

Unite union accepts below inflation pay deal for UK Heinz workers

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A deal has been struck in the UK between the giant food processing company HJ Heinz and the Unite trade union that, if accepted by the workers at the Kitt Green plant in Wigan, will represent a de facto wage cut.

Having twice rejected offers below inflation, workers at the plant—the largest food factory in Europe—are to vote February 13-18 on a deal the union has tried to force through in one form or another since September 2010.

The first rejection came after a mass meeting where the workers forced the local union officials to ballot on strike action against the proposed 3.3 percent rise. A 91.4 percent vote to reject the local union's recommendation stymied the union's attempts to push through the company's attack on wages. Local Unite official Graham Williams, speaking to the local *Wigan Today*, said it represented a "surprising and overwhelming rejection".

The local officials then handed the dispute over to the national union in an attempt to quash the workers' opposition. A series of weekly 24-hour strikes and a full overtime ban over the Christmas and New Year period were implemented. But in January, following negotiations between management and Unite national officials led by Jennie Formby, the strike planned for January 4 was called off.

The union then held another ballot on a deal that was little better than the previous one—a 3.5 percent rise this year plus a ?200 non-consolidated bonus with a 3.4 percent pay rise for 2012.

Workers again rejected this offer and the postponed 24-hour strike went ahead on January 11. But no further dates for industrial action were set. Instead Formby informed the press that Heinz and Unite had agreed to go to the government-controlled conciliation service, the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service

(Acas).

Acas consists of the chair and 11 employer, trade union and independent members, appointed by the Secretary of State for Business Innovation & Skills. Its current chair is Ed Sweeney, formerly the Deputy General Secretary of the Amicus union, which is now a part of Unite.

Many workers on the January 4 picket that spoke to a *World Socialist Web Site* reporter expressed alarm that Acas was being accepted by the union as an avenue to settle the dispute. Some have had bitter experiences with this "independent body."

The Heinz workers have every right to be concerned. Acas is rightly distrusted and seen by workers as the final act in the union bureaucracy's efforts to sell out disputes on the employer's terms.

In a press statement, Unite stated, "We are pleased that Heinz have been prepared to move significantly towards fulfilling our members' aspirations and we believe our members will view the revised offer positively. We will now be putting the offer to a secret ballot of the workforce. If the offer is accepted, as we believe it will be, we will then be able to move forward positively."

In turn, a statement from Heinz management read, "The talks were positive and constructive, taking full account of the concerns and aspirations of both sides. As a result, a new, further revised pay deal has been put forward by the company which the trade union team believe represents a significant move towards their members' aspirations. This has been viewed positively by the full stewards committee and we believe it is likely to be viewed positively by the workforce."

The new deal is for 3.9 percent for 2010 and again in 2011, together with the "consolidation of a pay supplement". This is just 0.6 percent higher than the

initial offer. With inflation running currently at 4.7 percent and expected to rise considerably in 2012, and with VAT rising to 20 percent between the two ballots, the union have accepted a deal that represents a reduction in workers' living standards.

Formby, in a press statement straight after the 3.3 percent offer was thrown out by the workers earlier this month, said, "Our members won't be palmed off with a second-rate deal that in real terms represents a cut in their standard of living." Unite have now achieved such a "second-rate" deal in the interest of management.

A leaflet distributed by the Socialist Equality Party at the plant prior to the latest announcement had warned against the role of the trade union. It stated:

"In trying to enforce the latest deal, Unite's statement said it was "a lay member-led union" and we will now move to ballot our members over the next week. It is they who will decide what next...' In reality, Unite has attempted to head off any conflict with Heinz, limiting action to periodic one-day strikes designed to isolate and exhaust workers while the union tops work with management and ACAS to resolve the dispute in favour of Heinz. By calling off the strike and recommending the acceptance of a deal, almost identical to that rejected months ago, it is the union bureaucracy who have 'decided' to end the dispute at the expense of the pay of the Heinz workforce."

It must be added that union members were not allowed any say in Unite's negotiations at Acas, and only learnt of this manoeuvre through the media.

The words of the SEP statement were correct a week ago, and they are correct today:

"Workers at the Heinz plant in Kitt Green Wigan, should reject the latest deal cooked up between management and the Unite trade union and mobilize to defend their jobs, wages and conditions...[they] must take the initiative and broaden out their struggle to the other 3,000 workers within the Heinz group in Britain. Their co-workers at the firm's plants in Europe and internationally must be contacted and their support enlisted.

"New organizations of struggle—rank-and-file committees democratically controlled by the workers themselves and independent from the unions—must be built armed with a socialist programme, aimed at mobilising the strength of the entire working class."



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