

Unions betray Tollcross McVitie's workers in Scotland factory closure

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Workers at the closure threatened McVitie's biscuit factory in the Tollcross area of Glasgow, Scotland have voted to accept redundancy terms. The decision is the culmination of months of sabotage by the GMB and Unite trade unions of workers' struggle to keep the near hundred-year-old factory open.

All 472 workers have now been issued with redundancy notices. The first jobs are likely to go before the end of this year. McVitie's owners, food transnational Pladis, intend the factory to finally cease operations towards the end of 2022. The closure will have a devastating effect on workers' families and the local area, with many small businesses dependent on the factory.

The votes, held across all shifts and departments in late October, reversed the near unanimous rejections of the company's first redundancy offer made only a few weeks earlier.

Workers up to the age of 40 were initially offered two weeks' pay for every year spent working for the company, while those aged 41 and over were offered three weeks' pay for every year's employment. The package meant that a worker aged 40 who had spent 10 years at McVitie's would get a mere 20 weeks' pay as compensation for losing his or her job. A new start would get next to nothing.

Even workers with decades of service and with little possibility of getting another job had their payments capped at one year's salary, while those over 50 could get up to 18 months' salary. The divisive proposals, paltry compensation for the hundreds of jobs at risk, and which arbitrarily discriminated against younger workers, were thrown out by huge majorities of up to 98 percent.

Within a few weeks, however, most workers felt they had no alternative but to accept marginally improved terms.

According to a worker in the plant, the new package, details of which have not been circulated to the media,

removed the upper limit on payments, added £4,000 for workers in the plant for less than two years, and a £1,000 attendance bonus. Whatever final figure was arrived at would also be increased by 20 percent.

The trade unions reportedly made no official recommendation but sat on their hands during the final votes, allowing the company to send out letters detailing the sums to which each worker would be entitled. In the absence of any perspective to take the struggle forward, workers settled for cash payments which will only last a few months and cost the company next to nothing. Even then, the votes were far from unanimous with some groups of workers reportedly only accepting the proposals by 55 to 45 percent.

The outcome points once again to the treacherous role of the trade unions and their wholesale transformation into tools of corporate management.

Tollcross workers were ready for a fight and had broad popular support, testified to by the organisation of a petition against the closure which quickly garnered over 77,000 signatures, online and in street stalls. But the unions, participating in the misnamed Pladis Action Group alongside the Scottish National Party (SNP) government, Glasgow City Council and the enterprise agencies, worked from day one to scuttle workers' efforts to defend their livelihoods.

This sabotage took place on several levels. The action group, consistent with its membership, subordinated McVitie's workers to the financial interests of Pladis and the food producing corporations. Chaired by SNP Scottish Finance Secretary Kate Forbes, the group was dedicated to convincing Pladis that its profits were best served by retaining production in Scotland. Had an alternate buyer for the factory emerged, the action group would have sought to ensure their profitability too.

From this standpoint, any militancy on the part of the workers constituted an obstacle to persuading the

employers of the workforce's eagerness to be more intensely exploited. The unions, who also kept McVitie's workers in the factory throughout the pandemic by allowing biscuit manufacture to be categorised as essential work, at no time suggested that workers take industrial action of any form in their defence.

The isolation of the Tollcross dispute was especially glaring given the McVitie's closure emerged during a general escalation of the class struggle in Scotland and the UK, raising the possibility of the fight at Tollcross being linked with a broader struggle of the working class against poor conditions, years of austerity, unemployment and the consequences of the pandemic.

Faced with this prospect, the unions have come forward to shut down every struggle they can.

The final McVitie's redundancy vote was held at the same time as the Rail, Maritime and Transport workers union (RMT) union ignored an 84 percent strike vote which would have brought the entire rail network to a halt during the COP26 United Nations Climate Change conference in Glasgow.

The same unions as those at McVitie's—the GMB, Unite—as well as Unison, also called off a five-day walkout of local government workers across half of Scotland's local authorities. The GMB was ultimately forced by opposition in its membership to reinstate strike action among 970 Glasgow cleansing workers, but it is currently presenting a marginally improved offer to staff who have suffered below-inflation pay rises for years as a major breakthrough, when it is nothing of the sort.

By promoting the action group, the trade unions sought to prevent McVitie's and Pladis workers elsewhere coming to the Tollcross workers' defence. No effort was made to mobilise thousands of other Pladis workers in other McVitie's production locations throughout the UK, including at Carlisle, Manchester, Liverpool, Leicestershire and Harlesden, let alone at company's sites internationally.

Instead, the proposals put together by accountancy firm Interpath Consultancy on behalf of the action group offered Pladis a modern production platform in Scotland, should someone be willing to invest in it. Given the aging character of the entire McVitie's estate in the UK, this amounted to encouraging Pladis to close a factory and lay off hundreds of workers somewhere outside Scotland, playing one section of its workforce off against the others.

The action group wound itself up as soon as the unions had led workers into the redundancy vote, testifying to its essential purpose of suppressing any struggle at Tollcross.

Robert Deavy, GMB Scotland organiser, announced, “GMB are satisfied that the redundancy process was finalised in an amicable manner which proved agreeable to our Union members”.

A crucial ancillary role in this betrayal was played by the pseudo-left in Scotland, who functioned as an extension of the action group. The pseudo-left, including the Scottish Socialist Party and the Socialist Party of Scotland, walked in lockstep with the trade unions, directing McVitie's workers through a succession of pointless and disorienting stunts, such as appealing to the director of retailer Marks & Spencer to “side with the workers” and proposing a local boycott of digestive biscuits. They sowed illusions in the Scottish government by calling on it to nationalise the factory in the event of its closure.

By contrast, the *World Socialist Web Site* insisted from the first that the struggle to defend McVitie's workers must be taken immediately out of the hands of the trade unions through the formation of an independent rank-and-file committee, from which management and union officials should be excluded. Acting through the rank-and-file committee, we explained, workers could break the isolation imposed by the unions and reach out to and organise joint action with the 4,200 McVitie's workers in the UK, 16,000 Pladis workers internationally and 65,000 workers employed by Pladis' parent company Yildiz Holding—the only basis on which to confront the multi-billion-pound company.

The same is true in every workplace. Such rank-and-file committees are *the only* means through which the necessary unification and mobilisation of the working class against the unending assault on jobs and living standards can take place. The WSWS has founded the International Workers Alliance of Rank-And-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to carry forward this essential struggle.



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