

# UK: Unite's 'left' candidates Turner and Graham silent on attempted sell-out of JDE strike

Tony Robson  
30 July 2021

The ongoing contest to choose the next general secretary of Unite the union sees two supposed standard bearers for the left, Steve Turner and Sharon Graham, stand against the openly Blairite right-wing candidate Gerard Coyne.

Turner is supported by present General Secretary Len McCluskey, the union's United Left, and the Stalinist *Morning Star*. Graham has been adopted by the two largest pseudo-left groups, the Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP).

The elections have been dominated by soundbites and slogans with Turner and Graham claiming to represent workers in struggle and to "have their backs", and with both promoting their role in the fight against fire and rehire contracts and presenting the record of Unite as exemplary.

How then is one to account for the stony silence of Turner and Graham over recent events at coffee maker Jacobs Douwe Egberts (JDE) in Banbury, where 300 workers have been waging a fight against fire and rehire since May? Neither feels able to utter a word because the reality of the class struggle would puncture the political myth making dominating the election contest.

On June 25, Unite suspended industrial action at JDE following back room talks with the company. It is seeking to ram through a concessions-based agreement in a ballot which closes August 4. The proposed deal delivers the overturning of terms and conditions demanded by JDE.

Turner had joined the picket line of JDE workers on May 8, paying tribute to "the confidence and determination of ordinary working people" and denouncing the company's "disgraceful attack now on their pay, their conditions, their shifts, their way of life and its completely unacceptable."

His rhetoric was aimed at concealing what was really being prepared by Unite behind the backs of JDE workers, underscored by his heaping praise on the local negotiating committee, including convenor Chris Moon and national officer Joe Clarke as "an inspiring group" and "our team of passionate reps fighting fire and rehire".

The *World Socialist Web Site* commented the next day, "JDE's use of Section 188 notices is part of a wave of fire and

rehire attacks launched in recent months, including at British Airways, Tower Hamlets Council, British Gas, SPS Technologies and Go North West buses. Major corporate and financial interests are seizing on the pandemic to implement far-reaching attacks on pay and conditions.

"But 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."

In the disputes against fire and rehire at British Airways, SPS Technologies and Go North West, ultimatums were only withdrawn in exchange for Unite acting as company enforcer against workers fighting to defend their rights and livelihoods. Once again at JDE, Unite has isolated the strike both on the industrial and political front, presenting as false friends forces in the Labour Party who have done nothing, and turning the dispute away from its genuine allies, workers throughout the UK and at JDE plants across Europe.

However, Unite's treacherous record, rather than the narrative of imagined victories, is becoming ever more widely understood among workers. The #Banbury300 Twitter account, set up by striking JDE workers—which has become the platform through which opposition to the rotten deal has been vocalised—was suspended temporarily last week after a joint intervention by Unite and the company.

Among its exposures was debunking the claim made by Unite that fire and rehire had been withdrawn. Unite's July 19 press release, claimed that the "new pay and employment conditions" package... removes the management's proposal to 'fire and rehire' staff," and cited Joe Clarke stating, "We believe that this is the best deal that can be achieved through negotiations and we will be recommending acceptance to our members."

Two days later, after posts by Banbury300 including a July 20 article by the *World Socialist Web Site*, Clarke and Unite legal officer Chris Gray issued a statement declaring, "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.”

That exposure of Unite is the reason why such a critical dispute such as JDE has become a taboo subject for the candidates of the “left”. Turner’s declaration, “stay united, determined and confident in the fight—we will win this!” has fallen before the political imperative to keep quiet and let Unite do its dirty work.

Turner’s rival on the left, Graham, has never even gone through the motions of publicly supporting JDE workers. However, in the election contest she claims direct responsibility for self-proclaimed “victories” against fire and rehire at British Airways and Go North West, boasting in her election statement of a “100% track record of success.”

This is not a contradiction. Graham is not advocating for strike struggles, but for the benefits of Unite’s “Leverage” campaigning, in which she plays the leading role. She insists that Unite and other trade unions focus on securing sector-wide agreements through closed door discussions with “key employers” who will then act as “pace-setters” elsewhere. The reality of this model of industrial relations is not that “pace-setter” agreements raise all boats, but that Unite secures its role as a corporate partner at the expense of workers.

Around 400 Manchester bus drivers waged a determined 11-week strike against Go North West and its parent company, Go-Ahead. Unite’s “leverage” discussions with Go-Ahead, led by outgoing General Secretary Len McCluskey, secured the union’s role as an industrial police force based on it agreeing to cost cutting of £1.3 million. Fire and rehire was withdrawn because Go-Ahead got everything it wanted—a reduction in sick pay, unpaid meal breaks, compulsory overtime and the lengthening of the working week, accompanied by jobs losses.

This week members of the Socialist Equality Party campaigned outside Go North West’s Queen’s Road depot. When told of JDE workers opposition to Unite’s proposed deal, three drivers said: “Unite they stitched us up as much as the company, Well done to the workers at JDE”; “They opposed the offer? Good on them, we should have opposed it”; and “Don’t accept it. All of us here regret accepting it. Unite stitched us up. All the union reps have left now.”

Graham’s campaign has been supported by the convenor at Go North West, Colin Hayden. Like many of the local union reps he has taken severance, escaping the working conditions he helped bounce workers into accepting. His endorsement, given pride of place in Graham’s election statement alongside branch chair Sam Harvey, states, “Sharon is the change we need. It was Leverage supporting our action that delivered an end to Fire and Rehire” if you want to protect your job, pay and conditions, vote for Sharon.”

The support of the SP and SWP for Graham is a means by which they desperately seek to maintain the grip of the union bureaucracy over the working class, portraying her rhetorical claims to shift union activity “back to the workplace” as a left

agenda. It is nothing of the sort.

Graham’s oft-proclaimed opposition to “Westminster politics” is only a declaration that workers shouldn’t interfere in the political affairs of the ruling class while Unite builds its relations with the corporate and financial elite. Her well-publicised comments about ending Unite’s meddling in Labour Party affairs is to assure Sir Keir Starmer that his own continued rightward course will meet with no opposition from her. As she stated in the *Daily Mirror* on July 24, “I’ll get on with my job, he [Sir Keir] can get on with his and there won’t be any problem.”

In a July 3 interview with *Red Pepper*, Graham gave full vent to her disdain for even a feint of socialist politics. Speaking in language familiar to any Blairite scoundrel, she spoke of a “left” that was “talking relentlessly to itself” and being “more interested in what it is against than what it is for”. Her rival on the right Gerard Coyne was said to be “on the softer side of the Labour Party. People forget that Gerard voted for Len [McCluskey] in the first two of his elections.”

In contrast to the enthusiastic and incessant coverage in support of Graham, the SP and SWP have said very little and offered nothing regarding Unite’s rank betrayal at JDE. The SP has not written any updates on the dispute since June 9 when it told JDE workers Unite was “standing firm.”. The SWP most recent article on July 27 amounts to 104 words calling on JDE workers to reject the deal, while making no criticism of “their union” Unite for negotiating it in the first place.

Oscar Wilde’s protagonist Dorian Grey sold his soul for an appearance of eternal youth, with the consequences of his many crimes transferred to an increasingly hideous portrait. His pact with the devil nevertheless ended badly. The fate of the SP and SWP, who long ago sold their political souls to the labour and trade union bureaucracy, is being played out for all to see. A genuine left movement of the working class is developing in opposition to the corrupt and pro-capitalist organisations which the SP and SWP seek to protect.

We urge JDE workers to take up the appeal for the formation of a rank-and-file committee which would resonate across all sections of the of the working class facing the same issues, the corporate onslaught and the treachery of the trade unions.



To contact the WSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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