

UK: Jacobs Douwe Egberts workers struggle in peril

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Dismissal notices were issued by Jacobs Douwe Egberts (JDE) against its Banbury workforce on June 2. But just as the company is escalating its pressure on the workers to accept inferior conditions or be fired, Unite the union is doing its utmost to bring the dispute to a close.

A fresh strike takes place today, following action last Thursday in a series of limited one-day protests. Behind the scenes, Unite's strategy is to block the necessary European-wide and global fight against the company's diktats and seek a new agreement that would preserve and deepen its corporatist partnership with the company.

The first steps towards this deal were taken last week, when JDE and Unite reached an agreement to gut workers' pensions, ending the defined benefits scheme and replacing it with a defined contribution scheme paying much smaller dividends. This takes place under conditions where workers are also threatened with pay cuts, which would force them to pay less into their pensions fund.

Management's demands include cutting traditional Christmas and bank holiday pay rates, introducing unpaid breaks, and limiting them to 30 minutes. It is estimated that workers could lose £3,500 a year in pay, with the Unite union stating that some members could lose between £7,000–£12,000-a-year.

The impetus behind these attacks on workers' conditions is a new global wave of corporate restructuring as companies seek to eliminate costs and establish market dominance. Last month, both Moody's and S&P Global Ratings agencies assigned an "investment grade" rating to parent company JDE Peet's, giving the go-ahead for further leveraging. This decision was based on the expectation that JDE will continue to maintain a positive cash flow, maintain

financial discipline and "simplify its capital structure". This translates to squeezing more profit out of its workforce by every means at its disposal, from wage cuts to limiting time off. This is how the market dictates the brutal restructuring agenda of firms such as JDE Peet's that is sparking a new upsurge of the international class struggle as shown by current strikes at Volvo, General Mills and by miners in the US, Latin America and Ukraine.

While JDE is proceeding with its plans, giving workers who refused to sign the new contracts 12-weeks' notice of termination, Unite is promoting the illusion that a negotiated settlement can be reached based on an appeal to recognise the loyal service of the company's UK workforce. It has most recently asked workers to pin their hopes on the return of a former manager to JDE, who will allegedly be more amenable to workers' interests.

Talks were due to take place on Friday, despite the company making clear it has no intention of retreating. Highlighting the union's role in imposing management's attacks on the workers, Chris Moon, a Unite convener at JDE Banbury, told WSWs reporters, "We've been waiting to sit down with management since 24 May where we'd left it. Since then they've issued the Section 188 [dismissal notices] and we're waiting for them to come back and give us some information or proposal to put forward."

There is broad dissatisfaction among workers with these attacks and the role of Unite. A worker on the picket told reporters from the WSWs on Thursday, "I have read your articles about our struggles, and I tend to agree with you about the union. They said that they were going to escalate our struggle against fire and rehire. What we now see is de-escalation... Our pensions have already been massively reduced. I think Unite

knew it and they didn't tell us. As you explained they are waiting till our opposition wears down. I agree that they will take the first opportunity to sellout our struggle."

Many workers understand that a successful struggle against JDE can only be waged in a united offensive with the company's global workforce. But the union's claim to be leading a struggle to win support at other European plants amounts to nothing real. The struggle against fire and rehire at Banbury has now entered its seventh week, but the only outcome of the solidarity action promised by Unite from the European Works Council (EWC) are letters of solidarity and vague promises for selective overtime bans.

Unite has also praised the EWC, presenting it as an example of international collaboration between workers. However, the EWCs, established by a directive of the European Commission, are merely "a structure through which management could inform and consult employees on significant transnational projects and changes to the company structure or activities". It offers no mechanism for workers to oppose any attacks by management. Rather it gives an opportunity for the unions to "express their views and voice their suggestions on the matter(s) at hand" through their representatives on the council. It is a just another example of union-management collaboration against the workers. The primary purpose of these corporatist bodies established under EU law is to prevent unified action by the workers from below.

Throughout the dispute Unite has worked to shackle workers' determined stand against fire and rehire to their own corporatist pitch to management, pleading to the company for a continuation of its decades-long partnership with the union. Year after year this partnership has only brought steadily worsening conditions and spells disaster.

A new strategy is needed to win. This begins with the understanding that workers face a battle on two fronts, against a company determined to force through restructuring on behalf of shareholders and investors, and a union that is beholden to these very same forces.

At today's strike and picket outside JDE's factory in Banbury, Unite is featuring the appearance of Labour MP Barry Gardiner, part of an agenda aimed at subordinating workers to false friends—in this case Sir Keir Starmer's Labour Party whose pro-business

programme and defence of the profit interests of the major corporations are not in doubt.

The only realistic strategy for workers is one that relies on their own strength as an international class, opposed to that of JDE and the pro-company Unite union, and which reaches out for support from the working class, both in the UK and across JDE's operations globally. To take forward a genuine fight, workers must take the struggle out of the hands of Unite, elect a rank-and-file committee, and draft an appeal to workers at JDE's plants in France, the Netherlands, Russia and beyond.



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