

British SWP covers for union betrayal of Gate Gourmet workers

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On August 11, one of the world's largest airlines, British Airways (BA), was brought to a standstill at one of the world's busiest airports, London's Heathrow.

Other airlines were severely disrupted by ground staff striking in support of 670 workers sacked the previous day by BA's in-flight meal provider, catering company Gate Gourmet. Given three minutes' notice, the catering workers were replaced by temporary lower-paid staff brought in by Versa Logistics, set up as a wholly owned subsidiary of Gate Gourmet eight months previously.

The dispute became world news, and the action by the Gate Gourmet employees resonated with BA employees and millions of workers around the world who themselves face deteriorating working conditions and the threat of redundancies.

But within a month of this show of solidarity, the sacked Gate Gourmet workers have been left to fight alone and BA has been emboldened to take action against ground staff. The principal responsibility for this rests with the trade union bureaucracy and its "left" apologists.

Within hours of the walkout, the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) stepped in to end action it viewed as a threat to its "partnership" not only with Gate Gourmet and BA, but with other corporations nationally. It instructed BA ground staff to return to work, and its leader, Tony Woodley, assured BA, "We do not condone what happened last week and we took appropriate steps to end the unofficial action."

Britain's largest leftist group is the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). They are also the major party within the Respect-Unity coalition, alongside a few smaller left formations and the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB). The former Labour member of Parliament (MP) George Galloway was elected as a Respect MP for the east London constituency of Bethnal Green and Bow in May this year on an anti-war platform.

To date, the SWP has made no comment on Woodley's betrayal in its publications, and continues to report uncritically on the actions of Woodley and his associates.

The *Socialist Worker* newspaper portrays the dispute simply as one between "ruthless union-busters" and "a courageous group of largely Asian workers" helped by fellow TGWU members at BA who "delivered the most effective and militant solidarity action seen in Britain for two decades—in defiance of

the anti-union laws." No mention at all is made of the treachery of Woodley for calling off this "most effective and militant solidarity action."

In its first edition following the TGWU's calling off of solidarity action, the August 20 *Socialist Worker* singled out as the greatest achievement of the unofficial action the fact it had "forced a company that set out to destroy the T&G union at its sites to begin negotiations with union officials on Friday." Only then did it state in passing and without even mentioning the TGWU that "The action was called off after 24 hours, but it points to how this crucial dispute can be decisively won. It grounded all BA flights at Heathrow."

From the start, negotiations between the TGWU and Gate Gourmet were focused on a joint attempt to get the strike called off and secure the acceptance by the sacked workers of the redundancies demanded by the company. Instead of pointing this out, the SWP has dutifully reported the TGWU's appeals for funds for its sacked members, who received no official strike pay from the union's own coffers for weeks.

For his part, Galloway made a photo-op visit to the gate Gourmet picket line on August 30, during which he told the sacked workers, "You have the backing of your union and its general secretary, which has not always been the case with other unions and leaders."

The SWP has also accepted the union's arguments that it must abide by the anti-union laws prohibiting secondary action. In an interview published by the SWP without comment on September 3, Brendan Gold, head of the union's civil aviation section, says, "The union is working to ensure that all the solidarity *that can be expressed* [emphasis added] will be."

Gold gives two examples of solidarity the union has obtained so far. One is "solidarity action" at Copenhagen airport, but there is nothing explaining what this action consists of on the TGWU web site or the site the union has set up for the strikers.

The other is "full support" from US unions representing Gate Gourmet workers. This consists of a letter from Bruce Raynor, president of the UNITE Here! union, which has 6,000 members at Gate Gourmet US, saying "they will be forced to take every lawful measure possible to support our fellow union members" if the workers are not reinstated—i.e., the very same "lawful" policy of doing nothing that the TGWU is pursuing.

The September 10 *Socialist Worker* cites approval the fact that the TGWU is seeking an emergency resolution to this year's conference of the Trades Union Congress, which begins September 12. They write, "It calls for unofficial action to be legal when it is provoked by a company, agency workers to be employed on the same rates as full-timers, and for solidarity action such as the stoppage by BA workers in support of Gate Gourmet staff to be legalised."

One could not conceive of a more pathetic attempt at a militant posture than a resolution calling on the TUC to oppose the anti-union laws and make a humble appeal to the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair to amend them.

It is precisely because the trade unions and the Labour Party defend the interests of management that the Gate Gourmet strikers—who once paralysed Heathrow—are now restricted to a token protest on a grassy embankment, dubbed Beacon Hill by union officials, while Gate Gourmet truck speeds past and through the factory gates.

Last week, Gold, the head of the TGWU's civil aviation section, visited the picket line to sell the strikers a "framework agreement" that he had signed along with TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber and the Gate Gourmet bosses. All of Gate Gourmet's 2,100 workers then received a letter telling them to accept or reject the agreement and the compensation package on offer and return their forms to the TUC by Friday, September 2.

One striker explained to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters that he was offered £5,800 in June for six years' service, but now the offer was £4,800. His wife, who had worked nine years, was offered £7,800—down from £9,800.

Gate Gourmet, according to the *Sunday Times*, claims that it has "won in negotiation the right to take back into employment only the staff it wanted to return." It says it won't take back 200 workers it identifies as "hardliners and militants." Yet even now, *Socialist Worker* reports Gold saying, "We will not allow the company to pick and choose."

Gold, in fact, admitted to the strikers that the company would not agree to reinstate all of the strikers. He said that they could keep fighting for their jobs if they wanted to, but those who wished could sign the form and take the compensation money.

And what does the September 3 *Socialist Worker* have to say? It quotes the TGWU convenor at Gate Gourmet describing the company letters agreed to by the union as a "small, but significant step forward.... In agreeing to write to everyone, the company is accepting it has a responsibility to the sacked workers. That is a crack in the position up to now where Gate Gourmet had said we were sacked and that was the end of the matter."

The SWP functions as a political adjunct of the trade union bureaucracy. Many of its members occupy junior positions within the union hierarchy, and, more importantly, Respect has secured the affiliation of a number of branches from at least three different trade unions.

with Both ~~arguing~~ that a new party of the working class should take the form of a rebirth of Labour-style national reformism coupled with militant trade union action. They maintain that such a new party will be led by a breakaway left section of the existing Labour Party and trade union leadership.

This serves to prevent the working class from drawing the essential political lessons of experiences such as Gate Gourmet.

It is not enough to recognise that the trade union leadership and the Labour Party are corrupt and defend the interests of big business. The degeneration of the old organisations of the labour movement cannot be explained as the product of bad leaders who need only be replaced by more militant ones. It is rooted in the failure of the nationalist and reformist outlook of trade unionism, a perspective that has proved incapable of defending the interests of the working class and that results inevitably in the growth of a class-collaborationist and privileged bureaucracy whose role is to police the class struggle and prevent it from taking revolutionary forms.

When production was predominantly organised within national borders, it was possible to extract certain concessions from the employers through strikes and protests. Today, however, the globalisation of production has enabled big business to establish an ever-lower benchmark by forcing workers around the world to compete against one another.

The trade unions, which are wedded to a nationalist perspective, are incapable of advancing a viable strategy for the working class of any country to defend its interests. As a result, the trade union and labour bureaucracy can no longer reconcile its defence of the profit system with even the maintenance of past gains, let alone an improvement in wages and working conditions.

Instead, the trade unions and the Labour Party have been transformed into mechanisms through which the demands of capital for wage cuts, speed-up and sackings are imposed, in the name of ensuring international competitiveness.

That is why the working class must now undertake to construct its own socialist and internationalist party. Only then can the working class be united across national frontiers to challenge the economic and political power wielded by big business. The SWP and Respect are an obstacle to the achievement of this historic task.



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