

British bakery to close with 200 job losses

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On October 3, it was announced that the RF Brookes bakery in Leicestershire, in the English Midlands, is to close, leading to the destruction of more than 200 jobs.

RF Brookes had already implemented two waves of redundancies in May and July this year, forcing many hundreds out of work in the Leicester area.

This came on top of 200 job losses in September 2011, when then owners Premier Foods announced the axing of nearly 200 jobs following the loss of a major supermarket contract. Premier had already eliminated 200 jobs earlier in the year.

In December 2011, the company was taken over by the 2 Sisters Food Group. The Leicestershire plant then employed around 500 workers. Some 190 job cuts were announced in May 2012, followed by the loss of a further 100-150 in July.

The redundancies in July came after workers carried out a four-day strike against plans to reduce redundancy payments, which 2 Sisters claimed were necessary to protect against further job losses.

Having reportedly written to workers claiming that the strike would have no effect, company officials then announced a week later that some work would be transferred to Nottingham and the number of redundancies increased.

In a statement at the time, a 2 Sisters' spokesman blamed the strike for the job losses. "Unfortunately, due to recent events it has been necessary to make contingencies. As a result, and reflecting our need to be able to have continuous production, we have regrettably proposed an additional number of redundancies".

The *Leicester Mercury* protested at what it described as "a seemingly vindictive act by the company for workers exercising their right to protest about a change in their conditions of employment".

"This sort of industrial relations should have died out many years ago", it complained.

The Leicestershire plant is now due to shut its doors

in March 2013.

Part of its production has been moved to a new site, in nearby Nottingham. The company announced it was creating 100 jobs as a result of new business. In fact, these "new" jobs are nothing of the sort. They are what is described as "pre-employment training" for the unemployed.

The company explains that it has worked "with Nottingham Jobcentre Plus and the Grimsby Institute of Further and Higher Education (GIFHE) to deliver up to 100 fully trained operatives" by October 1.

According to a spokesperson for Jobcentre Plus, the aim is to give the unemployed "an idea of what it's like to work in the food sector".

"If they complete the training they are guaranteed a job interview", he said.

Over the past summer, another 2 Sisters subsidiary, Cavaghan and Gray, in Carlisle, also launched an assault on workers' conditions and wage agreements. The company was seeking to lower overtime rates, sick pay and redundancy terms, and alter agreements on bank holiday working. The company has also pushed similar contracts at Fox's in Batley, West Yorkshire, threatening redundancies if the concessions are not accepted.

Workers have reacted angrily to this coordinated assault on jobs, wages and working conditions, but 2 Sisters has made it clear that it will brook no opposition to its actions. The transfer of jobs from Leicester to Nottingham will pit young, unemployed workers on workfare schemes against other sections of workers as part of effort to drive down wages and maximise profits.

In the case of RF Brookes, the company has made clear that it cannot even tolerate the token opposition advanced by the trade unions. The ex-lefts, particularly the Socialist Party, have presented the central issue as union-busting by the company. The unions have come

under attack in so far as they have been obliged to reflect workers' outrage at the job losses. They are, however, very far from leading any fight against the company's assault.

Across 2 Sisters, the unions involved have acted to channel workers' anger without seriously threatening the company.

In Carlisle, for example, workers voted two to one against the attack on working conditions. Their union, USDAW, immediately called for a compromise deal. Last month, the union brokered such a "compromise", which demonstrates the union's concerns.

In August, management agreed to leave the redundancy package untouched: statutory pay plus a payment equal to a week's earnings for every year of service.

Jayne Shotton, USDAW area organiser, told the media that "The company has given in on enhanced redundancy, which employees see as a massive breakthrough".

The emphasis on maintaining redundancy packages is telling. In exchange, the union agreed to a reduction in overtime payments from double time and time-and-a-half to time-and-a-half and time-and-a-quarter. The union also agreed to employees working three bank holidays for time-and-a-quarter and days off in lieu. Bank holidays were previously non-working days.

Shotton optimistically announced that "Management said they don't want to do death by a thousand cuts, they're making all the cuts in one swoop".

The reality can be seen by events at RF Brookes, where the company has spoken of taking "tough actions" at a loss-making site.

While the unions and the Labour Party call for investment into deprived areas such as Leicester, Nottingham and Grimsby, it is only on the basis of making these areas low-wage havens and pitting them against one another in the race to the bottom.

There has been significant opposition to these attacks. Organisations like Boycott Workfare reflect this anger but promote the illusion that, given sufficient pressure, the union leaderships can be made to fight and that the companies involved made to see sense and change course.

Events at RF Brookes have shown this is bankrupt. Jobs, working conditions and living conditions can only be defended through the formation of rank-and-file

action committees, independent of the trade unions, and in the fight for the socialist reorganisation of the economy.



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