

UK: Wigan Hovis workers bring strike action over zero hours contracts

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Around 200 workers at the Hovis factory in Wigan, Greater Manchester, have begun a series of three-week-long strikes against the introduction of agency workers on zero hour contracts.

Members of the Bakers Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU)—which represents 230 of the 357 employed at the site—voted by a margin of 75 percent in favour of the industrial action. The first week of strike action took place between August 28 and September 4. The second round is due to run from September 11 to September 18, with the final week starting on September 25.

The move towards casualisation of the workforce at Hovis by parent company Premier Foods forms part of a wider offensive of closing factories, eliminating jobs and driving down pay and conditions. In opposing these attacks, workers are not only faced with a fight against the company but the union itself. The BFAWU has made one concession after another to management and blocked any unified struggle at a national level.

Workers at the Wigan site decided to vote on strike action after 26 redundancies were made in April and agency workers on zero hour contracts taken on. During negotiations, the BFAWU had already agreed to the introduction of workers without any guarantee of hours and on inferior terms and conditions at the Wigan site. The union has subsequently attempted to justify its actions on the grounds that management reneged on the terms.

BFAWU regional official Geoff Atkinson stated, “We had an agreement that they could use agency staff only as a last resort. We do understand that the business needs temporary labour because of fluctuations in demand.”

The union presents itself as having been in the forefront of a campaign against the widespread use of

zero hour contracts to undermine secure jobs, pay and conditions across industry but feigns disbelief when Hovis adopts the same practice.

Hovis employs agency workers across its nine other sites nationally, and the unions’ acceptance of this has created the basis for a two-tier workforce. As has been the case throughout the private and public sector, the unions have attempted to defend this divisive practice by presenting it as a means of maintaining the terms and conditions of the permanent workforce. In reality, it has served as a mechanism for supplanting the latter with a new, superexploited generation.

By seeking to accelerate this process, the company has left the union without any cover at a time when it is being called upon to assist in the cutting of jobs and driving down of pay and conditions of all workers. The BFAWU at the Wigan factory has already acceded to cuts in hours and subsequently pay, all on the pretext that this was going to protect jobs. This has taken workers back to what they were earning 10 to 15 years ago.

At the same time, the union has not raised a finger to oppose the 900 job losses and closure of four sites announced by Premier Foods last November. While the union was telling workers in Wigan that sacrifices had to be made to protect jobs, the company called time on 50 years of bread production at the Garretts Green site in Birmingham with the loss of 511 jobs. The closure of the production site at Greenford, West London, has claimed another 196 while the axing of distribution sites in Plymouth, Devon and Mendlesham, Suffolk, has added a further 95 to the cull.

The BFAWU’s only response to this major downsizing operation was to offer to renegotiate pay and shift patterns in the interests of increased competitiveness. Regional official John Higgins stated

in relation to the Birmingham closure, “Rivals like Warburtons have never been slow to put their hands in their pockets. We want to see a genuine effort to save jobs on that site—there are a lot of angry people at Hovis. We are asking them for options—our members do not want to be the richest bakers in the dole queue, they want to be working.”

Higgins stated that the union had proposed the company eliminate the jobs of 80 agency workers to safeguard permanent jobs. However, the BFAWU’s pleas went unheeded by the company, and the closure programme went ahead in full. Premier Foods even issued a statement of gratitude to the union for its partnership with Birmingham City Council in cooperating with the closure of the factory.

Premier Foods’ restructuring is typical of that taking place across the economy. The food manufacturer, which owns many of the UK’s leading brand names, bought out Hovis in 2007. It has blamed the need to cut jobs on the loss of a £75 million a year contract to supply the Co-op supermarket. The squeeze by the supermarkets and increased competition from its rivals are all a product of the global recession following the economic crash of 2008. The company has also built up a debt of £1 billion following a wave of acquisitions including that of Hovis.

The BFAWU’s belated oppositional pose has nothing to do with unifying agency staff and permanent workers against this offensive, but with convincing the company that its services must be retained to police mounting discontent. According to a September 6 press release issued by the union, the company has now taken on 24 of the zero hour contract workers on a permanent and full-time basis.

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The BFAWU states that it will continue with the second round of strike action because, while Hovis has agreed to stop issuing zero hour contracts, it has not withdrawn the use of agency labour altogether. By defining this as the terms for resolving the dispute, the union leaves open the door for renewing its collaboration with the company, at the expense of the permanent workforce whilst casting agency workers to one side.

The BFAWU’s claims to have taken up the cause against zero hour contracts are without substance. In a

statement on its web site, the union refers to its role in a dispute in 2011 against “a well known supplier of cakes.” As well as failing to identify the company, other details of the outcome of this struggle are left conveniently vague. This can only be a reference to the dispute at Park Cakes in nearby Oldham and Bolton. The BFAWU had over an extended period negotiated away permanent jobs to be replaced with agency workers. The dispute in late 2011 developed in response to the company’s attempt to bypass the limited rights afforded to agency workers through the passage of the Agency Workers Regulation. The union cancelled the series of strikes planned after workers voted overwhelmingly in favour and accepted a deal in which 149 workers were taken on permanently but on the basis of the minimum wage.

The determined stand taken by Hovis workers in Wigan requires the adoption of a new perspective and forms of organisation. The isolation of the dispute by the BFAWU must be overcome and appeals made to the workers at the nine other Hovis sites for solidarity beginning with the immediate boycott of any transferred work.

Workers must reject the attempt to drive a wedge between agency and permanent staff. The basic principle of “an injury to one is an injury to all” can only be reanimated by championing the independent interests of the working class against the collaboration of the BFAWU with the profit drive of Premier Foods. It is on this basis the Socialist Equality Party calls for the building of rank-and-file committees.



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