

UK: Pseudo-left groups complicit in sell-out of JDE workers by Unite

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After Unite betrayed the three-month struggle by 300 Jacobs Douwe Egberts (JDE) workers against fire and rehire at the Banbury plant of the food and drinks transnational and pushed through a filthy concessions agreement on August 4, the Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP) maintained a deafening silence. One only finally broken by the SWP on August 10.

The struggle at JDE was the most recent and significant struggle in a series of strikes this year against fire-and-rehire contracts, including at British Gas and Go North West, and against mass redundancies at BT. The SP and SWP hailed this as proof of a turn by the trade unions towards class struggle in defence of their members. Each one ended with the unions, including Unite, agreeing to and then imposing a sell-out deal that gave the employers almost everything they wanted.

This left the SP and SWP to provide their apologies for the trade union bureaucracy, centred on the claims that fire-and-rehire threats had been removed and some of the worst attacks had at least been ameliorated.

Yet at JDE, this balancing act between polite complaint and a continued hailing of the unions has proved impossible to maintain. The deal which Unite once again celebrates as a “win” slashes annual pay by up to £9,000, lengthens the working week and introduces a gruelling 12-hour shift pattern, including nights for around 35 additional workers for the first time. This sell-out sparked angry opposition among Banbury workers. The Twitter page of the #Banbury300 became the platform for JDE workers to call for a “no” vote, exposing the lie peddled by Unite that fire and rehire had been withdrawn prior to the ballot, and denouncing the union for conspiring with the company.

The vote to accept the agreement by 81 percent was driven through by a combination of the company maintaining the threat of mass sackings and Unite insisting that nothing else was possible, warning that continued action could lead to the plant’s closure. Even the local *Banbury Guardian* felt obliged to include in its August 3 report on the sell-out the comments of a JDE worker: “It is a sad day for the workforce at JDE. Unite the Union have betrayed the trust of the workforce. If the union think this is a victory against fire and rehire then that is unbelievable. From day one it has been on the table and not removed until today when the vote went JDE’s way. If it hadn’t that would still be on table.”

In contrast, the SP has chosen diplomatic silence in the run-up to and aftermath of the sell-out, while the SWP’s very limited

coverage was directed towards corralling JDE workers’ opposition behind Unite.

The SP’s last article on JDE appeared two months ago, with *The Socialist* claiming, “Unite the Union has stood firm against the company’s ‘fire and rehire’ tactics, achieving an 86% turnout in favour of a further four strike days in June.”

The article also claimed that workers at Banbury had, through Unite, established contact with their co-workers in other parts of Europe including France, Germany and the Netherlands. This too was a lie. Unite ensured that all communication was mediated through its counterparts in the European Works Council, a company-union body, with the International Union Federation (IUF) only sending messages calling on JDE to engage in “constructive negotiations.”

The IUF has now praised Unite for securing a “positive outcome”.

The SWP’s initial coverage was no less uncritical of Unite. The May 10 edition of *Socialist Worker*, for example, claimed that “Unite union national officer Joe Clarke reflected the determined mood of workers at the Jacobs Douwe Egberts (JDE) coffee plant in Banbury.” Clarke was instrumental in negotiating the rotten sell-out at Banbury.

While the SP remained silent after Unite suspended the dispute on June 25 and damaging leaks about the concessions agreement began to emerge, the SWP felt obliged to indicate opposition. On July 13, commenting on leaks of the agreement and acknowledging sweeping attacks on workers, *Socialist Worker* urged them to place their trust in efforts to secure a change of heart from Unite. “Even now, if Unite told bosses that the deal is off and gets strikes back on then workers could win. Workers should pressure the officials to scrap the deal and use some of the union’s much-vaunted £40 million war chest to support an all-out indefinite strike.”

As one worker commented on the Banbury300 group, “And what if they don’t?”

The SWP of course had no illusions that Unite would reverse course. Its only other comment on the dispute was written by Pat Carmody, which was brief and pro-forma even by the SWP’s standards. Its 104 words, published as part of an industrial round-up on July 27, noted that voting on Unite’s deal had begun, admitting that the “new deal keeps the pay cuts and shift changes in exchange for paltry compensation. It also includes 23 redundancies,” and again urged workers to vote no “and demand a

re-ballot for an all-out indefinite strike.”

The SWP was firefighting on behalf of the union bureaucracy, even as JDE workers were beginning to draw the conclusion that they were in fact waging a war on two fronts, against JDE and Unite. As the Banbury300 Twitter page stated on July 19, “The workers at Jacobs Douwe Egberts are being forced to accept a deal they don’t want!” Their call for a No vote was accompanied by memes depicting the union being paid off by the company and conspiring against them.

Unite and the company intervened to try and have the Twitter page suspended.

Seven days after the sell-out, the SWP has finally gone into print to acknowledge the scale of the betrayal carried out by Unite.

“Unite leadership has failed the JDE strikers,” writes Pat Carmody. Noting, “Those that don’t sign up to new terms and conditions by 13 September will have to seek alternative employment,” he asks, “But what employer needs that weapon when union officials advocate their members signing up to worse pay, terms and conditions? Let’s call the JDE deal what it is—a defeat.”

What conclusions must be drawn from such a defeat? As far as the SWP is concerned, only that Unite should have acted differently! The “trade union movement in Britain and internationally” should have organised, “resistance... That’s what Unite’s leadership should have been doing.”

But Unite did not organise resistance. And it will not be made to do so by rank-and-file pressure, as is suggested by Carmody. He has the gall to write that “Militant protests outside the plant took bosses and union officials aback,” before repeating the claim that “Unite national officer, Joe Clarke reflected that mood when he told pickets, ‘We’re aiming for a knockout in round three, but if we have to go the full 12 rounds then we’re ready.’”

The only thing Clarke “reflected” was the cynicism of the union bureaucracy as they posed as defenders of the Banbury 300, while preparing to stab them in the back.

The re-entering of the working class into major struggles such as at JDE upends the pseudo left, who are no longer able conceal their unswerving loyalty to the union bureaucracy behind ritualistic and insincere calls to step up the action. What defines the SP and SWP as tendencies is not their “left” phraseology, but the fact that they do not have an independent existence outside of the union bureaucracy in which they are embedded.

This is clearly revealed in their gushing support for Sharon Graham in the elections for Unite General Secretary. To the extent they offer any alternative to the workers trapped in Unite, it is that Graham, an executive member of the union and leader of its leverage department, is the “Workers Candidate” who will lead them to a new promised land.

Graham is the architect of similar betrayals of the fight against fire and rehire at British Airways and Go North West and would have done the same at Banbury had it not fallen under the organisational remit of her rival for the general secretary post, Steve Turner.

A May 18 *Socialist Worker* article on the Go North West sell-out ended with the declaration, “Strikes are the best way to win against fire and rehire. But the outcome should not be negotiated

cuts.” However, even the belated criticism of that betrayal was preceded by the statement, “Sharon Graham, a candidate in the Unite general secretary elections, said, ‘Congratulations to all our members at Go North West. I was very privileged to stand beside you with leverage and help push Go North West back. Thank you for your endorsement for me to be Unite’s next general secretary.’”

Support for Graham and Unite is incompatible with any form of class struggle against the employers. Graham and the entire Unite bureaucracy stand for a strategy of “leverage”, by which they mean negotiating company and industry-wide deals similar to those agreed at JDE based on the bureaucracy acting as an industrial police force, suppressing opposition and imposing wage and pension cuts, speed ups and job losses.

The first critical step in waging any fight against the employers is breaking the grip of the company-labour syndicates which masquerade under the name of trade unions. This is the basis on which the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) advances the fight for rank-and-file committees.

A major factor in the political crisis JDE created for the SP and SWP was the intervention by the SEP. Our consistent exposure, from the very beginning, of the sordid manoeuvres of Unite found a growing audience among JDE workers, because it accurately reflected their own bitter experiences with the trade unions. The SEP’s political analysis of Unite and of the pseudo-left groups’ relations with the bureaucracy played a significant part in the SP’s decision to take its distance from the dispute and the SWP’s efforts to feign a critical stance regarding the sell-out deal.

Along with its sister parties across the world, the SEP has called for an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) based on the recognition that opposition to the murderous policy of the ruling elites over the pandemic and the wave of corporate restructuring requires an international strategy. “The IWA-RFC will work to develop the framework for new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale. The working class is ready to fight. But it is shackled by reactionary bureaucratic organizations that suppress every expression of resistance.”

This is the perspective the SEP fought for at JDE, advancing a socialist perspective and strategy to unify the struggle of workers at Banbury with their co-workers in the company’s 20,000 workforce across sites in nearly 40 other countries. These are the lessons which need to be drawn from the sell-out at JDE. We encourage workers to contact the SEP to discuss how their fight can be taken forward.



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