

UK: Unite union sabotages strike by engineers at Weetabix against fire and rehire

Tony Robson
24 June 2021

A one-day strike planned for June 23 by around 80 engineers against the imposition of fire and rehire contracts by Weetabix has been called off. The Unite union cancelled the action at the last moment to pave the way for backroom talks between the union and the company.

All that was required for Unite to veto the strike vote by its membership was for the company to agree to postpone changing the engineers' contracts until September 1. The union has reneged on its stated position that withdrawal of the threat to carry out fire and rehire and major wage cuts was the precondition for resuming negotiations.

A press release by Unite cancelling the strike action the day before it was due to begin stated, "It is hoped that fresh negotiations will allow a deal to be reached that will be acceptable to our members."

Unite has adopted a concessions-based bargaining approach opposed to the insistence by Weetabix engineers that their terms and conditions must not be sacrificed. The company is demanding a change in contracts which would result in a cut in yearly pay by up to £5,000. The change in shift patterns would also lead to reduced wages, with engineers rostered to work more days with the loss of shift allowances.

There is an added risk to safety posed by the reduced number of engineers on shift at any one time. The safety situation was already serious enough for the company to take the decision last year to employ the services of Peoplesafe, a 24-hour service providing protection to those in secluded areas surrounded by heavy machinery. It uses advanced technology to monitor safety and organise the emergency response for injured workers. The safety contractor reports that the food and drink industry has higher rates of injuries and deaths than other sectors of manufacturing.

The 24-hour strike was to be the first in a series of one-day stoppages every Wednesday, leading up to September, after the members of Unite returned a strike mandate in early June. The action by engineers covered two of the three sites Weetabix operates in the UK, at Corby and Burton Latimer near Kettering in Northamptonshire. The Burton Latimer site is its main plant and headquarters.

The strike by a small section of the Weetabix workforce would by the summer have disrupted supplies to major supermarkets of the famous wheat biscuit cereal, due to the integral role performed by engineers in the operation of the plants. On a weekly basis 70 million Weetabix roll off the lines, the equivalent of 35 million breakfast bowls.

The suspension of the strike by Unite is a warning to workers that it is not serious about defeating the attacks by Weetabix. The talks will take place within the framework set by the company, with the union seeking to convince management that the overhaul of terms and conditions can be achieved without the resort to fire and rehire and the risk of provoking significant opposition.

Weetabix employs hundreds of workers on the production lines at both sites and at its other UK facility at Ashton-under-Lyne, just outside Manchester.

The trade union for workers on the production lines at the Weetabix's UK plants is the Union of Shop Distribution and Allied Workers (USDAW). It has yet to publish any statement on the situation confronting workers. The *World Socialist Web Site* approached USDAW for comment, but the union was only prepared to confirm that it is due to organise a ballot for industrial action, while refusing to comment on the nature of the dispute.

The fact that USDAW is maintaining silence and

delaying a strike ballot while Unite vetoes strike action by its membership confirms that the trade unions are demobilising opposition and adopting a divide and rule strategy.

Weetabix is the latest major corporation to slash jobs and gut workers' terms and conditions after having pumped out increased profits over the past year of the pandemic. It is the largest cereal manufacturer in the UK, exporting to over 80 countries, and has production facilities in Europe, North America and East Africa with a combined global workforce of 1,800 employees.

Weetabix is owned by the US-based transnational Post Holdings Inc, ranked as the third-largest cereal firm in America in 2017. For the three months leading up to December 31, 2020 it reported net sales of \$113.5 million, up by 11.8 percent or \$12 million from the same period in 2019. The figure for the Weetabix side of its operations was \$28.1 million, an increase of 18.6 percent or \$4.4 million compared to the same period the year before. Overall, it reported net sales of \$1.5 billion and an operating profit of \$166.3 million for the period.

Workers in food manufacturing are confronted with a global wave of corporate restructuring. Fire and rehire contracts are being imposed at coffee manufacturer JDE in Banbury, Oxfordshire and McVitie's plans to close its biscuit factory in Tollcross, Glasgow.

The global integration of production and distribution has invested the working class with a tremendous social power which spans national borders and provides the only basis for a viable strategy to fight the transnationals. The role of the trade unions in every country has been to prevent this fight developing, in the face of the normalisation of death during the pandemic and a renewed wave of corporate restructuring. In fact, the pandemic has served as a pretext for the trade unions to further integrate themselves into the state and the structures of corporate management in imposing the burden of the economic crisis on the working class in every country.

The sabotage of the Weetabix strike by Unite is entirely in keeping with Unite's track record on fire and rehire. In April, the union announced "nationally co-ordinated action" against the practice but the only action it has co-ordinated is the isolation and betrayal of disputes which have broken out.

In May the union imposed a sellout deal on

Manchester bus drivers who mounted an 11 week indefinite strike against Go North West's use of fire and rehire. Parent company Go-Ahead only withdrew the ultimatum based on Unite's providing it with everything it wanted, tearing up the terms and conditions of bus drivers and incorporating the union's proposals for £1.3 million worth of cuts in the final agreement.

In every instance so far in which fire and rehire has been withdrawn this has come in return for the union's approval of sweeping attacks on pay and conditions, including at British Airways and SPS Technologies. At Goodlord and JDE, the companies have been able to proceed with issuing dismissal notices and imposing inferior terms and conditions while Unite has isolated these disputes and attempted to wear down resistance.

Weetabix workers should recognise that their fight against the company is just as much a fight against Unite and USDAW. The precondition for waging a viable fight against the transnational and defeating its attacks is the formation of rank-and-file committees of Weetabix workers, independent of the Unite and USDAW bureaucracies, which would reach out to workers nationally and internationally. This is the perspective advanced by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). We encourage Weetabix workers to read the IWA-RFC founding statement and contact the Socialist Equality Party to discuss the way forward.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact