

UK: Bakers union suspends strike action against 2 Sisters Food Group

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The Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU) suspended the seven-day strike at the Pennine Foods factory in Sheffield, due to commence from June 16. The union represents around 400 workers at the site owned by the 2 Sisters Food Group that employs 800 in total.

The seven-day strike action had been voted for at a meeting on the picket line during the second 48-hour stoppage on June 5/6. It was due to coincide with a second 48-hour stoppage at another 2 Sisters factory, RF Brookes in Newport, Wales.

This is the first dispute to emerge against the use of the National Living Wage (NLW) as a pretext to tear up workers' premium pay for shift, weekend and holiday working. Workers stand to lose up to £5,000 a year due to the changes with the contract.

The Socialist Equality Party welcomes the resistance shown by 2 Sisters Food group workers and their determination to defeat this attack. However, events at 2 Sisters demonstrate once again that in the hands of the unions any successful fight is faced with sabotage.

After receiving a clear mandate to escalate the strike, the BFAWU re-entered talks with management and called off the strike without the consent of the membership.

The BFAWU has yet to release a press statement. Notification was posted on social media with an information meeting held the next day. This is taking place under conditions in which the BFAWU have shifted the goal posts. It now claims that a victory has been obtained due to the company agreeing a backdated lump sum pay increase by June 30, while the question of the new contracts and elimination of premium pay is under negotiation.

The actions of the union have not been accepted uncritically. This was acknowledged as much by BFAWU full-time officer Haroon Rashid, who posted notification of the strike suspension on social media.

He wrote, "I have had a lot of Private Messages which have been very touching but also some people are still a little upset that we are not doing the 7 day strike all will be explained at Branch Meeting Tomorrow."

Among the concerns raised by workers are reprisals by management for the strike action. Within the workplace, everything is being done to reinforce the division of workers on different contracts, which workers aimed to overcome through the strike action.

The issues at 2 Sisters go beyond the several hundred workers involved in the dispute, but confront millions of workers facing the offensive by the employers and government.

Following the introduction in April this year of the NLW set at £7.20 per hour, major corporations, particularly in retail and food and drink industry, have used it as a Trojan horse to eliminate or reduce payments for overtime and Sunday working. This includes the main supermarkets such as Waitrose, Tesco, Sainsbury and Morrisons, all of which plead poverty and claim that such measures are necessary to offset the costs. This is under conditions in which the Conservative government has offered companies an exemption of £15 billion on corporation tax to protect their profits following the implementation of the NLW (and the increase in the National Minimum Wage for 21-24 year olds) last October.

The £7.20 per hour benchmark excludes workers under the age of 25 and is below the recommendation of the Living Wage Foundation of £8.25 per hour across the UK and £9.40 in London for those 18 and older. For many, far from representing a meagre increase, the NLW has served as the basis for a counter-reform that turns the clock back on terms and conditions and will cast millions more into the ranks of the working poor.

Boporan Holdings, which owns 2 Sisters Food Group, is the largest food manufacturer in the UK. It employs around 23,000 workers at its 45 sites across the UK, Ireland, Netherlands and Poland. It is owned by recently minted billionaire Ranjit Singh Boparan. Its chair is Labour Party peer Charles Allen.

This wealth has been accumulated on the basis of a wave of takeovers and a restructuring of 2 Sisters, at the expense of hundreds of jobs aimed at consolidating the company's

position as a major supplier to the big brand food retailers including Marks and Spencer. The profits of 2 Sisters Food Group and the main food retailers is underpinned by the low-wage economy in the food and drink industry, which employs 3 million in the UK—a third of which are from other European Union (EU) member states.

The strike action at 2 Sisters developed in spite, not because of the trade unions. The vote to strike was secured in opposition to the attempts to play different sections of workers against one another. For years, the BFAWU at the Pennine Foods factory in Sheffield has allowed new starters to be hired on inferior contracts without the premium rates, which the company now aims to withdraw from all workers.

The principle of equal pay for equal work has become a thing of the past and is not peculiar to 2 Sisters or the low-paid food and drink industry. It is mirrored throughout the private and public sector because the unions have mortgaged the future of the working class by claiming that protecting rights for existing workers can be maintained by denying them to the next generation.

The workforce at 2 Sisters Food Group testifies to the international character of the working class. It is evident on picket lines with white, black, Asian and east European workers standing together. This too runs counter to the line advanced by the unions, which at all times reinforce the sectional, regional and national division of the working class.

The BFAWU in calling for a Leave vote in the EU referendum on June 23 on the basis of lining up workers behind a nationalist campaign. In its joint statement with ASLEF and the Rail, Maritime and Transport trade unions, it claims that workers' rights are upheld by UK laws and criticises the Tory government for not going far enough with its attacks on EU migrants: "We note that David Cameron secured only very minor changes to EU rules and believe this demonstrates there is little hope of reforming the EU."

While 2 Sisters has declared open season on workers' terms and conditions across the country, the BFAWU have prevented any mobilisation at a national level. The policy of selective stoppages on a site-by-site basis cuts across the unification of the working class. It has been used repeatedly by the unions to rein in militancy and ensure that opposition does not cut across their attempts to renew their collaboration with the companies or government.

For its part Unite, the largest union in the country, has stalled any action at the 2 Sisters Pizza factory in Nottingham and has yet to announce the outcome of its strike ballot of its 440 members, which was due to be announced on June 6. Workers there have been confronted with an ultimatum to accept a "non-negotiated" pay settlement, which includes cutting overtime, weekend

working and bank holiday and sickness cover payments.

The issue for Unite is not the attacks on workers but the fact it has been bypassed as part of the negotiating apparatus.

It stated, "Any attempts to cut workers' overtime, holiday and weekend pay to offset the government's new 'national living wage' or to impose changes without negotiating with the workers' union will be strenuously challenged by Unite."

Unite has also advised the company to settle the pay dispute from last year in order to pave the way for negotiations on the contract.

The fight at 2 Sisters must be taken out of the hands of the BFAWU and Unite and based on the election of rank and file committees to extend the action on a national level:

- No secret negotiations between the union officials and the company.
- Appeal for solidarity from 2 Sisters workers across all sites in Europe.
- Turn the struggle out to broader sections of workers and youth, agency workers and zero-hours contract workers.

Above all else, the struggle must be conducted at a political level. Against the claims of poverty by 2 Sisters and the corporations, workers must advance a socialist programme that begins to make inroads into their vast concentration of wealth based upon private ownership and production for profit. This means breaking the grip of the financial and corporate elite enforced through the parliamentary system of the Tories and Labour.



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