

Britain: union agrees to hundreds of redundancies to sell out Gate Gourmet strike

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The Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) and the in-flight catering company Gate Gourmet are seeking to impose an agreement to end the strike by more than 600 workers that began August 10.

The deal signed by the union August 25 with the company, which provides meals for British Airways (BA), will result in the loss of around 670 jobs, nearly a third of Gate Gourmet's 2,000-plus London workforce. Touted as a package of "voluntary redundancies," the strikers are in reality being presented with an ultimatum by their union to take a minimal package of compensation or remain isolated and penniless until they finally leave with nothing—an argument backed up by the refusal of the union to give any strike pay for the past month and the threat that the company will fold if no agreement is reached.

The Gate Gourmet workers will not even be balloted on the deal. Instead, a letter from the company outlining the offer has been sent for individual workers to either accept or reject.

The union has attempted to sell its betrayal by stating that the redundancy payments on offer have increased and will be twice the statutory minimum. Even if this is true, Gate Gourmet workers are only paid between £12,000 and £16,000 a year, so kitchen workers will receive around £1,000 and drivers around £2,000.

The agreement represents a victory for the largest in-flight catering firm in the UK. According to an article in the *Financial Times*, the number of redundancies is virtually the same as that agreed by the company and the TGWU in June. That deal was rejected by workers at that time. According to an August 28 *Sunday Times* report, it will not even have to pay out the redundancies because British Airways has offered the company a £7 million fund as part of its efforts to end the damaging strike.

No agreement has been reached to ensure that the 200 workers identified by the company as "hardliners and militants" who are "never coming back" are not victimised. A *Sunday Times* article states that "Sources at the company last night claimed that it had won in negotiation the right to take back into employment only the staff it wanted to return."

If the blackmail by the union succeeds, the company will have secured everything it wanted—a reduction in labour costs, the sacking of its most determined opponents and the two-year extension of a lucrative contract with BA. A strike that in its early stages paralysed Heathrow Airport will have been led to a pathetic end.

It is essential that all working people draw the essential lesson from the Gate Gourmet dispute—namely, that it is impossible to wage any successful struggle against the employers without a political rebellion being mounted against the trade union bureaucracy and a break from narrow trade union forms of struggle. This much was clear from the very beginning.

Had it been left up to the TGWU, the redundancies required by the company would have been implemented without any opposition, just as countless previous attacks have been. According to employees' accounts, the workload has steadily increased while staff levels have been cut. The numbers of flights workers were expected to service increased from 42 to

72, and they could no longer share the workload with a nightshift. Sick pay entitlement was reduced from 25 days a year to 5. Overtime pay rates, which had previously risen according to the length of shift, were to become a flat rate, and shift patterns were changed.

Earlier this year, the company began negotiations with the TGWU regarding the imposition of a new contract on its workforce. The TGWU met with Gate Gourmet on more than 30 occasions during the course of the negotiations.

In June, the loss-making company and the TGWU reached a deal to implement a redundancy programme on the same level as the latest proposal. This was aimed at slashing labour costs by £14 million a year and was presented by the company and the union as a "rescue" package that would secure the future of the firm. It was this agreement that later led Gate Gourmet Managing Director Eric Born to describe the TGWU as "as an important business partner."

However, when the deal was recommended to the workforce by the union, it was rejected overwhelmingly in a ballot by a majority of nine to one.

In a pre-planned response, the company carried out a mass sacking and lockout of its workforce, who were replaced by a cheap labour force of agency workers it had organised as strike-breakers in preparation for industrial action.

According to a leaked internal company document published in the *Times* on August 14, long before the dispute broke out Gate Gourmet had planned to "Recruit, train and security check drivers.... Announce intention to trade union, provoking unofficial industrial action from staff. Dismiss current workforce. Replace with new staff."

This was to be carried out over a four-month period and would involve the wholesale recruitment of a cheaper workforce, mainly from eastern Europe.

The company has denied responsibility for the memo by claiming that it been drawn up a year before by managers who had since left the company. But the timescale of events it envisioned is almost exactly what has occurred in the dispute.

On August 10, 120 new staff hired by Gate Gourmet turned up for work at the Heathrow site for the morning shift along with the regular workforce. Permanent members of staff, knowing that there were company plans for redundancies, assembled in the canteen to discuss the situation.

At around midday, some 300 employees gathered in the canteen were given a barely audible ultimatum that unless they returned to work in three minutes they would be sacked. The workers refused and remained in the building, and amidst the ensuing confusion were fired.

At around 2:00 p.m., afternoon shift workers arriving for work became aware of the sackings and refused to work. According to eyewitnesses, a manager addressed them with a megaphone in the car park and fired them. The dismissals were later confirmed in a written note.

The sacked workers were then physically removed from Gate

Gourmet's premises.

The scabs used to replace the sacked workers were employed by Versa Logistics, which Born had established eight months previously. A spokesman for Born later explained, "Versa was set up early this year due to the imminent threat of strike action. It was important we had a contingency plan if something went wrong, and sensible to have a company in place that can bring in staff when necessary. Eastern European people are happy to work for less money. They are fully trained and fully capable. All temporary workers are paid less than permanent staff."

To this point, everything had gone according to the company's plan. But then things took a new turn because of the actions taken by the Gourmet workers independently of the trade union bureaucracy.

The sacked workers mounted their own protests and began to inform colleagues and friends of what had happened. This evoked a powerful response amongst BA workers, who themselves face deteriorating working conditions and the threat of redundancies. Up to 1,000 ground staff employed by BA took unofficial strike action in solidarity with the Gate Gourmet workers.

As a result, within 24 hours the principal airline at one of the busiest airports in the world had been brought to a standstill. The industrial action paralysed BA's flight operations at its Heathrow global hub for nearly 48 hours. More than 110,000 passengers around the world were stranded, and it is estimated that the dispute cost the airline around £40 million.

The actions taken by the sacked workers marked the beginning of a rebellion against the union bureaucracy and its class-collaborationist agenda. Without this step being taken, the Gate Gourmet dispute would have had little impact. It was only by breaking the stranglehold of the trade union leaders that the power held by the working class was given expression, even if only partially. Indeed, the next days saw the company itself placed on a back foot as BA placed as much pressure as possible for a quick resolution to the conflict.

It is illustrative in this regard to compare the experiences of Gourmet workers in Britain with the striking mechanics at Northwest Airlines in the United States. In this case, the dispute was neutered by the union bureaucracy from the very beginning. The Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA) limited industrial action to an ineffective picket line that was not honoured by the other airline unions or the broader union movement, which organised no solidarity action—thus allowing the company to continue functioning.

In the next days, the dire situation facing the company was turned around solely thanks to the TGWU's efforts to bring the strike back under its control. The union is supposed to defend the interests of thousands of Heathrow Airport and BA workers, but it did everything in its power to end a strike it viewed as a threat to its "partnership" not only with Gate Gourmet and BA, but with a host of other corporations nationally.

The TGWU's first action was to publicly condemn the strike as illegal and demand its members return to work. TGWU leader Tony Woodley later wrote in a letter to BA, "We do not condone what happened last week and we took appropriate steps to end the unofficial action."

This earned it the praise of BA, which stated, "The union was very firm to repudiate the unofficial walkout by [BA] staff, which is important to remember." For its part, the Trades Union Congress (TUC), the British trade union federation, declared its support for the TGWU's stand.

The calling off of sympathy action left the 600 workers standing on the grass verges outside the gates of a company that had replaced them with scabs. A few days later, even this ineffective protest was to be severely curtailed. On August 21, the High Court heard a case of complaint from Gate Gourmet accusing the sacked workers of intimidation and harassment. The court ruled that workers could continue to protest on the grass verge, but limited the number of people that could picket outside its main entrance to a token presence of six.

It also ruled that the TGWU would have to police the behaviour of pickets and stop any attempts at "intimidation or harassment" in or around the protests. The injunction named 17 people who have been accused by the company of harassment and intimidation. It ruled that the union would face legal action if it failed to control the behaviour of those protesting. The TGWU promised to ensure that "our members understand what is reasonably expected of them."

This is the way things have continued ever since, with the TGWU relying on time and growing hardship to chip away at the resistance of its sacked members and force them to accept the dirty deal it has drawn up with the company.

An e-mail statement from Gate Gourmet makes clear that its deal with the TGWU is only the thin end of the wedge: "It is Gate Gourmet London's hope that the results of this voluntary program and compensation payment plan, coupled with a possible compulsory program and work rule changes, will reduce its workforce to levels agreed upon by the union which will restore the company to economic viability."

The class-collaborationist perspective on which the unions are based—exemplified by the privileged caste of functionaries and allies of corporate management at their head—is rooted in a nationalist perspective that acts to prevent any effective struggle by the working class against the employers.

It is chiefly thanks to the economic nationalism espoused by the trade unions that Gate Gourmet and other corporations have been so successful in driving down wages and undermining working conditions. Its ability to replace an already poorly paid and predominantly Asian workforce with east Europeans willing to work for even less money is only one manifestation of the bankruptcy of all attempts to defend the working class on a purely national basis. In this case, east European migrants are being employed in Britain. In other cases, companies transfer their operations overseas. In any event, the globalisation of production under capitalism has established an ever-lower benchmark that forces workers to compete against one another for a diminishing share of national income.

The constant refrain of both the corporations and their flunkies in the union bureaucracy and the media is that there is no alternative but to comply with the agenda set by contemporary economic realities. For example an article by Salil Tripathi in the August 24 *Guardian*, "Catering for globalisation," insists that neither the company nor the workforce have any choice but to lower wages in order to be competitive or keep their jobs. "The first lesson of globalisation was that workers in the industrialised world would have to be more flexible, and accept that someone somewhere else may be prepared to do the same job for less money ... For current workers, maintaining a particular way of life, even if it is not luxurious by British standards, will be a challenge, because a wage unacceptable to them would be acceptable and an attractive proposition for someone else in Europe."

The writer concludes that "this goes beyond the present catering dispute at Heathrow. It is about the way the world is."

This is only the way the world is if one accepts the immutability of the profit system and the division of the world into antagonistic and competing nation states. That is why it is necessary not only to organisationally break from the trade union bureaucracy, but to adopt an entirely opposed political perspective to trade unionism—which even in its most militant guise cannot defend the interests of working people.

The working class must now undertake to construct its own socialist political party. This will provide the leadership and organisation necessary to take on and defeat the political power wielded by big business and its ability to bring to bear the power of the state against isolated groups of workers—as has been demonstrated by the legal attacks on the Gate Gourmet strike.

Such a struggle can only be conducted on the basis of uniting workers across national borders. Gate Gourmet is a subsidiary of a major global

corporation, US venture capital firm Texas Pacific Group. It serves some 20 airlines including British Airways, United Airlines and American Airlines, and has operations in 29 countries employing 22,000 people.

Whilst sacking hundreds of workers in Britain, the *Guardian* reported that in the United States the company, “plans to cut average pay of \$11 [£6.20] an hour by 12 percent and slash holiday, pension and health care benefits.”

Fierce competition within the airline industry, rising fuel costs and other factors threatening losses of \$6 billion this year alone have provoked other transnational companies to mount an endless series of attacks on airline workers. Tens of thousands of jobs have been shed, alongside attacks on the wages and working conditions.

An essential function of the trade union bureaucracy is to prevent the type of unified offensive by the working class without which such global operators cannot be defeated. It is only on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective that the efforts of the employers to divide workers against each other can be overcome and the class struggle be effectively pursued. This is the programme advanced by the Socialist Equality Party.



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