Northern Ireland: Unions derail opposition to Bombardier job cuts

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A weeklong strike by workers at Bombardier's Belfast aerospace plant, part of a months-long dispute, has been derailed by the combined efforts of the trade union bureaucracy and the Northern Ireland Labour Relations Agency (LRA).

The strike, at the city's historic Shorts plant, involved 4,000 of the 5,800 workforce and was called over ongoing efforts by the company to cut its Belfast-based workforce and introduce new shift patterns. In the end, despite workers' efforts, the redundancies have merely been delayed for some weeks and the new shift will be discussed as part of the next round of pay negotiations with the main trade unions at the plant—Amicus, the General Municipal and Boilermakers Union (GMB) and the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU).

The origins of the dispute lie in the depressed state of the world aircraft industry in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Canadian-based Bombardier, which makes medium-sized jets for the regional and business aircraft markets, has made the Belfast plant central to its aircraft production because of the low pay and high skill levels of the workforce. In 2002, under the impact of falling sales and aggressive competition from the Brazilian company Embraer, Bombardier set out to defend its profit margins by cutting its global workforce of 38,000 by 3,800. In March 2003, the company announced 3,000 more cuts. The job losses had impact across the company, including locations in Kansas, Arizona, Germany and Britain. Two hundred and forty jobs were also lost in Belfast.

Shortly after, 60 percent of the Belfast workers rejected a four-year pay deal that had been initially accepted by union officials, which included a one-year pay freeze. At the time, union officials denounced the workforce as "voting for their P45s [a tax form issued to unemployed workers]." Seeking to intimidate workers, the company immediately announced plans for 1,000 more redundancies, while local unionist politicians, including Jim Rodgers, a former Belfast mayor, called for a new vote, insisting that the workers "have no bargaining powers, it's a take it or leave it option."

The workforce nevertheless rejected new talks aimed at finding a way to impose the pay freeze.

Over the summer, top union officials from Amicus, the GMB, and the TGWU were called in to calm an increasingly tense situation at the plant. Peter Williamson of Amicus told the BBC, "It has certainly never been my experience as a trade union official to witness the resentment and the anger that is current in this workforce at this stage."

Local unionist politician David Ervine, leader of the Protestant paramilitary-linked Progressive Unionist Party, also warned of tensions at the plant.

Talks between Bombardier and the unions broke down, and the unions were eventually forced to hold a ballot on industrial action in which workers voted by a large majority to strike. In mid-October, with a strike imminent, the unions agreed to call off any action for six weeks if the company agreed to further talks as well as a suspension of redundancies and shift changes during this period.

The six-week breather, put forward by the LRA, meant that any strike would occur after the elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly held on November 26. Bombardier's Shorts plant is by far the largest manufacturing employer in Northern Ireland, and a bitter strike at Shorts would have forced unwelcome questions about the fate of the working class onto the political agenda.

For pro-British unionist politicians, Shorts has

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historically been one of the plants at which privileges offered to Protestants have been used to tie workers politically to the Ulster bourgeoisie. The local member of the Northern Ireland Assembly is Peter Robinson, deputy leader of Ian Paisley's far-right Democratic Unionist Party. Unionism rests on the claim that the interests of Protestant workers in Northern Ireland can be defended through an alliance with British capital.

The breakup and decay of this relationship is embodied in the fate of Shorts. Once a leading, even pioneering company, Shorts was taken over in 1989 by Bombardier and is now an integral part of the company's global operation. Rather than being offered privileged and secure jobs at the expense of neighbouring Catholics, Shorts workers of all religious persuasions are now forced into global competition with other sections of the Bombardier workforce, in Germany, Sweden, the US and the UK.

Simultaneous with the threat to workers in Belfast, 2,000 jobs at the company's rail division in Derby, UK, are threatened, while 170 jobs have already been lost in Wakefield, Doncaster, Ilford and Plymouth.

The company's Hennigdorf plant in Germany recently laid off 440 workers, while its Halle plant was threatened with closure.

For their part, the republican politicians argue that workers should support the end of British rule and subordinate their interests to an Irish capitalist class that has in the last two decades raked in immense profits based on cheap labour and access to European markets. In the recent elections, Sinn Fein and the Social Democratic and Labour Party campaigned on pro-business agendas that advanced Northern Ireland as an investment platform with links to the southern republic.

But talks planned for early November broke down, and workers refused to operate a new computerised time management system. The works canteen was occupied on November 20 by 2,000 workers who had been sent home by the company. By November 24, 4,000 Amicus and TGWU members were on strike, although officially the strike was not supposed to start until November 26—election day. Picket lines were set up on November 27, and a rally was held at Transport House in Belfast. Speaking to the BBC, Eugene McGlone of the TGWU complained that the company's tactic of docking two weeks' wages from all the strikers, before it was clear how long the dispute would last, had made the union's job of resolving the dispute in an "amicable" way more difficult.

Within a few days, shop stewards at the plant voted to accept a proposal put together by the company, the LRA and senior union bureaucrats that postponed any new redundancies until the end of March, while new shift and working practices will be discussed as part of pay negotiations. This ensures that the union officials will play the central role in imposing Bombardier's demands on the Belfast workforce. Davy Thompson of the TGWU stated, "We are more than happy as a union with the settlement," while Alex McRitchie of Shorts management stated, "Everyone has agreed that the future wage contract is central to the future competitiveness of our operation here in Belfast."

No less than the unionist or nationalist politicians, the trade union bureaucracy insists that workers must subordinate their interests to one or other section of capitalists. Under the impact of the very same global economic pressures that have transformed Shorts into a branch of a Canadian transnational, the trade union bureaucracy has evolved into an arm of corporate management whose function is to police the exploitation of the working class while pitting workers in one branch of Bombardier against another.

Shorts workers cannot defend their interests through alliance with any section of capital, whether British, Irish or Canadian. Unity must be built amongst working people of all and no religion in Northern and Southern Ireland, Britain, and internationally; and it must be based on a perspective that seeks to mobilise the working class as an independent political force. This demands the construction of a new socialist party in Ireland.

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