union campaigning which it responds to positively.

### **Vestas supporter: Lanah Moody**

**Lanah Moody is a student at Ryde High School. Her father Justin Moody was one of the occupiers at the Newport factory. She spoke to us in mid-August.**

**T**he last three weeks have been incredible. I've not really had anything to do with environmental activists and all the political groups before, and it has opened my eyes. Reading the socialist papers, I now know that we don't realise how much happens, all over the world, that we don't hear in the mainstream news.

And I've seen how hypocritical it is, the way the Government is running the country.

My dad did talk to me about it before he went into the occupation, but at first I didn't really know what to think about it. The first few days were absolutely mad. And now the campaign has spread much further, all across the world. It has even been mentioned in the New York Times.

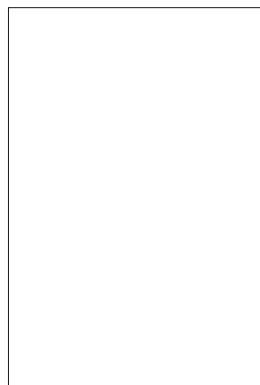
Now we have to keep going, keep spreading the word, getting in more people, making the campaign stronger, coming up with new ideas. We can't just let it fade away. We have to be persistent.

All of my friends basically agree. At the end of the day, it's our generation that depends on the future jobs. We're all worried that we may have to move off the island. The campaign has made people re-think everything. A couple of my friends have helped me with leafletting. I'm going to try to make sure that some of them come to some meetings with me and come to understand more of the politics involved.

I've always wanted to get into politics anyway, so this has been my way in, learning by intuition. There haven't been any political groups or environmental groups on the island before, but there should be.

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# Sparking the struggle, seeing it through

**A discussion among AWL activists: Bob Sutton, Dan Randall, Ed Maltby, Martin Thomas, Stuart Jordan, Vicki Morris**

**O**n 20 September, two days before police finally broke the Newport factory blockade, some of the AWL activists involved in the Vestas campaign talked over the experience.

**Martin Thomas:** The Vestas bosses announced that they were going to close the factory on 28 April. But there wasn't much campaign against the closure until three AWL members travelled to the Isle of Wight from 15 June.

There aren't many examples in our experience, or any other experience, of a factory occupation being triggered by a small group of people coming and giving out leaflets and talking with the workers. So — what allowed it to happen, and what are the lessons?

**Dan Randall:** The lessons are multifaceted, but a fundamental one for me is to do with the AWL itself. It was the culmination of a number of years of serious work around this question — the theoretical work on ecology we'd done, looking back at classical Marxist ideas about the metabolism between humanity and nature; the activist work around Climate Camp and helping build Workers' Climate Action; our general culture around producing workplace bulletins and having an industrial perspective. That's all part of the DNA of the AWL. It's what equipped

Ed, Pat Rolfe, and Dan Rawnsley to go down to the Isle of Wight and do what they did.

The SWP were sniffing around the factory before we were but gave up because they couldn't see quick results. What we did was not something that any left group could have done given luck.

**Stuart Jordan:** The conditions were pretty ripe for an intervention. Vestas was one of the biggest private employers on the Isle of Wight, an area with very high unemployment. It was sacking 600 workers after treating them badly while they worked there.

**Ed Maltby:** Things depended on the qualities of the small group of workers inside the factory who first approached us. They had a particular mentality, a sort of militant sensibility. It hadn't come from previous trade union experience. It was more a "cultural" thing. Some of them had travelled widely. They'd read. One was interested in permaculture.

I hadn't even heard of Vestas until the AWL conference at the end of May. But other comrades had done research, and equipped me, Pat and Dan Rawnsley with a list of contacts.

**Bob Sutton:** We didn't start with a ready-made highly-developed ability to help workers organise — but we did know what doing that looked like. We had an idea in our heads of what we should be doing, and in the course of the struggle we've very much grown in our ability to make that idea a reality.

I've been very involved in the AWL's

environmental work, but I'm not sure how critical that was. I'm not sure it would've been so different had we gone to a washing-machine factory. Our environmental perspective was more something that "kicked in" after the initial stages.

**Vicki Morris:** Persistence was central. It's illustrated by the story of 7 July. Three weeks after starting the campaign, and three days after the big meeting on the closure, on 3 July, Ed had drawn a blank with all the workers who'd suggested at the meeting that they might be interested in talking further about resisting the closure. He decided to return home for a break.

As his train got in to Waterloo station, he finally got a phone call from a worker interested in talking. So he turned round at Waterloo and went back to the Isle of Wight again.

That persistence makes you very tired sometimes, but you have to accept that class struggle has its own logic and rhythms and you've got to bend to them.

Persistence is also central to our attitude in the campaign as a whole. We're seeing it out to the end, seeing it through with the people who started it.

**Ed:** The fact that we "chose" Vestas was to do with our ecological ideas. While we were engaging with workers there, the work we'd done on seeing workers' control as central to an agency for solving ecological crisis allowed us to deal with issues that we encountered, such as the incredible wastefulness of the company, like the fact that workers were more pissed off with the poor health and safety than they were with many other issues.

Because we were able to draw analogies between capitalist environmental degradation and capitalist-workplace degradation of workers' bodies, we were able to respond intelligently to a lot of the issues raised.

Also, the experience at Vestas has al-

lowed us to teach a lot of environmental activists about some basic socialist ideas — especially people in the Climate Camp movement. We've given the notion of workers' struggle as an agency real grip.

**Bob:** We did punch above our weight. I suppose you could describe that as being a bit off-balance in terms of the resources we put into Vestas as against other campaigns.

Our ecological politics added a dimension to our solidarity, and provided very quick answers in the conversation you have, when coming from outside the Isle of Wight, about "why do you see this as your problem?" The implications of climate change raise revolutionary politics very quickly.

Bringing in Ron Clark from the Visteon occupation to the meeting on 3 July was, I think, a key catalyst.

**Martin:** We should recognise there was a lot of luck in it. We might've done it all and had nothing happen.

It shows the merits of being off-balance. If you try to do everything in a balanced way, you'll just give a few seconds' attention to every struggle. It's quite common with us, as with other socialist groups, that we'll go along to a campaign, give out a leaflet, sell a few papers and come away again. We're a small organisation and our resources are spread thinly. Vestas shows what you can do if you put in more sustained effort.

But the story of what happened between 15 June and the occupation starting on 20 July isn't just the story of the AWL relating to the Vestas workers. It's also the story of how the initial group of workers who started discussing resistance to the closure, after 3 July, became larger and began to change the thinking of a larger body of workers.

As late as the very day that the factory was occupied, on the gates you still had most workers saying "yeah, it's bad, but

nothing can be done". But there was a process by which one group of workers changed the thinking of another.

It's important not to see the workforce as a homogeneous mass. Or to see us as a homogeneous mass, because we were changed by it, too.

The end of the first phase of the campaign was the public meeting, sponsored by Cowes Trades Council and Workers' Climate Action, held on 3 July.

**Stuart:** That meeting had to be "legitimate". It had to have the look of a respectable labour movement affair. Unfortunately that meant a lot of full-time officials who saw their job as talking down any prospect of struggle. But it was important that Cowes Trades Council was hosting the meeting, and Ron Clark was on the platform, and he had something different to say.

It's always a problem being pro-trade-union with non-union workers when you know how large the weight of conservative officials is in the unions today. But on the whole, I don't think the meeting

played out at all badly.

**Bob:** The involvement of other people from Workers' Climate Action — people like Sam Wade from the IWW — was important in building that 3 July meeting.

**Ed:** In the course of the campaign, Patrick Rolfe and I have kept on repeating a quote from Lenin about the importance of finding the next link in the chain and grasping it. That was something we had to do at that meeting.

When I stepped off the podium, and when workers started looking disgruntled and leaving in disgust after the speech from John Rowse, the Unite national trade group secretary, who told everyone Unite would help them sign on the dole, I remembered something Ron Clark had taught me earlier in the week about the importance of identifying potential leaders.

I ran around with my little notebook taking numbers, making contacts, talking to workers about things that could be done next, like building up a telephone list and sounding out people on the shopfloor.

## **Vestas workers speak out**

**Mark Smith worked in the finishing shop at the Newport factory, and was one of the occupiers. He spoke to us in mid August.**

**W**ithout a doubt, the last three weeks have changed my view of the world. Firstly, on the question of unions. I'd probably never work at a place that didn't want a union, or I'd be very wary of it.

We've had support from all different types of people who I'd never thought would support us, people who don't even know us. It's been really good. And they all get along together, they're all pulling towards the same objective.

*Those who came from the mainland came because we saw Vestas as part of a bigger battle about jobs, about workers' rights, and about the future of the planet...*

You're spot-on about that. That's what has brought a lot of people to support us. People can see that from the point of view of the future of the planet, it's dire closing places like this.

I'm glad I went into the occupation, even though so far I've lost money from it. If I'd done nothing and just walked away, then six months down the line, and for the rest of life, I'd be kicking myself, thinking about what we could have done. It comes to a point where you have to stand up and fight for what you believe is right.

If you don't stand up and fight, you just get pushed around.

Now we have to keep up the pressure on Vestas and a lot of pressure on the Government — keep everything going, build on what we have already achieved, make it bigger and bigger.

**If I'd done nothing then six months down the line, and for the rest of life, I'd be kicking myself, thinking about what we could have done.**

long time, and when they did, they weren't that interested. Unite people had been told not to get involved.

RMT did turn up, and have been a lot more militant. It's a question of the relation between what you say, and what you're actually willing to do.

We have to get everybody, nationally, to pull together, for us and for themselves. If workers stick together in the future, and we all stand up and support each other, then we can change things.

You've seen different unions reacting differently in this campaign...

I joined Unite before the occupation, purely in order to have legal assistance. But then Unite didn't turn up at all, for a

**Martin:** After the meeting, you had the period from 3 July to 20 July, when the occupation started, and then the first phase of the occupation, to 24 July, when RMT full-time officials arrived.

The period 3 July to 20 July was mostly about the initial group of workers who got in touch with Ed meeting collectively, talking to other workers, drawing new people in, building momentum. Eventually, on 20 July, someone snitched to the management. The management tried to intimidate the workers who they thought might be involved in trying an occupation. The workers decided that they had to move quickly, quicker than they would have done otherwise, and occupy before management changed the locks or tried something else pre-emptive. They occupied on the evening of 20 July.

We were very much helpers at that stage, canvassing other trade unionists on the island for support, leafleting on the streets, trying to brief workers on what's involved in organising an occupation.

On the morning of Tuesday 21 July, we were in front of the factory with lots of workers milling around. The workers were not there as a picket line. They had turned up to work as usual. Managers had told them to go home again, but they wanted to stay around to see what was happening.

**Dan:** On 21 July, I think we were right to make a priority of getting a committee elected by the workers outside the gate. That was important in terms of the ownership of the dispute and making sure the dispute was led by the workers themselves.

**Martin:** Looking back on it, I think that on the evening of the 20th we should have spent more time talking among ourselves and working out precisely what we needed to do in the next few days.

At the time I thought we would have Unite officials down within a day or so,

trying to take over. I was keen to get a workers' committee elected because I figured the workers needed a collective way of asserting themselves and trying to retain control.

It hadn't crossed my mind that Unite wouldn't show up at all, and that RMT would arrive instead. Richard Howard, secretary of the Portsmouth branch of the RMT, was there very quickly, and played a very important role. We didn't expect that. The weekend before we had tried to phone him to see if he was supportive but had been unable to reach him.

What would we have done if the RMT hadn't turned up? I think we would've approached some other union — probably the local GMB branch — but in any case it was really important that the workers were organised before full-time union officials came in.

Those first few days were tremendous. On the morning of Tuesday 21st the workers were a crowd milling around outside the factory, concerned to see that no harm came to their workmates who were occupying, but mostly not at all sure what they might do about it or what might come out of it. By the evening of Wednesday 22nd, the workers at the gate were a collective force, determined to support the occupation and see the struggle through. We also got a "families and communities" committee set up, though that never really worked properly.

We started to have regular meetings run by the workers. But mostly they were just one person making a speech, reporting what was going on inside the occupation. There wasn't debate among the workers about strategies. We had the idea of extending the picket to other gates at the factory, but it was never openly debated in the meetings.

I wonder whether we should have been pushier. We dealt with the issues by talking with lots and lots of workers individu-

ally and hoping that our arguments about opening out the meetings and extending the picket would reach a critical mass. We saw it as central to develop the workers' control of their own struggle, and we knew there was some apprehension among the workers about "outsiders". We didn't want to seize a megaphone and start preaching.

Those were proper concerns, but maybe we acted too much as a sort of "think tank" in that period, and we should have been pushier.

**Ed:** It's clear-cut from the political point of view is that we should have fought harder for sovereign meetings to be held. We tried to do it, and I don't know what success we would've had if we'd tried harder. Maybe it just had to take some time for that idea to percolate through a workforce with no experience of union meetings, let alone democratic and lively union meetings.

After the RMT full-time organisers arrived from RMT head office, they started organising worker-only meetings, distinct from the general meetings of everyone at the factory gate. At the time I saw worker-only meetings as a good move, potentially better for the workers developing their own independent voice.

In fact, however, the worker-only meetings were just briefings on legal matters from the RMT organisers, not debates among the workers on strategy.

**Bob:** The big lesson of this is that a politics of working-class self-emancipation involves giving people the skeletons and structures to organise themselves.

**Dan:** Bob is right, but I think we found it quite difficult to combine being the people who focused on tactics, strategy and information with making ourselves visible as an independent political element, with independent activity, that people might want to join. SWP full-timers were pretty relentless about talking to people about

joining the SWP; and SP organisers arrived and immediately seized the megaphone to make long speeches about general anti-capitalism and the claimed virtues of their National Shop Stewards' Network; while we downplayed that sort of thing in favour of trying to get serious conversations about what needed to be done next.

**Martin:** There was a paradox. Our focus was on trying to help get a stronger organisation of the workers and a serious discussion of strategy. Because that was our focus politically, we weren't saying much along the lines of "we will do this for you", though in fact we did lots of practical-help things. The SWP, both because they are a bit bigger than AWL, and because they really didn't care much about workers' self-organisation or have any particular ideas on strategy, could come across as having a lot to offer because they could ply workers with invitations to go off and speak at Campaign Against Climate Change meetings here, there, and everywhere.

Lots of tremendously positive things happened in those few days between 20 and 24 July, but the workers' committee still wasn't functioning well at the point when the RMT arrived. It depended on a very small number of workers, so run off their feet with emergencies that they had little time to think, and they didn't organise meetings of all the workers where debate took place.

Bob Crow came to the factory gate on Thursday 23rd, and by Friday 24th the full-time officials from RMT head office were there.

**Ed:** The RMT was giving very useful support to radical, militant action. Even those workers who were in the occupation and initially reluctant to join the RMT after they came out now speak very positively of it. But the RMT was still basically functioning as a service provider, not an



agency to help workers organise themselves. The RMT officials could've used the worker-only meetings to help the workers develop their own strategy, to take more conscious control of the dispute. They didn't. Then on 8 August, when we eventually marched into the grounds of the factory, beyond the security fence, the RMT officials soon told everyone to get out again.

**Dan:** I think there was also a problem about the activity outside, in that period from 20 July to the eviction on 7 August, being run just as a support operation for the workers in occupation, "the boys on the balcony". Not enough was done to get Vestas workers who weren't in the occupation to get more involved and take a bit of ownership over the dispute.

**Martin:** The paradox was that, when the RMT officials kept saying "the workers have to decide", that actually had an anti-democratic effect. Often the workers were not well-informed about what the RMT leaders were doing and thinking. It would

have been better if the RMT had said to the workers: "this is what we think should happen", and had a debate about it. Promoting workers' control over their own disputes is not about standing back and saying "oh, we won't bother you". It's an active process.

We should've made much more of the general argument for strike committees. We have put a lot of effort into getting strike committees organised in disputes on the Tube, and fighting to get the RMT top leadership to respect them. We have an amendment to the RMT's rules, to be debated at the upcoming conference, that says that every dispute should be run by a strike committee.

In the period when the RMT officials were on site and the occupation was in progress, from 24 July until the eviction on 7 August, a lot was centred around the two court hearings, on 29 July and 4 August, where Vestas sought legal authority for the eviction.

One of the things we were arguing in

that period was that we should prepare for an eviction; that we should plan in advance for an eviction not being the end of the dispute, but a signal to escalate the picket of the factory into a blockade.

On 9 August, two days after the eviction, there was a big meeting of workers and supporters at the Southern Vectis club in Newport. Mark Smith argued at that meeting for moving to a blockade. We argued for it. The SWP put all their emphasis on calling demonstrations on days of action — 12 August and 17 September — but didn't argue against a blockade.

So, a big meeting agreed to move to a blockade. But as it turned out, we didn't have the organisation to make it happen in the next few days. There were only a token few people at the back gate of the factory. Momentum started to ebb.

**Ed:** Should we have risked looking “pushy” and maybe putting some people off by fighting harder for the tactics and the strategy of blockading the factory? Maybe, but there are limits to what we could have achieved from a position of not having an AWL member inside the workforce.

Also, by that time some of us were very tired, and the most active workers were

very tired too. The gulf between the campaign deciding something and it actually getting done was becoming deep. That was a big organisational flaw.

**Bob:** A new workers' committee was elected at that 9 August meeting, and one of its members was designated as responsible for organising the extension of picketing. But within two days he wasn't on the island — he was off for some days, speaking at meetings on the mainland, without anyone being chosen to take over his organising job.

There was a long-standing policy of “pillaging” key activists, by both the SWP and the RMT, to take them off to do speaking tours and the like, which made it very difficult for the workers' committee to function systematically.

**Vicki:** There was a certain inertia about the camp at the roundabout outside the factory's front gate by this point. People had settled in to organising the camp almost as an end in itself. It took something of an effort to re-focus on the industrial struggle that was still going on.

**Ed:** Although no-one at the 9 August meeting argued against blockading the factory — or against working to extend the blockade to the other factory, at Ven-

ture Quays in East Cowes, where activists occupied the roof from 4 August to 14 August — I suspect that the extension of the picket from the roundabout was seen as something that was a bit ultra-left, a bit adventurous. We hadn't fully won a political argument with the workers about using their industrial muscle to build a blockade.

**Martin:** A lot of the workers were very impressed by the publicity they got. After all, most people never get on the front page of the papers at any point in their lives. They don't get Government ministers agreeing to meet them. They don't get front-bench politicians, like the Lib-Dem Simon Hughes, coming to offer them warm words.

I suspect a lot of workers thought that if they could just keep up the coverage, they were going to win by sheer force of publicity. The SWP very much played on that, with their emphasis on the days of action as the key focus, and their huge over-valuation of what government minister Joan Ruddock said when she agreed to meet the RMT and a couple of workers on 6 August.

**Ed:** A lot of the workers regarded themselves as protesting, rather than attempting to get the company in a headlock. And there was a line coming from the SWP leadership that the important thing was creating a noise, putting up a flag, creating a photo-opportunity as a focal point for a campaign of public meetings.

**Martin:** So, after the eviction on 7 August, we didn't really move to an effective extension of the picketing. The action at the factory remained mostly confined to the camp on the roundabout, which wasn't blockading anything.

That was bound to lead to some loss of momentum. The day of action on 12 August was disappointing on the Isle of Wight. The main demonstration on that day, in East Cowes, was smaller than ear-

lier ones, on 8 August or at the court hearings.

12 August was quite well supported elsewhere. Yet, as we kept on saying at the time, a scattering of meetings, demonstrations, and stunts is good, but not a way to force concessions out of a hardline employer or a government. That's what we, as AWL, spend a lot of our time doing — meetings, street stalls, small demonstrations. We think such activity is very important to raise awareness and build long-term campaigns. But we don't fool ourselves that it will force the capitalist class into concessions.

On 14 August, workers got their redundancy money. It had been postponed from 31 July. Thanks to the occupation, all workers had got two and a half weeks' extra pay and some had extra redundancy money.

We said that the redundancy money could tip things one way or the other. People could see the payment as finishing the story — "the protest was good, but it's over now". Or it could tip people into thinking that they now had nothing to lose and becoming more ready for radical action. In the previous weeks workers had been inhibited from joining the occupation at the Newport factory, or starting one in the East Cowes (Venture Quays) factory, because they feared, with obvious good cause, that such action could lose them their redundancy money.

In fact, with the redundancy payments on 14 August, things tipped towards an ebb rather than a revival. Too much momentum had been lost for them to tip the other way.

Of course, that's to do with the general state of the labour movement. If there had been solidarity strikes, things would have been different. Even if there had been proper delegations of trade unionists visiting the picket line, rather than individual union reps or branch secretaries coming to

give support or donations, that would've changed things.

In the event, the campaign was quite heavily reliant on an unstated idea that publicity alone would force Vestas and the government to move. No-one wanted to argue against the strategy of blocking the blades held in the factories. But we got a lot of workers saying that Vestas was happy to let the blades sit there for many months, and wouldn't care about the value involved, £700,000. That has turned out to be untrue, but it was another way of saying: "I don't really see the point of the blockade."

**Bob:** Again, it's the same question of the campaign not having clear forums where people can get an overview. Questions like this — blocking the blades, extending the action to Venture Quays — were dealt with in a way where people were licensed to go off and do things if they wanted to, rather than making clear collective decisions.

I remember getting very conflicting reports about how much the blades were worth and whether Vestas was bothered about them at all. Most workers have no clear picture about the business decisions of their employer. The "open the books" line of argument should've been made much more central.

I think it remains clear that the industrial leverage in this dispute is the blockade of the marine gate. Our ability to sustain that remains to be seen. But in a crucial week, six workers were taken to the TUC Congress to conduct a bit of propaganda amongst the trade union bureaucracy instead. The different opinions and perspectives have never really been debated out.

The RMT officials never showed any interest in the blockade, and in the last couple of weeks, crucial for the blockade, there have been no RMT officials on the island.

At a Campaign Against Climate Change meeting in London on 7 September, Bob Crow appealed for donations to the workers' fund as a way to help compensate the eleven occupiers whom Vestas sacked for the loss of their redundancy. He was implicitly saying that the use of the fund for campaigning was secondary and that he didn't see the RMT as using the blockade to push Vestas to reinstate the redundancy money.

**Vicki:** It's important now to mobilise enough people to go to the blockade so that when the crunch comes, there's enough people there to make a good showing. The company might offer something — that's one scenario. Another scenario is that they'll come for the blades and get the police in to clear the marine gate. If it comes to that, we want at least thirty or forty people there for that experience rather than just a dozen.

**Martin:** I think winning reinstatement for the eleven is still possible. The blockade should be seen not as a gesture, but as a tactic with a particular aim in mind. It's important to have a realistic assessment of what can be won now, and what can't be.

It's also important to start at this stage to develop the next stage — about rebuilding the labour movement on the Isle of Wight, especially through the Trades Councils, and organising a proper campaign for jobs. The tax office and Gurit, a factory just across the road from Vestas, are already cutting jobs. Jobs are likely to be cut with the schools reorganisation now under way. The postal workers' dispute is about job cuts.

There are practical things to be done and work on them has to start as soon as possible, so that the people who've stuck the Vestas dispute out to the end go on to the next stage with some energy still fresh, rather than staying on this stage until they're so exhausted that they have to step back.