

UK: Unite tries to shut down opposition at JDE as voting begins

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Unite the union has responded to widespread anger over its rotten deal with Jacobs Douwe Egberts by launching a campaign of intimidation and censorship against JDE workers. Voting began on Monday and will close on August 4 over whether to accept an agreement with company executives reached after the union “suspended” two months of industrial action against the imposition of “fire and rehire” contracts.

JDE workers have condemned the deal as a sellout. It slashes overtime payments, increases the working week, and will force around 35 additional workers onto nightshift. Some will lose up to £10,000 annually—and if they vote “no” to these terms then “fire and rehire” is still on the table with termination notices to take effect on September 13.

The Banbury 300 Twitter account has given voice to workers’ opposition to the deal, calling for a “no” vote and condemning Unite’s collusion with the company. A JDE worker involved with Banbury300 said Unite’s deal was deliberately divisive, “Unite the union let the workers down by negotiating a deal that allows one group to vote a pay rise for themselves while voting for their own colleagues a pay cut of £10k. It’s disgusting and immoral. Unite will have to look at their future at JDE after all this. The workers have lost all trust for them.”

As a result of the deal, “The workforce is being destroyed, families broken up, friends are not talking to each other.” Unite had become so integrated with management that it was “making decisions about who can work which shifts”.

He continued, “The Banbury union committee isn’t even legitimate. They were supposed to have elections, but these elections were postponed twice. So the current Banbury union committee isn’t even official, but they are making key decisions for us. The union

chairman and branch secretary elected himself to the role of chairman!”

Last Thursday, the Banbury300 account went offline following threats and intimidation by Unite officials and JDE management. But 24 hours later it was back online, posting a defiant message, “Sadly JDE/@Unitetheunion tried to get the #Banbury300 shut down... sadly the Banbury300 won’t be scared into submission.”

Unite also silenced JDE workers on the union branch Facebook group. Posts critical of Unite’s deal were removed. As a JDE worker told WSWS on Sunday, “Anyone who spoke out against the deal is being censored... with voting starting tomorrow, I guess they want the people with opinions to shut up.”

Last Tuesday, Unite was forced into damage control after workers reacted with fury to the deal. An article published by the WSWS just one day earlier, “Reject Unite’s sellout deal with Jacobs Douwe Egberts!”, was posted by the Banbury300 and circulated widely. Joe Clarke, Unite’s National Officer for Food, Drink and Agriculture rushed a letter to JDE members, backpeddling on his earlier claims that fire and rehire had been defeated. Conceding that termination notices were still on the table, he declared that if Unite’s deal with JDE was rejected the union would re-ballot for industrial action.

Clarke noted, “There has been a lot of criticisms on social media and abuse of the union representatives and officials, we will not stoop so low as to get into that inappropriate dialogue.” Indeed, Unite only participates in “appropriate dialogue” with the companies.

Less than 48 hours later a second letter followed, this time from Clarke and Unite legal officer Chris Gray. Having previously recommended the deal, the pair now declared, “we are not overwhelming [sic]

recommending this deal. Neither are we asking you to reject it. It is down to you as an individual to look at the overall package and take a view on it.”

JDE workers were reportedly baffled by this statement. Unite’s absurd feint of political neutrality (they helped draw-up the deal!) was, however, quickly set aside as Clarke and Gray used the company’s relocation threats to bludgeon workers to accept.

Describing their efforts during negotiations to avert imposition of a 4x4 shift pattern, Clarke and Gray explained, “We were very nearly there but financially we were struggling as there would be an increase in costs. We were circa £750,000 - £800,000 short so we agreed to meet with Abel Martinez the Operations Director Europe. Unfortunately during the meeting Abel was clear and rather blunt in that for that amount of money he stated he would rather move the work elsewhere.”

Such is the language of today’s union leaders, on first name terms with the Operations Manager and evincing sympathy and respect for the financial “plight” of a global drinks conglomerate worth an estimated €15 billion.

“JDE like most multinational companies,” Unite’s letter continued, “moves work around the world based on costs and the ability to do the work. It became clear that without 24x7 working the whole plant was at risk as at a global level JDE seemed quite prepared to move work elsewhere.”

Unite’s response to the realities of capitalist economics is complete prostration. There is nothing unique in this. In every country the trade unions, rooted in their respective nation states, have responded to globalisation by integrating themselves ever more directly into the structures of corporate management, offering up their members at internationally competitive rates of pay.

JDE workers are facing a bitter struggle. But powerful sections of the working class in the UK, across Europe and internationally are confronting the same corporate demands for wage-cutting, longer hours and full labour “flexibility”. Such demands are being stepped up in response to a global pandemic that has triggered the deepest economic, social and political crisis of capitalism since the 1930s.

Unite’s basic message is “abandon all hope”.

The company’s plans can and must be fought, but

this means breaking free from Unite’s grip and forming a rank-and-file committee, based on a global strategy. Against the efforts of JDE and Unite to isolate the dispute and pit workers in the UK against their class brothers at JDE plants worldwide, workers at Banbury must issue an urgent appeal for international support.

The Socialist Equality Party urges JDE workers to read the statement issued by the International Committee of the Fourth International on May Day, calling for the formation of an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. We urge those workers who want to organise a fightback in the months ahead to contact the SEP.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)