

JDE coffee workers at Banbury issued dismissal notices in “fire-and-rehire” dispute

Ioan Petrescu
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Striking workers at the Jacobs Douwe Egberts (JDE) coffee factory in Banbury were presented with dismissal notices on June 2 for not accepting an inferior contract under its “fire and rehire” scheme.

The 291 workers, some of whom have worked there decades, face losing up to £12,000 a year, unsocial shift patterns, slashed overtime rates and unpaid breaks.

Management announced that all workers who didn't sign up to the new contract by May 17 will be issued with 12 weeks' notice, effective from June 7. Prior to last week's announcement, Unite the union had called just five strike days in total, two 24-hour strikes and a 72 day strike, as well as an overtime ban starting May 1.

The response of Unite to management's latest offensive was to issue a press release sanctioning just four more one-day strikes, scattered throughout the next two weeks to June 17. The first strike was held Saturday, June 5, with further stoppages due on June 10, June 13 and June 16.

Unite's press release described the company's latest move as “a result of a culture of corporate gangsterism”. However, in the very next sentence it pledges to enter into “constructive dialogue” with JDE if it withdraws the dismissal notices. The union states its desire to “chart a way forward that does not cause economic and social havoc to Banbury and the wider economy”.

In the statement, Unite employed the services of Howard Beckett—the Corbynite running for the post of the union's general secretary—to make yet another bankrupt call for the Conservative government to pass legislation outlawing fire-and-rehire, declaring, “The government has to get on the same page as voters on this and fast.”

The nationalist, pro-capitalist agenda of the union

bureaucracy, which is isolating the strike was laid out in a press statement released by Unite on May 26. It began, “The global boss of JDE... has been urged to withdraw the ‘fire and rehire’ threat to the Banbury workforce and engage constructively to find a solution which won't cause social and economic havoc in the Oxfordshire town.

“The employees have written an open letter to JDE Peet's chief executive officer Fabien Simon.”

The letter does not represent the interests of striking workers, but of the union bureaucracy. Its intended effect is to pit Banbury workers against their tens of thousands of class brothers and sisters internationally who are employed by the same conglomerate, JDE Peet's.

The letter pleads, “Our colleagues in the Netherlands, for example, are not being fired and rehired. Why are you singling out British workers for this mistreatment?”

Aside from a hypocritical reference to “colleagues”, this is a corporatist appeal to the company, presenting the interests of workers and bosses as one and the same: “We've worked hard through these frightening, tough times, helping to make your company very rich. Our reward? You've told us to take pay cuts of up to £12,000 a year or be sacked... We ask that you meet with us. Look us in the eye and explain why your company has become so hostile after decades of positive and constructive relations.”

The “open letter” concludes with another plea for the company to collude with the union in the tried and tested way, as the best means to enforce the necessary restructuring: “Please, work with us to find a fairer way forward. Withdraw these threats, engage with us via the agreed process, and treat us and this community with the dignity we deserve.”

Since the fire and rehire scheme was announced, JDE has engaged in intimidation tactics against the workers to force them to signing contracts in aggressive one-to-one interviews.

“Fire and rehire” is the practice of firing workers and rehiring them on a new contract, with worse terms and conditions than before. This is illegal in much of Europe, but in the UK it has become a go-to tactic for companies looking to save costs and restructure their operations during the pandemic. Since March 2020 there have been at least 23 instances of employers engaging in this practice, affecting the jobs and conditions of hundreds of thousands of workers at major companies such as British Airways, Tesco and British Gas. Others corporations and organisations that have introduced attacks through fire and rehire or are currently imposing them include Weetabix, Argos and Asda, Labour-run Tower Hamlets council in London, the privately run Mount Kelly School, St Christopher School, and Stonyhurst College.

In many instances, companies do not need to follow up on fire and rehire threats as they end up obtaining what they demand—and more concessions promised down the line—by deepening their collaborating with the unions. Such was the case at British Gas, where hundreds of workers were fired with no opposition from the GMB, after other unions had already recommended their members sign a new contract. Bus workers at Go North West in Manchester, owned by the global transport conglomerate Go-Ahead, have seen their working conditions slashed as a result of a rotten agreement recommended jointly by Unite and management.

Workers at JDE and elsewhere who are fighting corporations seeking to impose similar cuts must adopt an alternative internationalist perspective, programme and leadership in opposition to the trade unions.

JDE Peet’s operates globally and must be opposed globally.

JDE Peet’s ownership is split 50/50 between JAB Holding—the investment arm and holding company of the billionaire Reimann family—and the massive transnational food conglomerate Mondelez International. Its new CEO, Fabien Simon, became one of the highest paid executives last year, earning a signing on bonus of €10 million, which will be doubled in five years.

The attacks on the Banbury workers come despite the company increasing production by 9.1 percent and operating profits to €933 million (net profits €367 million) during the past year.

The claims of Unite that only workers at Banbury are under attack is false. As with all corporations, JDE Peet’s is constantly restructuring its operations, with an undermining of workers conditions in any one country setting the new benchmark for its workforce everywhere.

JDE Peet’s has engaged in a series of closures and cuts to its factories throughout Europe in recent years. In 2016, JDE announced plans to close its factory in Grimbergen, Belgium. The closure was implemented seamlessly in January 2017 with the loss of 274 jobs after “consultative talks” with the unions. Production capacity was transferred to JDE operations in the Netherlands, Poland, Germany and the Czech Republic.

In September 2018, JDE closed its factory in Andezeno, Italy, cutting the jobs of all 57 workers. A month later, in November 2018, JDE imposed inferior conditions on its workforce in Germany and the Netherlands after unilaterally cancelling the collective agreement in place at the time. The German unions did nothing in response but organise a series of ineffective protests.

Workers at JDE can only defend themselves by breaking from Unite’s corporatist straitjacket and taking the fight in their own hands by forming a rank-and-file committee. This would lay the basis not for appeals to the company, but for a class appeal directly to co-workers at JDE Peet’s operations in Germany, the Netherlands, Russia, the Czech Republic, Poland and across its 19,000-strong global workforce.

To unite workers in their struggles, the International Committee of the Fourth International and its affiliated Socialist Equality Parties has initiated the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RF). The Socialist Equality Party urges JDE workers to contact us today to discuss how to organise their fightback.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)