

UK: Jacobs Douwe Egberts workers strike against “fire and rehire”

Our reporters
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On Saturday, more than 200 workers from the Jacobs Douwe Egberts (JDE) plant in Banbury, Oxfordshire, along with family and supporters, picketed the plant as part of a 24-hour strike against the company’s use of Section 188 “fire and rehire” notices to push through contract changes.

Holding placards and sounding horns around the entrance to the plant, picketers endured a rainy and windy day to oppose the inferior contracts. JDE is one of the largest employers in Banbury, and broad community support for the strikes was apparent from the stream of car drivers sounding their horns.

Even though the pandemic has seen 9.1 percent growth for JDE Peet’s—the owners of JDE—due to booming demand for their coffee and tea products, workers are facing a brutal assault on their terms of employment.

Tom, who has worked at the plant for 14 years, told our reporters, “I’ll be losing about seven grand a year, just on my basic [salary]. 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, for less money. That’s what my fight’s about—they talk about work-life balance and they’re completely stripping it away.”

Pensions will also be targeted. JDE worker Alex explained, “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 grand a year. So, you can understand where we’re coming from.”

Workers have faced escalating attacks since the company was purchased by JAB Holdings in 2012, just three years after the global financial crisis. “It’s divide-

and-conquer,” said one worker. “They’ve got different people on different contracts. Some are being offered one thing and some another. They are trying to force people to accept with different deadlines and different hourly rates. Some people are being offered £40 a year for an extra 150 hours. Christmases, weekends, bank holidays. It’s just disgraceful.”

Marvin, who has worked at the plant for 27 years, went further: “They don’t value us anymore, no matter the experience or skill set. You’re basically just another number in their game. That’s how people feel now. 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.”

JDE’s use of Section 188 notices is part of a wave of fire and rehire attacks launched in recent months, including at British Airways, Tower Hamlets Council, British Gas, SPS Technologies and Go North West buses. Major corporate and financial interests are seizing on the pandemic to implement far-reaching attacks on pay and conditions.

But it is necessary to issue a sharp warning. Unite’s campaign against fire and rehire is an appeal directed to company boardrooms, shareholders and capitalist politicians and has nothing to do with defending the conditions of workers. The union’s sole concern is that new demands for workplace flexibility, cuts to pay, redundancies and pension reform, must be implemented via corporatist agreements with the union.

Saturday’s 24-hour strike was held one day after Unite officials began talks with JDE executives at the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS). Joe Clarke, Unite National Officer for the Food Industry, told strikers, “We made demands to the company to de-escalate and withdraw the Section 188, and to be honest, we were met with pure arrogance”.

But Clarke, along with Unite Assistant General Secretary Steve Turner, said little about the content of the ACAS talks.

Unite officials have declared their aim is to force JDE to “return to the negotiating table” but are silent on the union’s own negotiating position.

At British Airways, after the company issued fire and rehire notices, including demands for the elimination of 12,000 jobs and pay cuts of 20 percent, Unite declared a victory after it negotiated a deal resulting in the loss of 4,000 jobs and the gutting of conditions—a deal that cabin crew denounced as a “total shambles” and “betrayal”.

At Go North West in Manchester, where nearly 500 bus drivers have been on strike against fire and rehire since February 28, Unite has countered with alternative savings proposals worth £1.3 million. The company has responded by withdrawing its Section 188 threats to enter talks with Unite, with the content of their proposed deal yet to be announced. At SPS Technologies, Unite pushed through annual pay cuts worth £1,500 per worker, as opposed to the £3,000 initially demanded by the company. Similar “victories” workers have suffered via company-union restructuring deals are being prepared under the whip of intensified global competition for markets and profit.

At JDE, the workforce has suffered from a steady divestment and shrinking of the plant over the past 20 years. As one of the picketers explained, “It’s a massive factory, but if you look around, half of it has been sold off. R&D (Research and Development) has been shut down. That part of the factory there has been sold off. They are selling off all the assets... The office block here has been empty for about 10 years. They want to knock it down, but the cost of it, they don’t want to incur yet. They are slowly strangling the place.”

Company-union agreements in recent years have seen the introduction of 12-hour shifts and other attacks on pay and conditions. Unite’s opposition to a genuine fight is shown by its refusal to challenge JDE’s axing of 50-60 jobs at its Research and Development division at the Banbury site. There has been no call for united action to defend the jobs.

Workers at JDE can only defend themselves by breaking from Unite’s corporatist straitjacket, forming a rank-and-file committee and appealing to JDE

workers across Europe and other sections of the working class for support.

On Saturday, there was widespread recognition that European-wide action is needed to defeat JDE’s fire and rehire threats. But no faith can be placed in Unite’s claims that solidarity action is being organised by union officials in Germany and the Netherlands, or via consultation with the European Works Council, a corporatist body established under EU law that brings together unions and management to negotiate on “cross-border workplace change”.

JDE workers must appeal directly to their brothers and sisters at JDE plants in Germany, the Netherlands, Russia and across its 19,000-strong global workforce.

The dead-end character of Unite’s campaign will be on display Tuesday, when Unite officials and Labour politicians sail down the Thames on a barge decorated with banners against fire and rehire. They will moor outside the Houses of Parliament, timed to coincide with the reading of the Queen’s Speech in which the Johnson government’s legislative agenda will be set out.

The union is promoting an open letter signed by “140 MPs and Lords” calling on Johnson to legislate against fire and rehire. Turner told Saturday’s rally, “I know some of you are coming down to Westminster next week... because in that Queen’s Speech [there] should be a paragraph saying that the government will act to prohibit, to end, to make unlawful, fire and rehire.”

Turner did not mention that the vast majority of Labour MPs refused to sign an Early Day Motion against fire and rehire that was debated in parliament on April 27.



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