

Welsh Assembly elections:

## SEP candidate discusses lessons of Burberry factory closure with workers

Our reporters  
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On March 30, the Burberry factory in Treorchy, South Wales, finally closed. Six months ago, the company had announced its intention to shut down the factory with the loss of 300 jobs and the transfer of its polo shirt production to China, Poland, Portugal and Spain, where costs are lower.

David O'Sullivan, Socialist Equality Party candidate in the Welsh Assembly election on May 3, and his campaign team watched as 150 workers took their last walk out of the gates to be met by a rendition of Giuseppe Verdi's "Speed Your Journey" by the Treorchy and Cwm Rhondda male voice choirs.

Tears filled the eyes of many of the Burberry workers.

Jean Young, who worked at the factory for 25 years, summed up their feelings saying, "A lot of us have been crying and saying 'so long' to friends we might not see again.

"We're not all local, and although we will try and stay in touch, we're all going in different directions, some to new jobs, others are retiring and some have already left with depression.

"Thirty to 50 don't have other jobs to go to and are still hoping a workers' co-operative will be set up."

Other workers expressed their hostility towards Burberry and fears of the bleak future that hangs over the region. Older residents recalled feeling the same emotions 20 years ago when the miners returned to work following their year-long strike against the pit-closure programme of the Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher. Then, dozens of mines lined the Welsh valleys. Today, just one pit remains, and that is also threatened with closure.

By the time the march made its way through

Treorchy village, past dilapidated factories and boarded-up shops to the Park and Dare workmen's hall, it had grown to some 400 people, headed by a couple of Labour MPs and a handful of union officials carrying a solitary General, Municipal, Boilermakers and Allied Trade Union (GMB) banner and a couple of Amicus union flags.

The events of March 30 morning brought into sharp focus the utter collapse of the British labour movement and the pressing necessity for an independent political movement to fight for the interests of the working class in opposition to the profit system.

Burberry closed because the labour and trade union bureaucracy isolated the workers through a nationalistic campaign to "Keep Burberry British" and futile appeals to businessmen, media celebrities, churchmen and royalty to put pressure on Burberry's CEO Angela Ahrendts to change her mind.

The trade union bureaucracy called the police to prevent O'Sullivan from speaking at the meeting after the march. But he explained to workers outside that he had gone through the same experience as they had a number of years ago, when he led a struggle to prevent the closure of the Rolls Royce factory near Watford, where he worked.

The perspective of the union at Rolls Royce was to plead with company managers to keep the factory open by offering one concession after another. The union leaders even put forward a survival plan, in which they would guarantee more profits from the workforce than the company ever wanted.

Rather than mobilise the many other Rolls Royce factories across the country, the union isolated the workers and sabotaged their struggle, O'Sullivan

added.

This has happened time and time again to many other workers. This is because the unions have come to function as an arm of management. They argue that the global movement of capital means jobs and conditions can't be defended, but this is completely false, O'Sullivan explained. The notion that workers have a shared interest with the employers must be rejected. The only solution is a united offensive of workers internationally against the corporations.

In the same way, O'Sullivan continued, the Labour Party—at Westminster and at the Assembly—is a right-wing party of big business and the super-rich that has no intention of opposing these attacks on workers' living standards. Whilst workers' social conditions are being destroyed, Tony Blair is prepared to spend billions on the illegal war in Iraq.

O'Sullivan emphasised that there does not have to be an endless downward spiral of lower wages, rising inequality and war as the major powers scramble for control of the world's resources. The wealth of the world can be used in a rational and planned way to benefit the vast majority of society.

Every worker has the right to a well-paid secure job. If companies like Burberry can't provide them, they should be transformed into public companies democratically controlled by the working class.

O'Sullivan appealed to workers to vote for him and the Socialist Equality Party on May 3 and to help build a new party of the international working class.

Back in the hall, the campaign organisers—GMB local organiser Mervyn Burnett, GMB regional secretary Allan Garley, Rhondda MP Chris Bryant and Rhondda Assembly Member Leighton Andrews—claimed that their campaign had been successful!

The campaign would continue, they said, telling the workers that Harrods owner Mohammed al Fayed had offered to buy any clothes produced by a co-operative should it be set up.

Any “workers’ co-operative” established under conditions where a polo shirt in Britain costs £11 to produce—compared to £4 in China—could only survive by constantly driving down wages and living standards, this time overseen directly by the trade unions.

Andrews declared, “This campaign has achieved what no other campaign against factory closure has achieved in Britain.” It had forced concessions from the

company—a three-month postponement of the factory's closure date, enhanced redundancy payments, a £500,000 re-training package and a promised cash sum of £150,000 to be spent in the community every year for the next decade. All this amounts to some £5 million in total—less than Ahrendt's annual pay package and a tiny fraction of Burberry's 2006 profit of £175 million.

As if nothing had happened, Andrews declared, “If Burberry wants to be seen as a British company, they must keep the factory in Britain.”

Bryant added, “I reckon Burberry thinks they've won today” but “we've won the moral argument” even though “the factory was closed.” It would make other companies “think twice” about leaving.

Burnett ended the meeting saying the march was “the culmination of our seven-month campaign” and gave the workers a “fond” farewell, adding “I hope you secure employment.”



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