Reject Unite’s sellout deal with Jacobs Douwe Egberts!

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The Socialist Equality Party urges workers to vote “No” to the rotten sell-out agreement Unite the union is seeking to impose on 300 workers at Jacobs Douwe Egberts (JDE) Banbury plant.

JDE workers have reacted furiously to Unite’s proposed deal with the global coffee company, which will slash annual pay by up to £10,000, axe penalty rates, force workers onto night shift and lengthen the working week.

“The Banbury 300 are furious,” a JDE worker told the *World Socialist Web Site* yesterday. “Everyone is angry and feeling betrayed by Unite.”

Workers at the factory have already begun to campaign for a “No” vote in balloting that is due to start on July 26.

Workers at JDE’s Banbury factory began strikes, protests and overtime bans on May 1 against “fire and rehire” threats by the company. JDE announced “individual consultations” in April to force staff onto vastly inferior contracts. When they refused to sign, the company issued 12-week termination notices.

According to one worker, Unite’s 15-page company agreement was sent to workers last Wednesday and included a “leaver’s package”. Other workers say they are yet to see a copy. The deal followed three weeks of secret talks during which Unite suspended all industrial action.

A press statement issued by Unite yesterday morning claimed, “The key components of the package include removal of the management’s controversial ‘hire and fire’ proposal; safeguarding pay and employment conditions; and generous compensation if an employee has to change shifts.”

Unite national officer for the food industry Joe Clarke claimed, “We have now hammered out a package safeguarding pay and employment conditions for our members. We believe that this is the best deal that can be achieved through negotiations and we will be recommending acceptance to our members.”

JDE workers have slammed Unite’s claims as “smoke and mirrors”. The Twitter account #Banbury300 highlighted the deal’s “lowering the hourly [rate] paid and putting it on the shift allowance to make it look like a win.”

A source told *Banbury Guardian* yesterday, “The offer and compensation is a whitewash… They have ‘negotiated’ a shift allowance (that they get for working unsociable hours) by 15p extra while taking 15p off the hourly pay.

“Around 200 of the 291 involved will lose out in this new deal. People who have never worked nights are going to be forced to. They are taking no consideration of the known effects of night shifts on people's health'.

Another worker told the WSWS, “The shifts will change to a 4 on 4 off pattern, which is roughly 3 hours extra a week. Bank Holidays except Christmas will no longer be paid but included in holiday allowance which is 24 days a year. Overtime at time-and-a-half and double-time has gone! Redundancy has stayed at the same rate. Monthly pay for all [from fortnightly pay] with roughly £1,500 for changing over.”

Workers are especially disgusted by Unite’s false claim that “fire and rehire” has been defeated. JDE’s termination notices are still on the table and if workers reject the union-company deal, they will face the sack.

In recommending its sellout deal with JDE, Unite is holding a gun to workers’ heads. As a worker commented yesterday, “We are voting on a deal that says if we vote in, naturally fire and rehire is taken off the table. If we vote against the deal, we are sacked on September 13th.”

Another JDE worker said, “We’ve been told it’s the best we can expect… but it’s nowhere near the one we were fighting for.”

One worker said that Clarke “had a secret meeting with Rob Williams, the plant director, in a service station without the elected committee and workers reps, no minutes or anything.” But whatever Clarke did or agreed to, Unite’s betrayal is the outcome of a national strategy overseen by the union’s lead officials who are working to cement their relations with corporate boardrooms. Unite’s primary objection to “fire and rehire” is that it threatens to dispense with their role as industrial policemen and trusted partners of business and government. At British Airways and Go North

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West, for example, Unite claimed a victory over “fire and rehire” after the two companies agreed to union proposals for savage cuts to jobs, pay, terms and conditions.

Needless to say, none of the current contenders for Unite General Secretary, including supposed “lefts” Steve Turner and Sharon Graham, has uttered a word of criticism of the stinking deal being rammed through at JDE. Turner, who is promoted by the Stalinist *Morning Star* newspaper, visited striking JDE workers during the dispute, hoping to boost his electoral profile. Graham, absurdly promoted by the pseudo-left Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party as a “grassroots candidate”, leads Unite’s national “leverage team” that played a key role in betraying BA and Go North West workers.

The SWP’s intervention provided an object lesson in the duplicity of all such pseudo-left groups.

An article by SWP member Pat Carmody last Tuesday was headlined, “Fight any rotten deal over JDE fire and rehire strike”. It reported that “it would appear that the deal contains the huge pay cuts and the major attacks on shift patterns that workers at JDE have been resisting. If this is the case, this would be a major setback for workers at the plant and the struggle against fire and rehire.”

In making such admissions, Carmody is covering the SWP’s exposed rear by adapting to the hostility among JDE workers toward Unite. Carmody’s previous articles in May and June contained no criticism whatsoever of Unite’s role in the dispute. Rather, his May 3 article, “Fight brews at coffee giant Jacobs Douwe Egberts”, offered unqualified support to Unite, while on May 10 he cited approvingly Joe Clarke’s cynical boast, “We’re aiming for a knockout in round three, but if we have to go the full 12 rounds then we’re ready”. Carmody claimed that “Clarke reflected the determined mood of workers at the Jacobs Douwe Egberts (JDE) coffee plant in Banbury.”

The SEP and the WSWS warned from the outset that JDE workers could place no trust in Unite and must organise independently to defeat the “fire and rehire” plans of the company. On May 7, the WSWS wrote, “JDE workers at Banbury cannot wage a successful struggle to defend their jobs, terms and conditions if their struggle is led by Unite” and urged workers to “form a rank-and-file committee, acting independently of Unite and contact JDE workers throughout Europe and internationally to discuss a united offensive.”

On May 9 we wrote, “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.”

These warnings have been confirmed. The WSWS and SEP have advanced an independent strategy for JDE workers based on the unification of the working class across Europe and internationally to defeat company’s plans. In contrast, the SWP’s belated “criticisms” of Unite are still aimed at corralling workers behind their proven enemies. Carmody’s latest article concludes with the pathetic suggestion that “Workers should pressure the officials to scrap the deal and use some of the union’s much-vaunted £40 million war chest to support an all-out indefinite strike.”

The SWP knows full well that Unite has no intention of leading such a fight. The union responds to pressure from its members by drawing ever closer to the companies it serves so well. The SWP and similar organisations speak for the affluent middle class, including many with cushy positions within the union apparatus. They are terrified of workers breaking free from the union’s corporatist straitjacket and striking out on an independent road.

Amid the deepest crisis of capitalism since the 1930s, with a pandemic that has killed more than four million people and triggered a far-reaching economic, social and political catastrophe for the international working class, the SWP and similar pseudo-left outfits are seeking to block the development of the necessary socialist programme and leadership in the working class.

The SEP urges JDE workers to elect their own rank-and-file committee to campaign for a “No” vote and organise a fight-back against the company’s “fire and rehire” agenda. Workers should draw up their own list of demands including the defeat of all attacks on jobs, conditions and wages and appeal to the growing sections of workers coming into struggle across the UK, Europe and internationally who will support such a fight.

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