

**An urgent appeal to fellow Unite members
and to all trade unionists**



Sacked Belfast airport shop stewards

Gordon McNeill, Madan

Gupta and Chris Bowyer say:

Unite in Shame

Union of betrayals and broken promises

We are resuming our public protest at Transport House in Belfast because of the failure of our union leadership to stick to any of the commitments they have repeatedly made to us. For the last eight months we have been systematically lied to and misled by these leaders. The union membership has also been lied to about our dispute.

We can only conclude, as would any reasonable person who examines the facts, that the Unite leadership have never had any intention of resolving this dispute and have been just stringing us along with promises in the hope that we will eventually just go away.

Having fought for six years for justice we have no intention of giving up now. We will not end this protest until we receive firm commitments that the Unite leadership will implement all the promises they have made to us.

Sacked by ICTS - betrayed by our union

By now the story of what happened to us is well known to trade unionists in Northern Ireland and is increasingly becoming known to trade unionists throughout Britain and beyond.

Six years ago we, along with 21 of our members, were sacked by our employer, airport security firm ICTS, for striking for a 50 pence per hour pay rise. Although this was an official strike, our union official actively colluded with management to have us sacked. His action in repudiating our strike was backed by the then General Secretary and the legal director of the union.

Since that time we have fought a long battle for justice, both from ICTS and from our union. Last summer, we won a long legal battle against ICTS securing a ruling

that we had been victimised and sacked because of our trade union opinions and socialist political beliefs. We saw this as a victory not just for us, but for the whole trade union movement.

A victory for trade unionism - but at an impossible cost for us

But it was a victory at a cost for us. We were left with crippling legal bills plus the impossible cost of defending an appeal by ICTS against the decision. Our families and our health have all suffered because of the situation of poverty and debt we have been put in.

It was the actions of our union in getting us sacked and in refusing to back our legal case that placed us in this impossible position. That is why we have demanded that Unite pay our legal bills and also compensate us for the hardship and suffering that our families have been put through.

Union of lies and broken promises

Have the Unite leadership lied to us, to Unite members and to the public about this dispute?

Examine the facts.

▶ Last September Unite General Secretary, Tony Woodley, met us and promised that our legal bills would be paid and that we would get a compensation offer within seven days. The bills were not paid. No offer was made.

▶ In January 2008 Tony Woodley promised our solicitor that a special meeting of the union's Finance and General Purposes committee would be called within four days, by telephone conferencing if necessary, to agree an offer. The meeting was never called.

For more background info visit: belfastairportworkers.wordpress.com

‣ When we began our April 2008 hunger strike the Unite leadership responded with statements to the press and to Unite members claiming that the issue of the legal fees was resolved, and that the only outstanding issue was compensation. Yet the legal fees are still not paid and there is no longer a commitment to even offer compensation. Will they therefore admit to the press and to Unite members that what they said in April was a barefaced lie?

‣ We ended the April hunger strike when we received, through our solicitor, an assurance that all the legal fees would be paid and that compensation would be negotiated, with a 30 April deadline. The deadline passed with the bills unpaid and no offer of compensation made.

‣ On 2 May our solicitors received another letter stating that offers to resolve the issues would be made before 6 May. This deadline also passed without any offer being made.

All offers withdrawn - strings introduced

Finally on 8 May we received, again through our solicitor, a letter that, in effect, withdraws all these commitments. It offers nothing on the issue of the legal bills which have still not been paid. On compensation, there is neither an offer or even a deadline for an offer.

Instead, for the first time, it makes clear that any possible future offer is now conditional on our acceptance of strings. The strings are not spelt out in the letter but were put directly to us by Unite Irish Regional Secretary, Jimmy Kelly, in a meeting that we requested with him after the May Day parade in Belfast. Jimmy Kelly told us that he would "need" a letter from us exonerating both himself and Tony Woodley over their handling of our dispute. There would also need to be a confidentiality agreement about the dispute.

In response to Jimmy Kelly's request for a letter of exoneration we suggested instead a full and public inquiry into all that has happened in this dispute so that Unite members can pass their own judgement on the actions of the top leadership of the union.

Why won't Unite leaders stick by their word?

We can only conclude that the Unite leadership never had any intention of giving us justice. They clearly see us as just three individuals from Northern Ireland who are without influence and who can therefore be ignored. Their main concern is to make sure that the true facts of what has happened in this dispute do not come out. Why else the demand for confidentiality and for letters of exoneration?

It is clear that there are things they do not want Unite members, or the public in general, to find out about this dispute. These include:

‣ The fact that Tony Woodley told us we had no legal case but instead negotiated a rotten deal with ICTS. This offered a pittance in compensation and accepted the permanent blacklisting of the shop stewards from jobs in the airport. The 24 sacked workers rejected this unanimously.

‣ The paramilitary intimidation that we had to face to pressure us to walk away from the dispute. At one point two of us were bundled at gun point into a van, driven to the grounds of Belfast Zoo where we were told that it wouldn't just be us, it would be our families who would be killed if we didn't back off. We received death threats through the post. Evidence that these originated in Transport House has been passed to the police.

Why we can't wait any longer

It makes no difference to high paid union officials if this whole thing is spun out indefinitely. It is not them whose houses are on the line; they do not have loan sharks at the door, they do not have solicitors threatening them with action over unpaid legal bills.

We cannot wait any longer for this to be resolved. The latest betrayal of the Unite leaders, is once again going back on their word, has left us with no choice but to resume our protest action and to bring the shameful way in which we have been treated to as wide an audience as possible.

Our protest will begin with an occupation of part of Transport House in Belfast. If the Unite leadership do not back down, or if they respond as they did in April by calling the police to have us arrested, the action will be escalated. Ultimately the hunger and thirst strike will be resumed.

We are fully determined to see this through and will continue our protest until we have firm and unbreakable guarantees that our legal bill is being paid and that we are adequately compensated for the hardship that our union officials have put us through over the last six years.

Ask yourself if you had been betrayed, intimidated and lied to by union officials for six years would you just sit back and accept it?

Show your support

You can support our protest by directly contacting Tony Woodley and Jimmy Kelly and demanding that they meet us and grant our just demands and do so without any strings attached.

**Tony Woodley - tony.woodley@unitetheunion.com
Jimmy Kelly - jimmy.kelly@unitetheunion.com**

We need to fight together to democratise our unions, with all officials elected and on average workers wages. These are our organisations. We need to reclaim them and make them fight on our behalf.

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