

Campaign in Banbury reveals solid support for JDE workers

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Socialist Equality Party members campaigned in Banbury, Oxfordshire, Saturday finding overwhelming support for workers at the Jacobs Douwe Egberts factory fighting attempts to sack and rehire them on inferior contracts.

JDE workers are being balloted starting today on a sellout deal reached a fortnight ago between Unite the union and company executives. The deal has provoked widespread anger among workers, with Unite agreeing annual pay cuts of between £5,000 and £10,000 and the slashing of terms and conditions. The ballot closes August 4.

Unite has responded by claiming their sellout agreement is the best that JDE workers can hope for. Unite official Joe Clarke sent letters to JDE workers last week repeating company threats that if its demands aren't met the factory will relocate. If workers vote the deal down, JDE has made clear it will proceed with its plans to fire workers on September 13.

SEP members set up a campaign stall in Banbury town centre, distributing copies of a statement published Friday, "Reject Unite's sellout deal at JDE: Form a rank-and-file committee to defeat fire and rehire!" The SEP statement argues for a global strategy based on the unity of JDE workers across Europe as the only way to combat JDE Peet's, one of the largest transnational beverage conglomerates in the world.

Unite has worked to isolate JDE workers from a series of major disputes against fire and rehire in recent months, including at British Gas, British Airways and Go North West. Disputes at Weetabix, McVities, Hovis, Quorn and Heineken have also been suppressed and isolated by unions including Unite and USDAW.

Former JDE workers as well as friends and family of current employees stopped to talk to SEP campaigners. Many criticized Unite's sellout deal and spoke of

similar attacks on conditions and pay at their own workplaces, especially during the pandemic. Some took bundles of leaflets to give to others.

A woman who had already read the statement on a local Facebook group said, "It's not only here at Banbury they [the unions] are carrying out sellout deals. They have done it many other places including British Gas and British Airways. It is time for the workers to work in solidarity. I am in full solidarity with the JDE workers. We should not allow the coffee factory management and the union to impose these bad deals on workers. We should not allow this to happen."

Another person who stopped to talk said, "My brother works there, and he said that the Unite is selling out." While a former JDE worker told campaigners, "I have a lot of experience with the unions and should never trust them." Someone else explained that his friend at JDE recently bought a house with a mortgage and was now facing a massive pay cut, "He's totally devastated and now thinking how's he going to pay the mortgage."

Peter, a retired worker from Banbury gave an interview. He said, "I am speaking in solidarity with the Banbury coffee factory workers. What Unite are doing there is a disgrace.

"I know what these companies are doing. When I worked at Sainsbury's [supermarket] they used to do this regularly. Every couple of years they would change the contract. If you don't agree to it, you're up the road. We've had this for years. Exactly the same thing.

"Just after I retired, they did it again. I know a woman who'd been there 20 years and they sacked her because she didn't change her hours. She was a carer. And the union backs it. The union doesn't fight against it. The unions now, it's the same with the Labour Party, they don't represent us. They're ruling from the top. They're ruling from their empire."

“The unions have got their own agendas and they’re not representing the workers anymore. When do they ever go on strike? I used to be on picket lines everywhere. We were marching and we fought for the miners’ strikes and everything else. We fought all the way. We had lots of strikes to defend workers’ rights. But they don’t do it anymore. You know why? Because they’re frightened of having their assets taken away. They’re on a lovely salary and they’re frightened of losing it. You can lose yours, but they can’t lose theirs. This is the problem. In the old days when we used to fight for the workers we were prepared to go inside [to prison].

“I worked at export packing over here and a union official came in there and got me sacked. They accused me of assault and sacked me. I took them to court, and I won the tribunal. But the law says they didn’t have to take me back. So I got a bit of money in compensation, but I didn’t get my job back. And that union official, he ended up becoming a Unite leader and got knighted.”

Rob, a local manufacturing worker who is a Unite member, spoke about the broader issues raised by the dispute at JDE. “With Covid, Banbury workers have had enough to deal with. I personally have had three rounds of redundancies. I know so many people are either in and out of work or struggling financially, and the whole Covid situation has hit people’s pockets, people have been made homeless, people are struggling to pay their bills.”

Rob was scathing about JDE’s £5,000-£10,000 pay cuts. “It’s ridiculous. They can’t just abandon peoples’ contracts, sign new contracts with more hours for less money and expect people to accept it. People have got mortgages to pay, they’ve got bills to pay, they’ve got to put food on the table... The new contracts mean they are more vulnerable to being made redundant. It’s a scandal that they’re able to do this and get away with wrecking peoples’ lives...

“If Unite are the ones trying to push this, then Unite have lost their way because Unite were always in favour of workers’ rights and now if they are trying to scupper the rights of these people to keep their contracts, to earn the same money and not to be taken advantage of, it’s a bloody scandal.”

Asked what he thought about JDE workers forming an independent rank-and-file committee to organise a fightback, Rob replied, “Well, if you can’t get your

own union, which is there to be your support in times of hardship, when companies are metaphorically trying to shaft you left, right and centre, then I am in full support of them trying to do something independently. The more people stay together and support one another, the more chance they have of fighting the situation.

“Kraft General Food [old name for JDE factory] aren’t a poor company. They are not on the breadline, they’re not on the verge of going under, so toying with people’s livelihoods in this manner I think it’s an absolute disgrace that they can get away with doing it. And it’s even more of a disgrace that the unions, especially Unite, one that was supposed to be in favour of workers’ right, are the ones directly trying to shaft them. It’s disgusting.”



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