

Britain's pseudo-left promotes corporatism in Jacobs Douwe Egberts "fire and rehire" dispute

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Unite has called off strikes and overtime bans by nearly 300 Jacobs Douwe Egberts (JDE) coffee workers at Banbury in Oxfordshire as the union moves to betray their eight-week fight against "fire and rehire".

In a statement published Friday Unite announced a "de-escalation process", with Joe Clarke, Unite national officer for the food industry, explaining, "This will mean Unite suspending the current planned industrial action for the next fortnight and JDE agreeing to push back the implementation date for the 'fire and rehire' proposals until 13 September. Our members will be working normally during this period."

Clarke continued, "This jointly agreed de-escalation process presents a corridor of opportunity for meaningful talks to overcome the impasse in the difficult discussions we have previously had on the future terms and conditions for our members."

Unite is refusing to reveal the content of their planned talks with JDE, stating, "Unite won't be commenting again until these talks have concluded."

The union's refusal to inform JDE workers about their negotiating position on "future terms and conditions" is clear warning that a sellout agreement is imminent.

JDE issued termination notices on June 2 to workers who have refused to sign replacement contracts that will see them lose up to £12,000 a year, with unsocial shift patterns, slashed overtime rates and unpaid breaks.

As with previous strikes against "fire and rehire", including at British Airways and Go North West, Unite is offering its services as the best means to enforce company demands for the slashing of jobs, terms and conditions. Any deal short of "fire and rehire" will be proclaimed a "victory" by Unite, so long as it preserves the union's corporatist partnership with JDE.

Unite's pro-company agenda was apparent in Clarke's statement Friday that, "This dispute has caused serious strains between the workforce and management, souring the previous good employment relations that we enjoyed with the company for many decades."

Earlier this month, Unite officials held out the prospect of a possible "breakthrough" via the return of a former manager to sponsor talks. The WSWs warned on June 13 that the JDE workers' fight was in peril and urged workers to elect a rank-and-file strike committee independent of Unite to take over the running of the dispute.

Unite's claim that workers and JDE management have a common interest has been used throughout the dispute to oppose the need for an independent strategy against the dictates of a ruthless multi-billion-pound company and its shareholders. It has been supported in these efforts by pseudo-left groups, including the Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP), who have visited pickets to bolster the union's authority, conceal its pro-capitalist programme and block the development of a socialist strategy to fight JDE's offensive.

On *The June Socialist*, by ~~Kat~~ Katarticle Simpson claimed, "Unite the Union has stood firm against the company's 'fire and rehire' tactics", adding, "For many years, Unite has negotiated good wages and conditions for the factory workers."

This is a whitewash of Unite's presiding over a steady erosion of terms and conditions. During the current dispute Unite has agreed the gutting of JDE workers' pensions with a defined contribution scheme that will slash retirement dividends. The SP is silent on this because it flatly contradicts the portrayal of Unite as the defender of "good wages and conditions".

For many workers, their first encounter with groups like the SP is during a strike, when members arrive with messages of "solidarity". But it is necessary to understand the history and programme of such parties and to study the real content of the formulations they employ in articles and leaflets.

In the case of the Socialist Party, its origins lie in founder Ted Grant's break from Trotskyism in the post-World War II period, rejecting any possibility of constructing an international revolutionary party in the working class independent of the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy. Over many decades, including as the Militant Tendency, Grant's organisation upheld this national orientation to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy.

Today, SP members are embedded as reps and officials in key trade unions. Current SP leader Peter Taaffe was a key ally of Unite's Len McCluskey for the best part of a decade and the SP is currently promoting Sharon Graham, who has presided over the repeated suppression and betrayal of strikes against "fire and rehire", to take over as Unite general secretary.

The SP's intervention in the dispute has exposed the extent to which it and similar groups have embraced the corporatist and nationalist programme of the trade unions. Simpson writes, "JDE spokespeople have claimed that the Banbury factory needs to 'modernise' and is 'uncompetitive.' When factory workers spoke with other factories in Germany, France and the Netherlands, they were all being sold the same mantra. Yet the bosses have refused to open the books and have any meaningful dialogue with the factory workers."

It was not "factory workers" from JDE who spoke with "other factories" in Europe. All contact with JDE plants in Germany, France and the Netherlands has been via Unite's participation in the European Works Council, a joint union-management body set up under EU law to block the development of continent-wide industrial action by workers.

While noting that JDE workers in Europe face the same attacks, the SP proposes no strategy to unite them in a common fight across national borders to defeat JDE's plans. Any such fight would mean breaking Unite's control over the dispute, a prospect that fills the SP with horror. Unite's "Recovery and Rebuild" programme for manufacturing published

in June 2020, calls for protectionism and trade war measures against “low-cost rivals”, pitting British workers against their class brothers and sisters worldwide. The SP lines up with this via its opposition to free movement of labour, seeking to blame foreign workers for unemployment and the social crisis. Its support for Brexit in 2016 was argued on the explicit basis of a national reformist and protectionist strategy.

The SP notes that JDE has declined to “open the books”, i.e., it has refused to divulge its financial standing. Most workers will agree that JDE should be forced to reveal who has benefited from the massive profits realised by JDE during the pandemic, but how is such a demand to be realised and to what end?

The call to “open the books” was among a series of transitional demands developed in the early years of the Third International and later by the Fourth International as a means of mobilising the working class—raising its political consciousness and fighting capacities—in the struggle for state power and socialism.

As Leon Trotsky explained in the *Transitional Programme*, the founding document of the Fourth International written in 1938, “It is necessary to help the masses in the process of the daily struggle to find the bridge between present demands and the socialist programme of the revolution. This bridge should include a system of transitional demands, stemming from today’s conditions and from today’s consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to one final conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat.”

Trotsky contrasted the FI’s concept of transitional demands to that of the parties of the Second International. “Classical Social Democracy, functioning in an epoch of progressive capitalism, divided its programme into two parts independent of each other: the minimum programme which limited itself to reforms within the framework of bourgeois society, and the maximum programme which promised substitution of socialism for capitalism in the indefinite future. Between the minimum and the maximum programme no bridge existed. And indeed Social Democracy has no need of such a bridge, since the word socialism is used only for holiday speechifying.” Trotsky explained that in the imperialist epoch of decaying capitalism which opened in 1914, “every serious demand of the proletariat and even every serious demand of the petty-bourgeoisie inevitably reaches beyond the limits of capitalist property relations and of the bourgeois state.”

The fight to expose the “business secrets” of the banks and major companies was part of the fight for workers’ control of industry, “The immediate tasks of workers’ control should be to explain the debits and credits of society, beginning with individual business undertakings; to determine the actual share of the national income appropriated by individual capitalists and by the exploiters as a whole; to expose the behind-the-scenes deals and swindles of banks and trusts; finally, to reveal to all members of society that unconscionable squandering of human labour which is the result of capitalist anarchy and the naked pursuit of profits.”

The SP guts transitional demands of their revolutionary content. It believes in the permanence of capitalism and therefore politely suggests that the company books be opened to facilitate the resumption of Unite’s corporatist partnership with JDE, which the SP refers to as “meaningful dialogue”!

For its part, the SWP offers various caveats to its support for Unite, but always from the standpoint of better corraling workers behind the union’s pro-capitalist strategy.

A case in point is Ian Mckendrick’s June 22 article in *Socialist Worker*. He notes that Unite, “organised a demonstration at the factory gates on Monday of last week with Barry Gardiner MP to launch his parliamentary bill to outlaw fire and rehire”. The SWP responds, “A law against fire and rehire would be welcome”.

Mckendrick offers the following criticism, “Gardiner’s bill isn’t due for

a second reading until October—too late for the JDE strikers. It is also a huge gamble to hope that 86 Tory MPs will back Gardiner’s bill.”

In other words, Gardiner’s bill is a transparent fraud that depends on securing Tory backing and offers nothing more than a cover for collaboration of Unite and other unions, as well as the Labour Party with the employers.

Labour’s Employment and Trade Union Rights (Dismissal and Re-engagement) Bill is aimed at suppressing the struggle of the working class against fire and rehire. If by some miracle the Bill were passed tomorrow, it would merely enshrine in law that brutal workplace “restructuring” must proceed via corporatist agreements with the trade unions.

The issue is not as the SWP presents it, one of tactical efficacy and timing. The SWP’s support in principle for the Bill is a call for class collaboration and state suppression of the class struggle.

Both Unite and Labour’s Barry Gardiner are explicit on this score.

It is worth quoting Gardiner’s June 17 statement published on *LabourList*: “I want our companies to thrive, and I want us to have a flexible workforce. My bill is about bringing in consultation rather than threats, representation, and negotiation rather than dictatorship, and cooperation to create sustainable companies that reward workers with a fair and living wage for their skills and loyalty whilst making a fair return to investors. [...] This is not workplace revolution. It is workplace reasonableness. In the Commons we spend a lot of time disagreeing, but there are times when we can all share a common goal. This should be one of those times. My bill will improve cooperation, reduce industrial strife, and promote best practice. It’s wonderful that so many good employers and business leaders condemn fire and rehire. My bill is not only morally right but in the best interests of sustainable business.”

As Gardiner told a demonstration in London last Saturday, today’s trade unions are supported by such luminaries as New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, US President Joe Biden and the Pope. Unite’s press release promoting the Bill is framed as an appeal to the Tories, declaring, “Jacob Rees-Mogg MP, leader of the House of Commons, called fire and rehire threats ‘wrong’ and a ‘bad practice’, adding companies should know ‘better than behave in this way’”.

More than 80 years ago, Trotsky poured scorn on the “cowardly experiments in regulation” by Social Democrats, professors and “technocrats” who proposed, in the midst of the Great Depression, to “drain the ocean of anarchy with spoonfuls of bureaucratic planning”, only to “run head-on into the invincible sabotage of big capital.”

Today Britain’s Labourites make no such grand pretences: Not a “New Deal” but a Private Members’ Bill against fire and rehire. A Bill whose text has yet to be drafted, which is unlikely to ever pass, and which will further enshrine the trade unions’ alliance with the banks, corporations and the state.

“To break the resistance of the exploiters, the mass pressure of the proletariat is needed.” So wrote Trotsky. The parties of the pseudo-left are bitter opponents of this perspective. Fearful of the masses, hostile to the inherently revolutionary demands of the working class for social equality, the SP, SWP and other parties of the affluent middle class regard the trade unions as a vital force for the suppression of the class struggle and socialism.



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