

JDE strikers in UK: “It’s a bit like the pandemic, I can’t see the light at the end of the tunnel.”

Our reporters
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A reporting team from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with striking workers picketing at JDE’s plant in Banbury, Oxfordshire on May 8.

Alex, who has worked at the plant for 15 years and told the WSW, “The factory’s been here since 1965. It’s always been unionised labour and of late JDE took over and they put in place a bully boy—a guy called Rob Williams.

“He’s basically been walking over the workforce since he’s arrived, to the point now where he intends to take at least one fifth of the wages off the longest serving people and basically make us work an average of 30 more shifts per year.

“We used to be on a defined benefit [pension scheme]. He’s taken that off us, and that to me personally means a deficit of nearly £15,000 a year. So, you can understand where we’re coming from. I come from a mining background and I understand about workers’ rights and I feel that this is the worst case of fire and rehire.”

Alex cited the billions being made by corporations such as JDE and their hedge fund investors, “Do you understand what a billion is? A million seconds is 12 days. A billion seconds is 34 years. That’s the difference--and that’s what these people are like.”

JDE is closing the Banbury plant’s Research and Development [R&D] division resulting in the loss of 50-60 jobs. Alex said, “Our brothers in R&D are going and we should be doing more for them.” He gave the example of someone there who “came though as an apprentice and worked his way up through the factory to near second in charge. And now him and his wife are losing their job and they’ve got small children.”

Tom has worked at JDE for 15 years. He said, “I’ll

be losing about £7,000 a year, just on my basic. The overtime rates are going to be slashed so no double-time or time-and-a-half – there’ll be a flat rate. My shift patterns are going to change, so I’ll be expected to do another 33 shifts a year, which means I’m going to be away from my family, away from my loved ones, for less money. That’s what my fight’s about – they talk about work-life balance and they’re completely stripping it away.

“If you had a football team at the bottom of the table, you don’t sack all the players do you? You start with the manager and that’s the only way forward.”

Tom agreed with the need for international unity among workers to defeat JDE’s attacks, “There are four other factories taking action on behalf of us in solidarity--in Canada, France, Belgium and Spain... the people at the top are just venture capitalists, just trying to profit and then sell it. This company has sold its name four times since I’ve been working here.”

With two children and a mortgage, Tom said JDE’s plans would affect his family massively, “My wife will have to potentially change her job for more hours. So we’re going to end up seeing our children less, and that’s my biggest bugbear. I spend more time here, already, than I do with my family. 40 hours a week... and now they want me to do more, for less money. Where’s the humanity in that?”

Marvin, Nial and Steve have worked at the plant for 20 year, 27 years, and 18 years respectively. **Nial** said, “I’m losing a lot of money from my pension and other things. The company is making a lot of money and has made more since lockdown.

“How much is enough? It’s unbelievable. We hope our colleagues in Europe do what they say they are

going to do, preventing them from shipping work in to try to cover it.”

Marvin said, “They don’t value us anymore, no matter the experience or skill set. You’re basically just another number in their game. You don’t get the best out of people when you treat them like that. It’s horrible place to work now. Every day is toxic...”

“Management can see that the only way we can win is with the support of our European colleagues. Today, we’ve shut down. It will take them 2 days to get going. We’ll have to go in tomorrow and get it started up again. You normally don’t see management, but they’ll be on our backs tomorrow.

“Over the last three nights I saw the managers/supervisors for about 3 minutes. That shows how little we rely on them... This new CEO we’ve got is very vindictive. If you tell him what you think, he says it’s a lack of respect and dignity. He calls you in for a one-to-one to be ‘realigned’. That’s the language he uses.”

Marvin spoke about the cuts to pensions, “We get 3 weeks’ pay for every year that we’ve been there. He wants to reduce that to a maximum of 18 years. A lot of us have been here for a lot longer than that. I’ve been here for 26. So straight away they’re reducing their costs. You would not put that in unless you were thinking of making redundancies in the future. It’s all about corporate greed.”

Paul started work at the plant in 1983. “I’ve been here all my life, straight from school. In July, they changed our pension scheme, which drastically alters the amount you get. They’re also averaging about 20 percent pay cut. And they’re getting rid of one of our shifts. We run a five-shift pattern and they’re changing it to a four-shift pattern... with a pay cut it’s even less money. We just want a fair deal. We worked all through the pandemic. We’ve made them record profits and now our reward is to have a pay cut.”

Paul said that international solidarity was key, noting that “the company can build this branch anywhere in the world”. He explained, “We’ve had solidarity from America. All the JD branches in Europe and Germany, the Netherlands, and the French. The French are going to do some one hour strikes and try to do an international protest.”

Amy described the company’s tactics as “divide and conquer”. She explained, “We’ll be losing £4-6k a

year. They gave us till the 4th of May to sign, otherwise there’s 60 people willing to do our jobs, so they’ve got us over a barrel.

Peter, her co-worker agreed, “We had to sign, we had no choice, but we did so under protest. Nineteen signed. I’ve worked here 23 years. Between the four of us [standing together on the picket] we’ve been here 80-90 years.”

Amy said, “It’s a bit like the pandemic, I can’t see the light at the end of the tunnel”. Phil replied, “There isn’t one. Management are so arrogant about everything, they just think that they can do whatever they want.”

Dave said he has worked at the company since 1973, “I’ve worked for some nasty horrible people in the past. When I started here 23 years ago, I thought thank god for that, I have finally come somewhere to work for someone who appreciates what you do. They reward you fairly, and they really care about the staff.

“Everything was done mutually, but for the past three years I’ve never known such a pig-headed bunch of individuals that are trying to drive this through. And it’s out of pure greed and the egos of the individuals who are trying to push it through.

“If this plant’s in such a dire position, how come the onus for recovery is not being borne by everybody? It’s being portrayed as an inefficient site because it fits their narrative. It’s far from it. It boils down to rank corporate greed.”

Asked for his thoughts on the way forward, Dave replied, “Strike action, that’s the only thing that they are going to understand. Hopefully we’ll get the support of workers in Europe and globally. This is taking industrial relations back over a hundred years. What are we going to be doing next, sending kids up chimneys?”



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