UK Weetabix engineers begin strike against fire and rehire

Tony Robson
21 September 2021

Weetabix has been hit by a 48-hour strike action at its two main UK sites by engineers opposing the imposition of fire and rehire contracts which would cut their annual wages by up to £5,000.

Around 80 members of Unite the union are striking at the main site of the US owned food and drink transnational at Latimer Road, Kettering, and at Corby in Northamptonshire.

The strike began Tuesday with picket lines mounted at both sites. Further weekly 48-hour stoppages are scheduled to run every Tuesday up until November 30.

The engineers are determined to resist pay cuts and restructuring of their contracts that would roster them to work more days, with the loss of shift allowance, enforced by the threat of dismissal.

The fight against Weetabix cannot be entrusted to Unite, which has worked to demobilise opposition to the company's attack.

Engineers were due to have taken strike action from June 23 against the fire and rehire contracts, to be followed by 24-hour stoppages action every Wednesday throughout the summer. But Unite suspended the strike the day before it was due to take place in favour of entering "meaningful talks." The *World Socialist Web Site* warned earlier that Unite had already shifted from its stated position that withdrawal of the fire and rehire policy was a precondition for any further negotiations. Unite instead agreed that any changes to contracts would be pushed back until September.

Unite has not publicly released the contents of revised proposals that resulted from its "in depth" negotiations with Weetabix, but they were rejected by a majority of 82 percent in a consultative ballot. It is only because of the dead end Unite led workers down that it has finally called a round of selective strike action.

Weetabix has also been dependent on the services of Unite and the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) to undermine any unified fight against the cost cutting agenda of the highly profitable company.

USDAW delayed a strike ballot in a dispute over plans to reduce shift premiums for unsocial hours until after Unite had called off the initial action by engineers against fire and rehire. Workers voted unanimously to strike, but USDAW postponed the action on two occasions—the first of which was meant to start with a one-day stoppage on August 2. It also manoeuvred with the company to put a proposed agreement which was rejected by its membership. Following a 24-hour strike on August 16, the company agreed to reinstate the 27.5 percent shift pay premium.

USDAW has stated that the issue is now settled, but the company was only forced to relent due to the intransigence of the workers on the production line and shopfloor.

This push back against the company is threatened by USDAW and Unite allowing Weetabix to pursue a divide and rule policy. Rather than function as defensive organisations of workers, the trade unions act as junior partners of the company in policing opposition.

After suspending strike action for three months and handing the initiative to Weetabix, the attempt by Unite to present itself as a staunch opponent of the fire and rehire policy is risible. Newly elected General Secretary Sharon Graham stated, "The idea of 'fire and rehire' is abhorrent to me.

"If Weetabix decide to go down this route and they overstep the line then I will absolutely defend our members."

The claim by Graham that Unite will prevent the

© World Socialist Web Site

company overstepping the line is a fraud. Weetabix engineers need look no further than the bitter betrayal of their fellow workers in the food and drink industry at the coffee maker, Jacobs Douwe Egberts (JDE), in their fight against fire and rehire.

Only days after Unite suspended strike action at Weetabix, it stepped in to suspend two months of selective strike action by around 300 workers at JDE in Banbury, Oxfordshire, on June 25. This was to pursue back-room talks with the company which resulted in a concession agreement put to JDE workers in late July.

Workers opposing the sellout agreement exposed the claims by Unite that the fire and rehire ultimatum had been withdrawn, and denounced the deal on inferior terms and conditions as a betrayal of everything they were fighting for. It was only though the isolation of their struggle and with a gun pointed to their head that the agreement was rammed through. It entailed annual pay cuts of up to £9,000 and lengthening the working week and day through the introduction of 12-hour shifts.

Graham remained silent on JDE while it was hailed by Unite as an example of another great "victory" against fire and rehire. Unite's false narrative of its record of success depends on the services of the pseudo-left Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party groups. They hailed Graham as the "Workers Candidate" in the Unite leadership contest and whitewashed her role in overseeing the sellout of the strikes at British Airways and Go North West buses in Manchester, which were ended by the tearing up of workers terms and conditions as demanded by the corporations.

Unite has organised a media campaign denouncing "Greedy Weetabix," claiming that its actions threaten to undermine its customer base and market share as the UK's favourite cereal. While appealing to popular sentiment, this is all to assure the transnational that it is acting to protect its corporate bottom line.

The profits Weetabix has continued to pump out under conditions of a global pandemic in which workers have faced a threat to their lives would have been inconceivable without the complicity of Unite and USDAW. The latest strike action is viewed as an unwarranted intrusion into the union's partnership with the company, and it aims to resume normal service at the earliest opportunity.

Weetabix is owned by Post Holdings Inc, ranked as the third-largest cereal firm in America in 2017. For the three months leading up to December 31, 2020, it reported net income of $113.5 million, up by 11.8 percent, or $12 million from the same period in 2019. The figure for the Weetabix side of its operations was $28.1 million, an increase of 18.6 percent or $4.4 million compared to the same period the year before. The company is the largest cereal manufacturer in the UK, exporting to over 80 countries, and has production facilities in Europe, North America and East Africa with a combined global workforce of 1,800 employees.

The fight against fire and rehire and attempts by the company to claw back workers shift allowances at Weetabix develops within the context of a global restructuring by the food and drinks transnationals, which is provoking widespread resistance. From Coles warehouse workers in Australia, to PepsiCo workers in the US, the working class has fought to take a stand against the demands by the transnational companies to establish new benchmarks of exploitation which have brought them into conflict with the unions and their sellout agreements.

Weetabix workers should form a rank-and-file committee to overcome the divisions enforced by Unite and USDAW. They should reach out to their co-workers internationally to counter the escalating race to the bottom in the name of global competitiveness.

This is the perspective advanced by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and- File Committees (IWA-RFC). As the founding statement explains, "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."

We encourage Weetabix workers to read the statement and contact us to discuss how their fight can be taken forward.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site