

50,000 march in Birmingham against BMW sell-off of Rover

British union officials use anti-German chauvinism to divert struggle over auto jobs

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Fifty thousand took to the streets of Birmingham last Saturday in protest against BMW's sell-off of its Rover car operations in Britain.

The call for the demonstration was made by a coalition of auto trade unions, local businessmen and media, Labour Party MPs and Birmingham city council. It was the largest protest outside London for many years. Rover workers were supported by thousands of trade unionists and their families from throughout the region, where tens of thousands more jobs could go as a result of the sell-off by BMW. Many also travelled from further a field to express their solidarity with the Midlands' car workers and voice opposition to the job slashing.

Up to 16,000 jobs are threatened at various Rover plants in Britain and the impact will be devastating for Birmingham and the surrounding region. The knock-on effect among some 400 firms supplying Rover with parts and services could lead to a further 50,000 jobs going. Some estimates put the loss to the local economy at over £400 million a year. According to the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, if 6,000 of the Longbridge workers lose their jobs, unemployment in Britain's second largest city would rise from 9 to 13 percent (over three times the national average).

The march was significant for more than its size, however. There were many expressions of nationalism and anti-German sentiment. Not only were numerous Union Jacks being waved (itself relatively unusual on a trade union march in Britain) but also a fair number of St. George's crosses (signifying England rather than the United Kingdom). One man had dressed up as John Bull, the epitome of English nationalism. Some backward elements could be heard chanting "Sh*t on the Germans, Sh*t on the Germans". Others carried particularly virulent anti-German banners: "BMW uber alles", "Liars.

Cheaters. You German B---ards."

Although expressed by only a minority of marchers, such xenophobic sentiments were not an accidental feature. Ever since BMW announced its decision to sell off the majority of its Rover operations, Britain's tabloid press and sections of the business establishment have been pushing anti-German propaganda. Porn king David Sullivan, president and co-owner of Birmingham City Football Club, was quoted in the press saying, "The government were spivved by the Germans and they should do something about it."

In Birmingham prior to the demonstration, a local BMW showroom had "scum" sprayed on its wall in red paint. The manager said: "You can understand how people feel. There's a lot of anti-German feeling. We've also had abusive phone calls, people hurling abuse at us across the forecourt and even people driving past shouting." The day after the demonstration, Rover workers were invited to take a sledgehammer to a BMW car parked alongside the track at the local stock car racing course. The day's events also included a "BMW Blitz."

Such nationalism has been encouraged by the main auto unions. Tony Woodley, chief negotiator for the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), said: "It is no exaggeration to say that this campaign is now a battle for Britain and British manufacturing and it has struck a chord with the British people." Amid the trade union placards demanding "Keep Rover running," were those urging support for "British manufacturing" and a defence of "British jobs". As the march started to lead off, one union steward was overheard saying, "Our jobs are gone, but I hope BMW gets it next."

Some of those on the platform at the final rally took pains to disassociate themselves from the more overt expressions of xenophobia, but this does not detract from

their political responsibility for the nationalism evidenced on the march. Bill Morris, General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, which has the largest membership at Rover, called for workers to line up to defend “British manufacturing”: “The T&G is calling on every family in every house in every street to show their feelings of betrayal against BMW by demonstrating their support for Rover workers and British manufacturing.”

The union leaders' talk of leading a fight in defence of Rover workers' jobs is empty rhetoric. No sooner had they left the rostrum in Birmingham, than they had already begun negotiations with Alchemy, the firm of venture capitalists that BMW has chosen to take over its Longbridge site and the MG sports car range. The *Sunday Telegraph* quotes Alchemy CEO Jon Moulton saying the unions were already talking to him about the redundancy payments that should be made. The unions' slogan “Defend British Jobs” is designed to block a united struggle by British and German car workers against what is, after all, a common employer.

There is a global crisis of overproduction in the auto industry, which some analysts put as high as 30 percent. Nissan workers in Japan face the loss of 21,000 jobs. Last year, GM cut over 3,000 jobs at its Opel plant in Russelsheim, Germany. Ford is considering ending production at its Dagenham plant in Essex, which once employed over 11,000. The same day as thousands marched in support of Rover workers in Birmingham, Honda announced that it was slashing car production at its Swindon plant. Reports spoke of a 50 percent cut in output.

Global auto manufacturing has witnessed a wave of mergers, acquisitions and cross-company share swaps. Whereas 12 corporations once controlled 70 percent of global auto production, today it is just five: GM (23 percent), Ford (17), DaimlerChrysler (11), Volkswagen (9) and Toyota (9). Most recently, DaimlerChrysler purchased a 34 percent share in Mitsubishi Motors (Japan); GM has acquired 20 percent of Fiat Auto (Italy), which receives 5.1 percent of GM in return and France's Renault obtained a controlling stake in Nissan (Japan). As the major car makers jostle for market share, those production facilities which cannot show the highest productivity levels and the lowest wage and ancillary costs are being shut down, or heavily downsized.

Rather than calling for united action by autoworkers against job losses, the trade union leaders in Birmingham argued for a change in economic strategy by the Labour

government. The bulk of the speeches were given over to urging Prime Minister Tony Blair to abandon his efforts to keep the value of the pound high and to join the European single currency, the euro.

John Edmonds, general secretary of the GMB union, accused Labour of “sacrificing thousands of jobs on the altar of low inflation.... BMW has behaved disgracefully but it is not to blame for thousands of job losses in textiles or ship building where contracts are being lost abroad because of the strength of the pound.” Sir Ken Jackson of the Amalgamated Electrical and Engineering Union (AEEU) said, “the strong pound is the biggest problem facing manufacturing companies of all sizes”.

The Trade Union Congress (TUC) has lined up with the main employers' organisation, the Confederation of British Industry, to urge a devaluation of the pound and for Britain to enter the euro zone.

The call for an effective devaluation of the pound is made, not out of a concern for workers' jobs, but because of the belief that Britain's advantage as a low-cost production platform is being undermined. The union leaders are articulating the concerns of major sections of British industry dependent on exports, who have seen their profit margins shrink, and the many transnational corporations that have invested in Britain over the past two decades.

In the 1980s the Thatcher Conservative government first set out to establish Britain as a cheap labour investment location for international corporations seeking access to the European market. This ability to attract international investment was predicated on the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs, massive cuts in wages and constant speed-ups. The union leaders embraced this strategy, making constant demands for sacrifices by their members in order to make Britain “internationally competitive”. At Rover alone, this resulted in 13,000 job losses since its take-over by BMW. The nationalism espoused by the union leaders subordinates the interests of British workers to those of the employers, while preventing the necessary united offensive by car workers the world over against the system that endangers their livelihoods.



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