

UK bakers union calls off strikes at Park Cakes

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Workers at Park Cakes Bakeries in Bolton and Oldham face the prospect of a reversal of their wages and conditions after the Bakers Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU) called off strikes, despite a clear mandate for action.

More than a month after 1,000 employees at Park Cakes voted to strike, the union has worked to sabotage any struggle.

On November 7, one day before three days of strikes were due to start at Park Cakes in Oldham, the BFAWU called it off. A four-day strike at the Bolton factory on November 11 was also called off. There were no concessions from management, just an offer to continue negotiations.

In a statement cited in the *Oldham Chronicle* but not on BFAWU's own website, regional officer Roy Streeter said, "This is good news, but with caution. It shows both sides are willing to negotiate. Our general secretary contacted the company for a meeting on Friday and they agreed to look at the situation."

The dispute concerns the European Union Agency Workers Directive (AWD) that came into effect on October 1. The government claimed that the AWD would give agency workers certain rights that already exist for full-time staff. The reality is that companies such as Park Cakes are recruiting new entrants on zero-hour contracts and pay grades slightly above the National Minimum Wage. This allows employment agencies to keep the agency workers on minimum pay.

Agency workers are not accorded the same employment rights as permanent staff until they have been employed for 12 consecutive weeks. Full-timers at Park Cakes face being forced to accept similar contracts or losing their jobs.

The strike ballots result announced October 14 was 79.25 percent in favour at Bolton, and 72.2 percent and 67.8 percent at the two branches in Oldham.

Instead of calling an immediate joint strike, two weeks passed before the union called separate mass meetings of workers in Oldham and Bolton on the spurious basis of asking the "members what they want to do."

Votes were held in favour of striking, workers at the Bolton meeting backing four separate days strike action on November 11, 14, 22 and November 30. Contrary to the statement of BFAWU Regional Organising Secretary Geoff Atkinson, who told the Bolton workers that strikes would be co-ordinated between both factories, separate strikes dates were called at Oldham.

Workers at the Oldham mass meeting were asked to support strikes to be held on November 8-10 plus December 6-8.

Even if the remaining strikes go ahead, staff at both plants will still be out on separate days, with Oldham taking action for just three days in December and Bolton just one day, on November 30.

No statement regarding the dispute at Park Cakes has appeared on the BFAWU's web site since October 17. BFAWU National President Ian Hudson merely called on workers "to write to their MP expressing their disapproval at the company's actions."

BFAWU claims that it is resisting the establishment of a two-tier wage system and inferior conditions system at the factory, conveniently ignoring that one has existed at both factories since the agency workers were brought into the production process over five years ago.

The fact that agency workers are forced to work on lower wages and inferior condition is entirely the responsibility of the union bureaucracy. In a statement earlier this month, Trades Union Congress leader Brendan Barber acknowledged the critical role the unions have played in allowing firms to implement the directive on their terms.

Barber stated, "The TUC and the [Confederation of British Industry] reached an agreement on these

regulations two years ago after many hours of discussion and compromises from both sides. The TUC reluctantly agreed to the 12-week qualifying period for the new rights.”

Outside the Bolton Park Cakes plant on the day the first strike was to begin, workers expressed their anger and frustration at BFAWU’s actions. One explained that once the company completed its Christmas production schedule and the traditional “slow time” period arrived, “the management will have the whip hand.” Permanent workers spoke of their disgust at the terms and conditions that agency workers were being forced to endure.

Agency workers said almost unanimously that they had never been approached by a union representative. Asked if any BFAWU representative had even explained the new AWD legislation to them, each replied that they hadn’t. Many agency workers were unaware that changes had even been made to their employment rights.

One worker said, “The union came around while we were working and told us the strikes were off. We didn’t have time to think about it. We voted to go on strike and we should have gone on strike. I can see where all this is going. We will all end up on the agency and on their pay.”

Another said, “With Christmas coming up not a lot of people can afford to take time off, and we could also lose our £300 attendance bonus, but at the end of the day we strike for a reason. If we don’t strike now and take action they are going to take more and more things off us.”

BFAWU’s sabotage of any struggle at Park Cakes is of a piece with its long record of working with the employers, at the expense of the jobs, pay and conditions of its members. Despite this, it is being heavily promoted as a “fighting trade union” by various pseudo-left groups including the Socialist Workers Party which invited Hodson to address its Right to Work conference.



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