

McVitie's Glasgow action group proposal to avoid closure is rejected, Pladis wants "more"

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Food production transnational Pladis has summarily rejected proposals from the Pladis Action Group to maintain production at the Victoria Biscuit Works in Tollcross Glasgow, owned by Pladis brand McVitie's. According to the company the proposals were not "viable".

Closure of the Tollcross plant, which employs 472 workers, was announced in May. The plant is scheduled to end production by the end of next year, although the entire workforce has already been issued with HR1 redundancy notices, allowing the company to proceed with sacking workers as it winds down its operations. Pladis, which produces famous McVitie's biscuit brands, intends to concentrate production in other UK based plants, including Carlisle, Manchester and Harlesden, London.

The action group proposals, marshalling the combined resources of the Scottish government, Glasgow City Council, enterprise agencies and the GMB and Unite trades unions, amounted to a 21-page document. The group's declared aim of shaming Pladis into working with a hastily put together alternative business plan was and is a waste of time.

By peddling illusions in their plan, the action group is trying to prevent McVitie's workers from turning to the methods of the class struggle, including industrial action in defence of jobs and living standards. The workers have a huge support base, with 80,000 people having already signed a petition demanding the plant be kept open.

Details of the group's proposals have still not been fully made public. McVitie's workers were given no information on the progress of negotiations between the action group and Pladis on which their livelihoods depended. GMB officials repeatedly cited commercial confidentiality until Pladis exposed this charade by

rejecting the proposals out of hand.

According to press reports the plan involved a new biscuit factory being constructed somewhere in the local area, at a cost of £57 million, paid for by an unknown developer building the factory and leasing it to Pladis, or by unknown equipment manufacturers funding it. The proposal suggested a food manufacturing grant of £4 million might be available and hinted at possible tax breaks. However, according to a source for the *Sunday Post*, who described the proposal as "credible in terms of the operational analysis", "the key pillar is how it would be paid for, and there is no pledge of state financial aid."

In other words, from the standpoint of expanding Pladis' profits, the plan made no sense. Pladis clearly want a much bigger handout and far bigger concessions to consider disrupting their plans to remove "excess capacity" in the UK.

The company, part of Yildiz Holding, which employs 65,000 workers worldwide, is 63 percent owned by Turkish billionaire Murat Ulker. It views the UK biscuit market as "mature" and aims to exploit it by using fewer workers at fewer sites. Pladis also operates plants in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, India, Pakistan, Kazakhstan and the United States, and operates on the basis of a global strategy for its various brands. In recent years it has sought to expand its worldwide biscuit and chocolate market share, particularly into North Africa. Under the impact of the pandemic, however, subsidiary Godiva Chocolatiers has been forced to close all its 128 retail stores in the US and abandon plans for up to 2,000 stores worldwide.

In response to Pladis' rebuff, the action group members blustered in near identical language. Scottish Deputy First Minister John Swinney of the Scottish

National Party (SNP) claimed his government was “perplexed”, as Pladis had said they were “committed to working with us to review the proposal”. Glasgow City Council leader, the SNP’s Susan Aitken, complained that Pladis had refused to “seriously engage” with the proposal. Labour member of the Scottish parliament Paul Sweeney said, “Pladis have failed to engage constructively and in good faith” and called for a “comprehensive state aid package”, presumably to give Pladis what it wants.

The trades unions sang from the same hymn sheet. GMB Scotland senior organiser Hazel Nolan said, “Tollcross general manager Jim Cuthbert told us they ‘expected more’ from the counter proposal but offered no specific comment on what ‘more’ would look like.” Pladis, Nolan complained, needed to provide “honest answers” to the workforce and “honesty is also needed for the members of the action group because if a firm like Pladis no longer sees Scotland as a viable place to do business, then everyone needs to understand why and what must be done to prevent further manufacturing decline.”

A GMB press release developed the same theme, promising to do whatever Pladis wanted. “If there is any way to save this site, and the jobs that depend on it, it must be explored – but that requires Pladis to be clear about what they want before we can consider alternatives. The unanswered question is this: ‘What would it take to stay?’”

No great insight is required to answer the question. Pladis clearly want to close a factory in the UK. To avoid that being Tollcross, the action group and the unions need to provide Pladis with more tax breaks, productivity agreements, more job losses and handouts than are available from the other UK plants, one of which would possibly close. In other words, the unions must intensify their collaboration with the company to ensure the further division and impoverishment of all McVitie’s workers.

GMB Scotland sought to divert attention from its alliance with the employers by waving the Saltire. The press release continued, “But we also must ask: ‘Why does Scotland keep losing out when it comes to our manufacturing industry?’” In fact, manufacturing industry across Britain has been devastated over the last 40 years under successive Conservative and Labour governments and during the entire 22 years of

devolution in Scotland and Wales, including 14 years of SNP rule in Scotland.

The trade unions have betrayed every major struggle launched by workers in defence of jobs and conditions, dating back to the miners’ strike of 1984-5, and in the process have become thoroughly integrated into corporate management. In response to the global integration of capitalist production, which Pladis embodies, the unions have abandoned their former national reformist strategy and limited defence of workers’ living standards. Instead, they have become strategic allies of the corporations in imposing labour discipline in “their” factory, company and country. More if this and worse is what the GMB means when it asks, “What would it take to stay?”

No way forward is possible with these pro-company organisations. The Socialist Equality Party’s call for new rank and file committees of struggle in every workplace, seeking the broadest, united, international mobilisation of workers against all attacks on jobs, living standards and democratic rights, is based on the recognition that no common ground exists between workers and any section of the capitalist class. Class conflict is the essential fact of capitalist society. We urge McVitie’s workers at Tollcross, and all other plants to contact the SEP and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees today.



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