

Weetabix workers escalate UK strike to four days a week

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From Monday, around 80 engineers at the Weetabix plants in Kettering and Corby, England, stepped up their strike action, moving to a four-day stoppage each week.

Members of the Unite union at both factories have been on strike every Tuesday and Wednesday since September over proposed changes to working practices that would leave them up to £5,000 a year worse off. The threat of dismissal hangs over workers refusing to accept, in another example of the “fire and rehire” policy adopted by a growing number of companies.

The engineers were originally scheduled to strike at the end of June, followed by weekly 24-hour strikes throughout the summer, but Unite suspended the action to allow “meaningful talks.” This resulted in new proposals from Weetabix, duly put to the workers by Unite. The union was unable to sell the proposals to its members, however, who rejected them by an 82 percent majority, forcing the union to launch the current stoppages.

Weetabix 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. It is owned by the US-based Post Holdings Inc, ranked as the third-largest cereal firm in America in 2017.

For the three months leading to December 31, 2020, Post Holdings reported net sales of \$113.5 million for the Weetabix side of its operations, up by 11.8 percent or \$12 million from the same period in 2019. It made a profit on these sales of \$28.1 million, an increase of 18.6 percent or \$4.4 million compared to the same period the year before. Overall for the period, Post Holdings reported net sales of \$1.5 billion and an operating profit of \$166.3 million.

Unite, just as it has done many times throughout this

year, at bus operators Stagecoach and Arriva, at Go North West, at British Airways, SPS Technologies and JDE, is leading its members into a dead-end. Its aim is to let workers blow off steam in disjointed industrial actions while it negotiates with the company to find a way to implement cuts, with minor cosmetic changes that the union can present as a victory.

This strategy can be seen most clearly in the refusal of Unite to mobilise any broader support for the Weetabix engineers throughout the dispute. This year, disputes, including strikes have erupted at multiple food manufacturers, both in the UK (the McVitie’s factory in Tollcross, Glasgow, and the JDE plant in Banbury, Oxfordshire) and internationally, most significantly the six-week strike at Kellogg’s in the United States. But the union has not made any effort to establish lines of communication between these struggling workers so they can fight together against their exploitative conditions.

Even in the same factory where the engineers are striking, the workers on the production line—members of the Union of Shop Distribution and Allied Workers (USDAW)—have not been called out in support. USDAW reprises the role that Unite itself played earlier this year in August, when USDAW members at Weetabix struck in a pay dispute but Unite refused to join as it was engaged in negotiations with the employer.

Unite’s true orientation can be seen by looking at who it is directing its appeals towards. Throughout the strike it has engaged in meaningless publicity stunts by pleading with major supermarket chains to stop selling Weetabix products until the threat of fire and rehire is lifted. Examples of this can be seen on “Stop Weetabix”, a Unite Twitter account created in “support” of the striking workers: “Hi @waitrose, we

called you to discuss your links with @weetabix. It seems you didn't want to chat & hung up on us"; "Hi @Asda, We visited your #TraffordPark store today and unfortunately, campaigners were met with aggression and hostility." Similar appeals were aimed at Dorothy Burwell, a board member of Post Holding, the owners of Weetabix: "Dorothy has the power to stop #FireandRehire so why doesn't she?"

The answer to that question is painfully obvious: because she, and all the other corporations and wealthy investors that Unite is appealing to, stand to gain enormously from the attacks on the pay and conditions of workers. The thrust of Unite's corporatist perspective is to convince the employers that cuts to workers' pay and conditions can be made through agreements with the union, without resorting to the inflammatory methods of fire and rehire. In particular economic hot-spots, it seeks to persuade management that a few above-inflation pay increases are a small price to pay for helping Unite sabotage one struggle after another by workers seeking to reverse decades of low pay and exploitation.

Unite's contempt for its members is also revealed by the meagre strike pay it provides. Even though it boasts of having a £40 million "war chest", workers are only receiving £70 a day, £7 more than the minimum wage. There are reports of some workers not being given even this measly sum.

The escalation of the strike at Weetabix comes shortly after the central pillar of the trade unions' campaign against fire and rehire crumbled late last month. Throughout the year Unite has promoted Labour MP Barry Gardiner and his Employment and Trade Union Rights (Dismissal and Re-engagement) Bill as the holy grail that would protect workers from exploitative employers using fire and rehire to attack pay and conditions. Gardiner's bill was a transparent fraud that offered nothing more than a cover for the collaboration of Unite and other unions, as well as the Labour Party, with the employers.

However, as the *World Socialist Web Site* predicted months ago, even this non-threatening bill stood no chance of passing through the House of Commons. Despite the illusions fostered by Unite and other unions that Conservatives such as Jacob Rees-Mogg and even Prime Minister Boris Johnson were opposed to fire and rehire, all Tory MPs voted against the bill, causing it to

fail with 251 votes against 188. Even if the bill passed, it would merely have enshrined in law that brutal workplace "restructuring" must proceed via corporatist agreements with the trade unions.

After the bill failed, Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham published an article in the *Daily Mirror* attempting to save the union's reputation. Her piece was full of fiery rhetoric against "greedy corporations" and "bad bosses", as well as bluster about how the union is "not prepared to let workers pay the price of the pandemic."

Ignoring such hot air, Weetabix workers should recognise that their fight against the company is just as much a fight against Unite and USDAW. The only way to defend pay and conditions is by forming a rank-and-file committee, independent of the trade union bureaucracies, which would reach out to workers at other factories, in the UK and internationally, to organise a joint struggle.

This is the perspective advanced by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). We encourage Weetabix workers to read the IWA-RFC founding statement and contact the Socialist Equality Party to discuss the way forward.



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