

Workers vote for strike action at Park Cakes factories, north west England

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Workers employed at Park Cakes factories in Oldham and Bolton, north west England, have voted to strike against changes to their terms and conditions that would see them losing up to £4,000 a year.

Mass meetings were held on October 29 by the Bakers Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU), even though the workers had already voted in an official ballot for strike action on October 14. BFAWU President Ian Hodson spoke at the Bolton meeting, while Ronnie Draper, the union's general secretary, was the main speaker at Oldham.

The workers at the Bolton meeting voted overwhelmingly for four separate days strike action on November 11-14, November 22 and November 30—the scheduled day of action called by a number of trade unions nationally against government cuts in pension rights. BFAWU Regional Organising Secretary Geoff Atkinson told the meeting that the strikes would be co-ordinated between both factories.

Hodson made clear the BFAWU's real purpose in calling action. "The threat of action will force the company back into negotiations... We don't want to take strike action, we want to solve this," he emphasised.

The dispute began in opposition to management's attempts to dodge the new Agency Workers Regulations (AWR), which is supposed to give employment agency workers more rights. In fact the legislation is being used as a means by which companies can employ staff on zero-hour contracts. Doing this allows the agencies to carry on paying their workers minimum wage. The 12-week rule in the legislation provides that workers doing the same or a similar job for that period should be given the same wage level and certain minor benefits relating to overtime as permanent workers.

Even though maximum fines of £5,000 can be levied against companies for breaking this rule, agency workers will be moved to other departments or out of the factory altogether long before 12-weeks continual employment is reached.

The ballot paper asked, "Are you prepared to take industrial action consisting of a strike?"

This is the same wording that was used by the union in the recent ballot at Burton Foods in Blackpool where the company registered an objection and strike action was called off at the last minute. A deal was then agreed by the BFAWU and Burton Foods, amounting to 6 percent over two years. As this was way below the inflation rate, the Blackpool workforce rejected it by a large majority. They eventually reluctantly accepted the same deal later, under pressure from the union.

Hodson told the workers at Bolton that the Conservative *Daily Telegraph* and the pro-Labour tabloid, the *Daily Mirror*, supported the workers' action and that cross-party support in parliament was evident through an early day motion signed by 20 MPs. The early day motion was sponsored by Labour MP John McDonnell and commits them to precisely nothing.

He continued, "We don't believe we have over-the-top pay rates. We believe we have proper negotiated reasonable pay rates. In fact we think they are low and it wouldn't cost the company that much to pay you all what's been negotiated."

On the BFAWU's website Hodson had earlier contrasted the recent hikes in Park Cakes management salaries, to the pay freeze for workers. In the meeting he declined to mention that his union sanctioned the wage freeze. At all times, the union works to shore up the profitability of the company, not defend jobs and conditions of its members.

In a statement posted on November 3, BFAWU explained, “Park Cakes Bakery claims that the cost of paying agency workers is such that it could put its business at risk.” “As a Trade Union, we would not put any business at risk and would work with any employer that was facing such difficulties. Indeed, we did last year with the very same Park Cakes, who told us they were struggling and that no one in the business was having a pay award.”

Park Cakes has been part of the global multi-billion pound capital equity company Vision Capital since 2007. It is estimated to be worth £2.7 billion

The union’s 2010 annual report is testimony to its role as the enforcer of wage cuts for its members. At Deli France, the report states, “The employers started with a 3-year pay freeze we got them down to 18 months. This was then rejected at ballot, further discussions took place and we are now balloting on a 1-year pay freeze. If this is rejected it will be a question of ACAS [the arbitration body] getting involved and a ballot for industrial action. I can report our members agreed to accept a freeze in pay for a twelve month period.”

At Hovis Premier Foods, Greenford, it states, “The employers’ position was that a 0 percent increase or put it another way a pay freeze was the only offer that would be made for that period.

Following a series of meetings with the employers we have extracted from the employers a three-year deal. This will see no increase for 2009/2010 but increases in line with inflation for the following two years.”

At Hovis Premier Foods, Eastleigh, the report states, “Further discussions took place with the employers which saw a revised offer being made. This was then put to ballot and our members accepted a two-year deal which included a pay freeze for the first year.”

The decline in BFAWU’s membership testifies to thousands of workers either losing their jobs as a result of the union refusing to defend them, or voting with their feet and leaving the union. In December 2003, BFAWU had 27,479 members. By December 2010, this was down to 22,392.

Winding up the meeting, Hodson said of the strike vote, “We are glad you support us and grateful for giving us a vote of confidence in the way we are dealing with this. But let’s be clear—we don’t want you to do it, we don’t, and we do it very, very reluctantly.”

After the Bolton and Oldham meetings it transpired that the two factories would not be striking together, as originally stated. The Oldham factory will strike on November 8 for three days and December 6 for three days. None of these coincide with strikes at Bolton or the national day of action set for November 30.

Meanwhile, factories continue to close or shed workers throughout the industry. At Warburton’s bakery in Oldham, 174 workers are set to lose their jobs. Workers at the firm’s Shaw bakery site were given a 90-day consultation notice on September 20. Warburton’s said employees could be offered jobs in other sites. However, the amount of travelling required and the starting hours would make that impossible for most.

Last year, Warburton’s initially announced that 121 of the 477 jobs in Bolton were under threat. After negotiations with the BFAWU, 45 staff ended up losing their jobs. Hodson commented at the time, “It’s never pleasant when people are under threat of losing their jobs, but we are as pleased as we can be after the original threat was to lose 121 jobs.”



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