Reject Unite's sellout deal at JDE: Form a rank-and-file committee to defeat fire and rehire!

Statement by the Socialist Equality Party (UK)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) urges workers at Jacobs Douwe Egberts (JDE) to reject Unite's filthy deal with the company.

After two months of principled struggle by JDE workers, Unite called off industrial action on June 25 and went into backroom talks. The outcome is a rotten agreement that imposes the dictates of JDE management and shareholders.

The actions of JDE are part of a global wave of corporate restructuring as companies and banks seek to claw back from the working class the trillions handed out by governments to bailout out share-markets and corporations during the pandemic.

Unite has agreed cuts to hourly pay; the axing of double-time and time-and-a-half penalty rates; new shift patterns with workers forced onto night shift; a 3-hour increase in the working week; a transfer to monthly pay; and a severance package offered to just 23 staff based on a selection process shrouded in secrecy. All this on top of Unite's recent agreement to slash pensions.

The threat of "fire and rehire" has not been withdrawn. Rather Unite is working with the company to present an ultimatum: either accept our deal or face the sack when termination notices take effect on September 13. Unite official Joe Clarke's claim that industrial action has "merely been suspended" and that a strike ballot will begin if the deal is voted down is a fraud. He has made clear Unite's real position, declaring Tuesday that its current deal is "the best that can be achieved through negotiation".

After the company-union agreement was revealed last week, workers denounced Unite, its local representatives and national leadership. "The workers at Jacobs Douwe Egberts are being forced to accept a deal they don't want!", the Banbury300 tweeted on Monday.

Many JDE workers have called for a "No" vote in balloting that opens July 26 and there is broad recognition that Unite acts as a company union, with memes produced slamming its sweetheart deal with JDE, and denunciations of "big deals and bungs, off the back of workers".

Workers want to fight, but a new strategy and programme is needed to achieve victory. Over the past four decades, since the betrayal of the 1984-85 miners' strike, the trade unions have suppressed industrial action to the lowest levels in history while the super-rich have glutted themselves at workers' expense. Now, as strikes develop globally against savage cuts in jobs, pay and conditions during the ongoing pandemic, workers confront organisations that are "unions" in name only. Unite, GMB, Unison and the rest have been fully transformed into appendages of corporate management and the state.

No fight against JDE can be successful outside of a political and organisational break with the trade unions. Unite's betrayal of workers at JDE has been repeated across the UK and internationally. In every single struggle waged against fire and rehire contracts, the trade unions either allowed them to be imposed or secured their withdrawal on the proviso that they would enforce the gutting of terms and conditions demanded by company executives:

British Gas: In March, the GMB told 7,000 striking British Gas engineers they had no option other than to sign fire and rehire contracts. 460 workers who refused were fired, with no opposition from the union. GMB officials had the temerity to claim this week that the struggle was a "victory" and were greeted with a torrent of abuse from members for "rolling over like a little lap dog!"

British Airways: In April 2020, BA announced plans

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for fire and rehire contracts targeting 12,000 jobs and pay cuts of more than 20 percent. The contracts were withdrawn only after Unite's cabin crew division BASSA agreed the destruction of 4,000 jobs, pay-cuts of 15 percent and vastly inferior conditions. Furious cabin crew denounced Unite as "Utter trash."

Go North West: In February, 500 bus drivers in Manchester launched indefinite strike action against fire and rehire contracts. They were out for 11 weeks. Unite offered the company £1.3 million in cost-cutting and sent members back to work on inferior conditions and forced overtime, leading to a loss of jobs.

Unite's campaign against fire and rehire was never about protecting jobs, pay and conditions. It was aimed at keeping their own feet under the boardroom table. Any action taken by workers has been used to pressure companies back into negotiations with their trusted business partners.

The isolation of the JDE dispute is part of broader political efforts to suppress working class opposition to the Johnson government and the pandemic billionaires. Along with the Trades Union Congress and the Labour Party, Unite has promoted a cap-in-hand appeal to the Tories to outlaw fire and rehire threats. Such appeals have focused on Labour MP Barry Gardiner's Private Members Bill that has not even been drafted yet and has no chance of success when it is eventually moved—long after JDE and other strikers have been sold out. The Labour Party is so beholden to corporate interests that only 46 out of its 199 MPs signed an Early Day Motion against fire and rehire in May.

In recent days, a statement from the Banbury and Bicester Constituency Labour Party branch has circulated among JDE workers bemoaning the refusal of local Tory councillors to support a motion against JDE's attacks. What a grotesque farce!

Instead of appeals to such false friends as Labour and open Tory enemies, JDE strikers must turn decisively to their fellow workers in the UK and internationally.

Unite has deliberately isolated JDE workers, industrially and politically. The main purpose of a campaign focused on JDE shareholders and parliament has been to prevent any joint action with workers at BA, British Gas, Go North West, Weetabix, McVitie's, and national rail and bus workers who have all been in dispute.

Moreover, every JDE worker knows they face in JDE Peet's one of the biggest transnational drinks conglomerates in the world, operating across six continents with a market capitalisation of €15 billion. The only way to hit them hard is to win the support of its global workforce.

JDE workers repeatedly asked for joint action with JDE workers in France, the Netherlands and Germany. But Unite fobbed them off with claims about solidarity via the European Works Council—a joint union-management committee dedicated to organising betrayals behind workers' backs.

Repelling JDE's assault means taking control away from Unite and building independent organisations of class struggle. A rank-and-file committee must be established, independent of Unite, with leaders who are trusted representatives of the workforce.

A rank-and-file committee would spearhead the campaign for a "No" vote and draw up a list of demands for the defeat of fire and rehire and the protection of hard-won conditions, calling for solidarity from workers everywhere.

We appeal to JDE workers to study the lessons of the four-week dispute at Volvo in the US and the fight waged by the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee. The United Auto Workers union has enforced a return to work, after workers repeatedly rejected its sell-out contract. But the rank-and-file committee has shown how the fight must now proceed through the ties it has forged internationally and with other US plants and by providing a clear strategic alternative to the company-union alliance.

JDE workers stand at a crossroads. A stand taken in Banbury will be an inspiration to workers in the UK and internationally who face the same attacks and the same pro-company trade unions. The SEP and the *World Socialist Web Site* will offer every possible assistance, including translating and circulating appeals to JDE workers in Europe. We will help to popularise your demands and alert workers all over the world. But it is JDE workers themselves who must initiate this next vital stage in your struggle.

We invite JDE workers who agree with this to contact the SEP today by email (sep@socialequality.org.uk), Facebook or Twitter and begin a discussion on the way forward.

Send a message of support for the JDE workers!

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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