

Airport catering workers still sacked at Heathrow airport

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More than 600 airport catering workers employed by in-flight catering firm Gate Gourmet at Heathrow Airport in London remain sacked. The workers have been fighting to be reinstated by the company over the past week following their replacement with temporary staff hired by a company called Vera Logistics.

It is now known that this company was founded eight months ago by Gate Gourmet for the specific task of hiring a replacement workforce, employed on lower pay.

The sackings resulted in the 48-hour shutdown of British Airways (BA) at Heathrow airport on August 11 and 12 as BA staff held an unofficial strike action in support. More than 300,000 airline passengers around the world had their travelling plans and holidays disrupted.

On August 16, negotiations between the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) and Gate Gourmet broke down. The union say that this was due to the firm's insistence that it would not reinstate all the sacked workers but wanted instead to "selectively re-employ" as it pleased.

In a further statement, the TGWU called on British Airways to intervene in the resolution of the dispute. However, while the TGWU were calling for help from BA, the airline was instigating a wide-ranging "investigation" into the unofficial action of its own staff.

British Airways chief executive Sir Rod Eddington wrote in a letter to staff that the walkout in support of the sacked workers was a "a body blow that defies belief". He wrote further, "I have also launched a full investigation into the circumstances that brought about this unofficial and outrageous stoppage so that further appropriate action can be taken".

BA has set up a "confidential hotline" and called on

staff to report the leaders of the unofficial strike and "to discuss the circumstances behind the strike". The airline said it will establish "whether staff were bullied or intimidated into walking out or staying out". A BA spokesman said the investigation may lead to the dismissal of those staff deemed responsible.

BA's decision to root out those workers who came out in solidarity strike action on behalf of their catering colleagues is being carried out with an eye toward the future. Under Eddington's stewardship, more than 13,000 jobs have been lost at the airline in a continuous effort to drive down labour costs. There are reports that BA will need to shed more workers as it increases the number of automated check-ins when it moves flights to Heathrow's new Terminal 5 in 2008.

BA is fully aware that such plans will encounter opposition, which may, as it has this year and in the past, develop outside the control of the compliant TGWU bureaucracy.

Commenting on the BA investigation, Dan Solon, an analyst at Avmark International, a London-based consulting company, said, "British Airways wants to make it clear to the public that they really were ambushed and that the strike was not down to poor management. Chief Executive Rod Eddington will be concerned that this was an orchestrated strike and not a spontaneous action".

But proof emerged this week establishing Gate Gourmet's responsibility for provoking the dispute. They had detailed plans worked out beforehand to provoke their staff into unofficial action and then sack them. The *Times* newspaper published a memo on August 14 drawn up last year by Gate Gourmet management that read, "Recruit, train and security check drivers... Announce intention to trade union, provoking unofficial industrial action from staff.

Dismiss current workforce. Replace with new staff.”

According to the document, this was to be carried out over a four-month period and would involve the wholesale recruitment of a cheaper Eastern European workforce. Upon the disclosure, the company attempted to deny all responsibility for the memo by claiming that it been drawn up a year ago by managers who had since left the company.

Further press reports this week stated that Gate Gourmet was heavily in debt and that some creditors were considering demanding the repayment of £177 million. Aware of the increasingly perilous financial state of Gate Gourmet, BA has moved quickly to help ensure its future.

On August 17, details emerged of a proposed new contract between British Airways and Gate Gourmet. The contract is reportedly an “improved offer” and would expire in 2010. British Airways said it would provide the caterer with “business stability”. The airline provides about 80 percent of Gate Gourmet’s UK catering work.

An article in the *Times* on August 17 reported that Gate Gourmet opposed BA’s suggestion that the contract be linked to “any agreement with staff or the union over job losses or reforms to staff conditions”.

It now appears that BA has dropped any such conditions. Their statement said, “It’s no secret that Gate Gourmet has to deliver both commercial and labour changes to safeguard its future. For our part we have been in commercial discussions since mid-April. We have offered a two-year extension to the contract to 2010 and to increase its value. We are prepared to stand by the terms of the deal that has been agreed in principle since mid-July”.



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