

Britain: Anger boils over at union's complicity in sacking of 850 BMW workers

Niall Green
18 February 2009

Hundreds of workers at BMW's Cowley auto plant in Oxford, England, angrily confronted union officials on Monday as it was announced that 850 jobs would be immediately slashed. The confrontation was filmed by one of the workers present and has had thousands of hits.

Production at the factory, which produces the Mini car, is to be cut from three shifts over seven days to two shifts over five days. All work at the plant has ceased until the start of next week. German-owned BMW is also cutting work at a sister plant in Swindon, transferring 150 workers to the Oxford factory.

Production at Cowley was shut down for four weeks over Christmas due to falling demand for new cars in Britain and internationally. Three hundred workers—hired through temporary agencies—had already been told in December not to return after the shutdown. Global BMW sales fell by more than 4 percent in 2008, while sales of the Mini, though rising overall last year, nosedived by 35 percent in January.

The 850 sacked workers at Cowley, almost all of them agency staff, were sacked with immediate effect on Monday morning. Most were employed through two agencies, Manpower and Right4staff. All but 90 of the agency workers at the plant, which employs 4,300 workers, lost their jobs.

An hour before the end of the night shift, the workers were told by union representatives to down tools and go to a separate building, where the announcement was made. The workers were then told by the company that they must immediately hand over their overalls and identity cards or face penalty deductions in their final wage packets.

Responding to the sackings, workers angrily denounced the union officials from Unite and threw food at them.

Several workers caught the mood of the meeting on mobile phone cameras, showing the depth of hostility directed toward the union's role in the company's plans. One worker stood up to denounce the union and demand they return workers' dues:

"We paid the union. It is a corrupt organisation. They gave us one hour's notice that we are losing our jobs in a credit crisis. If you cannot represent us, we want the money we've given to you over the years and pay us back our money [huge cheer]. We are going to speak to the media outside, and we are going to tell every newspaper, every newspaper, exactly how you've represented us [huge cheer]."

"We asked you yesterday what was our situation, and you said you didn't know."

Many agency workers have described themselves as a "second class" workforce with no rights to redundancy payments. Sacked agency worker Roger Freitis told the local press, "We've been here all weekend asking what is going to happen and they said nothing. Then an hour before the end, they round us up and say we are going. No redundancy, nothing, just an hour's notice. It's disgusting."

Thirty-year-old agency worker Adam Mason asked, "Where has the union been all this time? Why did I bother paying my subscription—they did nothing for us."

Another laid-off worker, Bart Hryniow, told the media: "The union has been speaking to them for three weeks and we all get told an hour before we leave. People were upset and throwing eggs and apples at the union. Everyone was very angry."

Tony Woodley, joint general secretary of Unite, told the press that BMW's treatment of the workers was "disgraceful" and demanded an "urgent meeting" with company bosses.

"The manner in which these cuts were announced today was disgraceful. Sacking an entire shift like this, and targeting agency workers who have no rights to redundancy pay, is blatant opportunism on BMW's part and nothing short of scandalous," Woodley added.

But union officials knew long before that BMW was planning to slash the workforce. Unite had been in talks with management for weeks over reducing production and staffing levels. Speculation over cutbacks was rife among workers over the weekend, but the

union maintained its silence until the last-minute announcement of the redundancies. Speaking on the video, a union representative tells the angry audience that the union “won’t apologise” for agreeing to the cuts in shifts, adding only that it is unfair for “you people.”

In truth, the union has been involved in a conspiracy with management to conceal the reality of the workers’ situation and prevent any joint response by permanent and agency workers, most of whom have worked side-by-side for years. With the plant on shut-down and the sackings announced at the last moment, they effectively ensured there was no possibility of the workers meeting up to discuss events.

As to the feigned outrage of Woodley over the targeting of agency workers, Unite has overseen the expansion of non-permanent staffing in the auto industry, happy to aid management efforts to cut costs and drive up productivity as long as the union could continue to receive dues from temporary workers.

The auto industry in Britain, as across the world, is in crisis. Jaguar Land Rover, owned by Indian-based multinational Tata, has shed 2,000 workers, while Nissan has cut a shift with 1,200 workers at its Sunderland plant, as part of its elimination of 20,000 worldwide jobs.

Agency workers are usually the first to face the axe. Toyota announced in November that it would cut its temporary workforce in half, laying off 3,000 workers by March.

The pro-business policies of Unite, like all other unions, have produced a decades-long decline in jobs, living standards and working conditions, a process that has accelerated by the economic crisis. Auto factories that have not yet laid off workers have cut production, putting staff on short hours or sending them home on reduced pay. At Honda’s plant in Swindon, 4,800 people have been sent home for 50 days on 80 percent of basic pay. Upon returning to work—if they still have jobs to go back to—workers will be required to do unpaid overtime to make this up.

That the Unite trade union appeared before the BMW workers as representatives of management, enforcing its dictates, is not accidental. The refusal of the unions to defend even the most basic aspects of their members’ interests is rooted in the organic opposition of these organisations to the development and extension of the class struggle. Committed to the defence of capitalism and the interests of the British nation-state, the union bureaucracy is a privileged social group whose wealth and status is dependent on its role as industrial policemen of the working class.

In this respect, it is worth noting the contrast between the actions of the Unite trade union at the Lindsey oil refinery in Lincolnshire at the beginning of this month with those at BMW.

In the case of the Lindsey oil refinery, Unite was extraordinarily active in the so-called “Britons First” dispute, appearing on picket

lines, producing banners and posters, and generally being only too willing to sound off about what it had described as “unfair” competitive practices by an Italian sub-contractor at the plant. This is because its reactionary policy of insisting on the employment of “local labour” in no way contradicted its role in enforcing the interests and requirements of big business. Rather, it presented the opportunity for the union to make common cause with “British” employers and to bang the drum for economic protectionism as a means of defending the interests of British capital more generally.

Where it is unable to resort to the expedient measure of scapegoating foreign workers for job cuts, however, as in the case of BMW and numerous other manufacturing industries now imposing layoffs, it is silent.

Organisations such as the Socialist Party and the Communist Party supported the unions in the “Britons First” dispute, arguing that it was a sign of the fact that the unions were prepared to lead a struggle on behalf of workers, no matter how divisive its demands.

But the anger and hostility of the Cowley workers towards the union officials at the plant offer a real indication of the lineup of forces in the coming class conflicts—with workers on the one side and the government, pro-capitalist parties, major corporations and their trade union lackeys on the other.

Car workers, like other sections of the working class, must actively seek to forge united rank-and-file organisations of temporary and permanent employees in opposition to the leadership of Unite and other unions, in solidarity with their counterparts in the car industry across Europe and internationally. Only on the basis of socialist policies can the reorganisation of industry to meet the needs of working people, not the profit interests of big business and the bankers, be achieved.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact