

# Bakery union sells out Park Cakes fight

Robert Stevens  
14 December 2011

The Bakers Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU) has sold out the dispute by bakery workers employed by Park Cakes at sites in Oldham and Bolton, England.

The union has called off the strike action voted for by workers at both plants, and has agreed a deal with management that will impose minimum wage contracts on 149 employees.

Geoff Atkinson, BFAWU organising regional secretary, said the deal was “good news because we’ve created permanent contracts, albeit on minimum wage.” The fact that 149 workers now have “guaranteed wages and hours”, he claimed, offered them “a bit of security”.

In truth, the union has signed up to an agreement that pushes down wage levels for permanent workers, setting a benchmark that will be used for further attacks. For a 16- to 17-year-old employee, the minimum wage in the UK is £3.68, rising to £4.98 for 18- to 20-year-olds and just £6.08 for a worker aged 21 and over.

The dispute began in October following the introduction of the European Union Agency Workers Directive (AWD) that came into effect at the start of the month, which management was attempting to dodge.

The AWD was supposed to give employment agency workers more rights by providing that those doing the same or a similar job for more than 12 weeks should be given the same wage level and certain minor benefits relating to overtime as permanent workers. But companies are exploiting loopholes so that agency workers are either transferred or laid off, meaning they can continue to pay the minimum wage. This in turn is being used to undermine the jobs and wages of permanent staff.

On October 14, workers in Bolton and Oldham recorded high votes in favour of industrial action in Bolton and Oldham. Instead of calling an immediate

joint strike, however, the union sat on this mandate for two weeks. It then organised separate meetings of workers in Oldham and Bolton. As if a mandate for strike action did not exist, the meetings were called on the spurious basis of asking the “members what they want to do”.

Workers at both plants then voted again to hold strikes, on dates to be drawn up by BFAWU. Contrary to Atkinson’s claims, these were not coordinated between both factories. Instead, it was determined that employees at the Bolton site should strike on four separate days—November 11, 14, 22 and 30—while those at Oldham were asked to strike on November 8 and 10 and December 6 and 8.

In the event, all the strikes up to November 10 were called off by the union before they even went ahead. The strikes scheduled for December were also called off, as the union and management came to their final agreement.

Since the beginning of the dispute, the workers at Park Cakes bakery have been left totally isolated by the BFAWU bureaucracy. No campaign was waged to unite permanent staff and agency workers on the basis of a fight for decent pay and working conditions for all. At the beginning of the dispute, BFAWU national president Ian Hudson merely called on workers “to write to their MP expressing their disapproval at the company’s actions.”

The Park Cakes dispute occurred whilst workers at the Warburton’s Bakery, also in Oldham, face the loss of 174 jobs with the plant’s closure. In September, staff at the factory were told by management that a 90-day consultation period regarding its closure had begun. The company is streamlining its operations, even as it declared that sales had hit £492 million last year, whilst profits soared by 44 percent.

It goes without saying that the BFAWU has not lifted a finger to prevent nearly 200 workers from losing their

livelihoods.

Having been kept demobilised and isolated, the majority of workers at Park Cakes voted to accept the new agreement.

The BFAWU's stated concerns over how the AWD was being abused by companies, including Park Cakes, were entirely bogus. The fact that agency workers are forced to work on lower wages and inferior conditions is entirely the responsibility of the union bureaucracy. In a statement last 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."

The deal undermining workers' conditions at Park Cakes is no aberration. Even before the latest agreement, those at Park Cakes were working under a management-union pay freeze that was imposed last year.

The role of the trade unions as servants of management was summed up in a statement posted on the BFAWU web site last month. It read, "Park Cakes Bakery claims that the cost of paying agency workers is such that it could put its business at risk." It added, "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."

In the same November 30 statement, the union cynically noted that after it had agreed on a pay freeze for employees, "Imagine the disappointment of the workers at Park Cakes who found out later that their Managing Director had a 14.6% pay increase and that their Directors shared over half a million pounds between eight of them!"

In order to continue to reap profits, Park Cakes, as with all firms, must implement ever more draconian conditions against their workforce. In this, they have the full and active support of the trade unions.

This agreement to cut workers' pay, amid the skyrocketing cost of living and inflation, was just one

of a host of such deals that the BFAWU has agreed with companies around the UK in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crash.

These include deals at Deli France, Hovis Premier Foods at Greenford and Eastleigh and at Burton Foods in Blackpool. At the latter factory, the company registered a legal objection to a strike ballot, and the proposed action was then called off by the union. Management and the company then utilised this to agree on a 6 percent pay deal 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 (see "Workers vote for strike action at Park Cakes factories, north west England").

It is on the basis of this pro-business agenda that the BFAWU has lost thousands of members over the last decade. Members have either lost their jobs as a result of the union refusing to defend them, or have voted with their feet and left it.

The fate of the Park Cakes workforce testifies yet again to the reactionary role of the trade unions. They long ago ceased to be genuine organisations of the working class, and function solely to enforce the interests of management and the capitalist class as a whole.

It is imperative that Park Cakes workers draw the lessons of this experience. New rank-and-file organisations must be built—independent of the trade unions and labour bureaucracy—to unite all sections of the working class in a common struggle. This is the programme fought for by the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**