

Britain: Gate Gourmet strike betrayed by Transport and General Workers Union

Our reporter
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On September 28, the Transport and General Workers Union and management at the US-owned Gate Gourmet airline caterers reached a deal to end the six-week dispute between the company and its workers at London's Heathrow Airport.

The agreement between the TGWU and Gate Gourmet stipulates that 144 workers will be made compulsorily redundant and hundreds more will be encouraged to accept voluntary redundancy. There is no doubt that most of the compulsory redundancies will include those deemed "militants" and "troublemakers" by the firm.

The accord signed by the two parties will see just 187 of the 713 sacked workers get their jobs back. A further 210 will be offered the choice of re-employment or redundancy and 172 workers will take severance.

The company is also demanding that workers made compulsorily redundant sign "compromise agreements" under which they will have to waive their right to take their cases to employment tribunals.

The union and the company announced that hundreds of workers at the in-flight caterer that supplies meals for British Airways had voted to accept the deal. The TGWU had recommended it to a mass meeting attended by 600 sacked workers.

The dispute began on August 10, when Gate Gourmet summarily sacked more than 700 workers at Heathrow Airport and imposed a lockout, replacing its workforce with Eastern European agency workers it had organised as strike-breakers in preparation for industrial action. In response, some 1,000 British Airways workers staged unofficial strike action in solidarity with the Gate Gourmet workers, paralyzing BA flights for 48 hours.

The TGWU denounced the unofficial action and was instrumental in ensuring that its members at BA returned to work. Over the next six weeks, the union

worked to isolate the sacked workers and their campaign to win reinstatement, whilst negotiating a deal favourable to Gate Gourmet's demands.

Previously, the company had agreed a provisional deal based on 650 voluntary redundancies, whilst refusing to reinstate any of those workers it deemed troublesome. The TGWU said that about 700 of its members applied to accept the offer. These included 300 of those sacked and 400 from the Gate Gourmet staff still employed.

This week's agreement goes even further in imposing the agenda of the company, which has achieved all of its original demands.

Tony Woodley, TGWU general secretary, stated that he was pleased "that our shop stewards and members have accepted a settlement that will see the great majority of our members go back to work or take voluntary separation."

The deal vindicates the warning made by the Socialist Equality Party from the start of the dispute, as to the perfidious role of the TGWU. An August 30 WSWs article on the initial agreement between the TGWU and Gate Gourmet explained that working people must draw the central lesson from the Gate Gourmet dispute: "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..."

"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."

One of the women who have been sacked told the *World Socialist Web Site*:

“This is a complete betrayal, but what I can’t understand is why. We all pay our union dues, so the union should defend us and all they do is defend the bosses.

“What do I do now? I am one of the few people that did not vote, I did not put my hand up to accept the deal. I can’t go back to the wages they are now bringing in, because if I make trouble I will be out straight away. I will be glad to be one of the 144 that will be made compulsorily redundant.

“We all have children to feed and mortgages to pay. The strike pay was not worth anything. How could we live on just £55.00 a week? And then this was paid only after a long time and there are still people phoning the union to get even this money.”

Another male striker stated: “I am sick. The union has been nowhere to be seen throughout the last weeks here. They were here only at the beginning. They have spent more time with the company than with us.

“I am very bitter, I have worked here for nine years and with every change that has taken place the unions and the managers have worked together to cut our wages. The company have got everything they wanted, even when we have gone on strike. This is disgusting, and they will be able to pick and choose who will work and who will not work. I will take the money and go. I will not work with those that were working while I was out here.

“I am now 56 years old. It is going to be very difficult for me to find work. But I will not go back. The wages are terrible and if they want you to do overtime you have to stay and the pay is the same. We stayed inside the law as we were told, but the company didn’t. How is this? And to get our job back we have to sign that we will not take any legal action. How have they got away with this? I am very angry.”



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