

Unite cans Heinz struggle

By Alfred Stevens, MMU Student

The 1,200 striking workers at Europe's biggest food manufacturing plant, the Heinz factory in Kitt Green of Wigan, suffered the first defeat in their ongoing struggle against the management and owners of the company, as shop stewards decided to call off the 24 hour strike that was planned for Wednesday January 4th. The workers had been planning to strike for the fourth time over management's sub par offer of pay conditions, including the removal of the performance related bonus and restrictions on overtime.

In an unsurprising move, given Unite's previous of trying to buy its members off cheaply, the shop stewards accepted management's demand that the planned industrial action on the 5th be called off. The shop stewards argue this was to allow the offer that had called 'final' to be voted on by its members. The offer though is hardly better than the previous one, which the workforce voted overwhelmingly to strike against.

The 'final' offer consists of a 3.5% wage rise in year one + a £200 lump sum and a 3.4% wage rise in year two, and the removal of the health care provision for employees the company currently provides. This was a miniscule improvement on the previous offer and falls far short of the 4.3% increase Unite are demanding, a demand that still fails to match the level of inflation currently running at 4.7% according to the Retail Prices Index. The removal of the health care provision is a new move from the company that if accepted would likely fund its paltry wage increase in the latest offer. It is yet to be seen how the workers will react to the offer but judging by some of the comments on the strike's facebook page, they're not ready to give up so easily and have plenty stomach for the fight. One posted, "Its a shame that because of a few busybodys that you are compelled to bring this crappy offer back to the membership

allowing the company to build up stocks this week. My answer is it aint nearly good enough."

Certainly there was no lack of determination to win, witnessed amongst the workers, when a contingent of students from the Roscoe occupation of the University of Manchester traveled down to the picket lines before dawn for the first 24 hour strike. The students traveled to Wigan to express solidarity with the workers and make it clear that they share the same fight and that the government's attack on higher education was an attack on the educational opportunities available to children from working class backgrounds, who will be put off attending university by the sheer level of debt it would burden them with. The government has used the excuse that it simply can no longer afford to fund higher education in this 'Age of Austerity'.

The noises being made by Heinz ring similar tones. They are using the current economic climate as an excuse to reduce the wages of its employees, even taking out a full page advert in the Wigan Evening Post on 16 December trying to intimidate the workers to accept concessions with the threat of lay-offs. Jaap Wilbers, Vice President of Supply, warned, "It is a competitive world in which we live and the cost of doing business at Kitt Green is higher than other Heinz European options". He threatened, "The UK has lost a great many jobs over the last 15 years due to being uncompetitive".

The workers at the factory gate however rightly recognise this ploy for the opportunist gamble it is. Heinz has not been adversely affected by the economic downturn. In fact it has performed rather well, benefiting somewhat from peoples natural inclination to eat more beans on toast when faced with less money in their pockets. This has meant that the US based food international, value estimated at around \$10 billion, reported a second quarter gross profit margin of 37%. Out of these profits it was only

too eager to award its shareholders a 9% dividend and workers were angered in the run up to Christmas when managers flaunted their large bonuses for the year.

The company has also been trying to squeeze more productivity out of workers in recent years. One worker cited an instance where Heinz threatened disciplinary action against three workers when they all refused to operate two machines at once in case one of the main machines broke down. Importing managers from outside the company to "turn the screw" has also angered them. Where safety has not been an issue the workers at the factory have mostly gone along with the measures to increase productivity and now the Wigan plant makes 80% of the total profit for Heinz UK & Ireland. Its demands of and disregard for those who have brought the company these profits seemingly has no end.

Although the statements Heinz are making about the workers at the Wigan plant being some of the best paid in the industry are true, this is not a particularly grand claim to make in an industry traditionally entailing poor working conditions. The only reason the workers at the Wigan factory enjoy fairly decent wages and benefits, ones that provide a reasonable standard of living is due to the stomach of the workers to stand up to the bosses. It was only due to this militancy that the factory managed to avoid many of the reforms that were part of the attack on the working conditions of the working class that swept the country in the 1980's and 90's.

The last such action occurred in 2007 when over 1000 workers at the Heinz factory staged a 24 hour wildcat strike in protest over another sub par pay offer despite the company reaping profits of over £135million that year. They were also outraged by attacks on sick pay, disciplinary procedure and the cutting of temporary workers pay. On that occasion the workers walked out against the advice of the union officials and it is this sort of militancy that is key in scaring the bosses into concessions.

If this strike is to succeed it needs to take a similar approach, shirking the union bureaucracy if it lacks the stomach to fight management and the shareholders. There is also the need to spread the struggle, Heinz employs 200 workers at a plant making baby food in Kendal, half of these are threatened with losing their jobs since the discontinuation of the 'nurture' range of infant milks in the UK. It is imperative that the strikers use whatever contacts they may have to encourage solidarity action at the plant in Kendal.

The next 24 hour walkout is planned for the January 11 if workers vote not to accept the current offer from management.

