

# Workers in Banbury condemn “fire and rehire” sell-out deal at Jacobs Douwe Egberts: “It is a domino effect”

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1 August 2021

Socialist Equality Party members campaigned in Banbury, Oxfordshire, on Saturday discussing the “fire and rehire” dispute at the local Jacobs Douwe Egberts (JDE) factory with workers, young people and retirees. Campaigners placed the JDE dispute in the context of a global resurgence of the class struggle.

Around 300 JDE workers are being balloted on a sell-out deal presented by the Unite union after back-room talks with the company last month. The deal agrees wage cuts of up to £10,000 and brutal shift patterns consisting of two 12-hour days followed by two 12-hour nights in a single 4-day period. If workers do not accept the deal, JDE has warned that termination notices will take effect on September 13.

Workers at the factory began rolling strikes and overtime bans on May 1 against the company’s dictates. But they have been left isolated with strikes called off by Unite despite a similar wave of “fire and rehire” attacks at British Gas, Go North West, Weetabix, Clarke’s, Tesco and BCM Farena. Unite’s sole demand was for a resumption of negotiations with JDE that preserves the union’s corporatist partnership with the company.

The deal presented by the union has provoked widespread anger among JDE workers but Unite officials have sought to bludgeon workers into voting “yes” in the ballot that closes on Wednesday, repeating company threats that JDE will relocate the factory if workers vote “no”.

SEP members set up a campaign stall in Banbury town centre, advancing a path of struggle against Unite’s pro-capitalist programme. Around 300 leaflets were distributed including copies of a statement published last Friday, “Reject Unite’s sell-out deal at

JDE: Form a rank-and-file committee to defeat fire and rehire!”

Anna, whose brother-in-law works at JDE, gave her thoughts on Unite’s role in the dispute: “I am very, very, disappointed to see that Unite has caved in. I understand perhaps some of their reasons for doing it, but I really do believe that if we don’t all stick together, this is more than just JDE, this is affecting workers and their families up and down the country. Solidarity is the only answer. We need to stick together and be strong.”

She continued, “I would have expected Unite, of all people, to stick it out. I mean, that’s what they are asking the workers to do. So, I am very sorry to see Unite agree a deal with the management that apparently is only slightly better than the original deal. That’s not much good to the workers. So, okay, these workers keep their jobs, but if it’s like my brother-in-law who works at the factory, that’s losing £8,000 a year off his salary and incalculable in terms of his pension.

“It’s not just about this factory in Banbury. It is a domino effect. This now becomes common practice. Any big company can come in, and if they want to change the terms and conditions and fire and rehire, they can do that.”

SEP campaigners talked with other friends and family of JDE workers who were critical of the deal and thought it represented an unbelievable attack on workers. Some of them were aware of the role played by Unite and condemned the union for negotiating the deal. They responded enthusiastically when SEP members raised that the fight should be broadened as much as possible, to other workplaces and other countries.

Two former JDE workers also stopped to talk. They said that JDE treats its workers miserably, taking advantage of everything it can to penalise them. The union never attempted to defend them against management while they were working there, no matter how often they called for it.

Another person said what the company was doing was disgusting and it should be fought against. She said her friend is working at JDE and she was familiar with the proposed contract and the role the union is playing: “The union is no longer fighting for workers’ best interests. It should be changed”.

Shaun, a chef from Liverpool, said, “I think, like you said, they [JDE workers] are being held hostage. They are being forced into a contract they shouldn’t have to accept.” When asked what he thought about the fact that Unite was promoting an inferior contract, he responded, “Well, the unions make money off it. The union gets a cut.” He offered a message of support to JDE workers: “I don’t know you but get together. If they all walk out, they’ve got no workers. Even people who don’t work there should be fighting for it as well.”

Members of the Socialist Equality Party also campaigned in Manchester outside Go North West’s Queen’s Road bus depot. Around 400 bus drivers from the depot took indefinite strike action for 11 weeks this year against “fire and rehire” contracts. The company eventually withdrew its threats on the basis of a deal reached with Unite that slashed pay and conditions.

When told of JDE workers’ opposition to Unite’s proposed deal, a group of 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.” Another driver pointed out that recently Go North West had started to take on more new drivers at the garage. He speculated that the company was trying to replace workers who had gone on strike.

Jason, a bus driver from First bus company who is a supporter of the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee also sent a message of support to JDE workers advising them to get out from under the influence of the union: “Independent rank and file organisations that challenge the status quo are the future. Workers should be looking at their history of betrayal by unions and

instead of stabbing each other in the back (being played by union officials) just to get ahead individually, they should be forming challenges to the narrative collectively. I stand in solidarity, from an industry that is already suffering from union betrayal. Don’t let what’s happening on the buses happen to you!”



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