

Britain: An opportunist defence of the union betrayal at BMW Cowley

Niall Green
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On February 16, hundreds of workers at BMW's Cowley car plant in Oxford, England, were sacked. Those sacked were mainly agency workers, many of whom had worked at the plant for years.

The layoffs were the latest in a string of mass redundancies in the car industry in Britain that have seen thousands lose their jobs or be put on short hours.. (See "Britain: Anger boils over at union's complicity in sacking of 850 BMW workers")

Following the announcement at the Cowley plant, some of the 850 sacked workers angrily confronted officials of the Unite union, demanding to know why it had failed to defend their jobs. Workers' tempers were especially inflamed by the revelation that the union had been involved in negotiations for several weeks and were aware of management's intentions, but had concealed this from their members. One union representative told the meeting that they couldn't let the workers know because management might sack them if they did! Many irate workers demanded the union repay their dues, while other threw fruit at the Unite representatives.

In response to this outpouring of workers' anger at the union's collaboration with BMW management in the destruction of jobs, the Socialist Unity web site has come out in defence of Unite.

Prominent on the web site is one Andy Newman. A member of Respect Renewal, the faction of the defunct Respect Party that remained loyal to ex-Labour MP George Galloway, Newman is also active in the Stop the War Coalition. Just as importantly, he is a member of the Southern Regional Council of the GMB union. His February 17 article, "Blame the bosses not the unions", is a blatant apologia for the conspiracy hatched between management and the unions at Cowley against the agency workers.

Referring to the fact that the union, rather than BMW, took "the flak" over the job losses, he urges, "We need to be careful that we don't throw the baby out with the bathwater." While it is true that the unions response to shutdowns in the car industry has "been inadequate", some of the criticisms made against them over this verges on "being anti-union", he states.

In particular, he attacks complaints that the unions had been involved in secret negotiations with management for weeks

before the announcement was made. He quotes one worker complaining of the union, "They did nothing for us. They kept us all in the dark and we haven't been able to prepare for losing our jobs."

In response Newman states, "But hang on. Overall car sales in the UK are down about 50% since last year, and BMW Mini sales have gone down 33%. So of course the union has been in negotiations trying to avoid redundancies. *And of course those negotiations will have involved confidentiality, as management and union's explored alternatives.*" (Emphasis added)

Here Newman makes explicit that it is the market that dictates what can be done, not the independent interests of workers. And for the same reason, Unite's responsibilities lie with BMW and the corporations, not its members. He complains that it was BMW that broke the spirit of trust and co-operation, "by *springing the redundancy announcement on the unions* and the staff. Yes the workers are angry, but it was BMW management who sacked them, not the unions." (Emphasis added)

There is every reason to believe that Unite knew about the lay-offs in advance and refused to tell workers. There was a widespread rumour of sackings among staff at the factory over the weekend before the Monday morning announcement and repeated requests from employees for information about the status of their jobs. Despite this, workers were told by Unite representatives that they knew nothing—right up to the point that union officials and BMW management mounted the platform in the room where the axed workers were herded to announce the 850 job cuts.

The fact that BMW management felt comfortable to leave Unite to break the news indicates that management had complete confidence in the union to act as industrial policeman.

Newman's piece is saturated with the kind of arrogant, patronising and hostile attitude that typifies the entire trade union bureaucracy. He insinuates that the question of whether the unions were aware of the impending job losses is irrelevant as "... to be 100 percent honest, *it is not clear whether—in the current context—the union could have persuaded the permanent staff to take any action to defend the agency workers..* One of the most insidious aspects of the current two-tier workforce is that it undermines solidarity, as the permanent workforce tend

to see the agency staff as a buffer against their own redundancy," he states. (Emphasis added)

The truth is that all the workers at Cowley were never given the opportunity to take any collective decision on the future of their jobs—let alone fight for an alternative—because the union ensured they were kept in the dark until the last moment. The announcement of the sackings by company reps and Unite officials, just one hour before the plant was closed for a week, meant that there was no possibility of the workers meeting up to discuss their response and approach full-time workers for their support.

But even before this event, agency workers at the Cowley Mini plant were not allowed to take part in a crucial vote that in fact led to them being sacked. The *Oxford Mail* pointed out on February 19 that Unite had deliberately excluded agency workers from having any say in their own future. It reported, "On January 14, permanent staff were asked to vote on whether to agree to more shutdowns at the plant, which would safeguard the jobs of all workers, or to agree to a change in the shift pattern which led to the weekend shift being cut and the 850 agency worker redundancies this week.

"But agency workers were excluded from the vote, despite being fully paid-up members of the Unite union."

Plant union convenor Bernard Moss defended the exclusion as being in line with an "agreed legal procedure". In abiding by this procedure, it is the union that actually used agency staff as a "buffer" against redundancy and not the "permanent workforce."

Newman in any case rules out any alternative to the job cuts, a priori.

"What could the unions have done differently?" he asks.

"The unions did not create the recession. *They can only operate in the economic climate, and the social and economic system that we actually live in,*" he states. (Emphasis added)

"Last week at our GMB branch committee we heard a report of a furniture factory where there is a lot of anger against the union and against the stewards," he continues, "even though we have negotiated away 50 redundancies, because some of the staff are angry that their production bonuses are going to be cut."

"Some workers have unrealistic expectations of what the union can achieve", he complains. "[I]f a company is genuinely losing money they cannot continue without changes. *Away from abstract propaganda, and in the real world, there isn't a viable socialist alternative currently available that can prevent the cuts and redundancies we are faced with in the here and now.*" (Emphasis added)

In other words, the absence of a "viable socialist alternative" in the "here and now" means that workers have to put up or shut up. And just in case there is any possibility that they refuse, thereby jeopardising union/management chats over what is or is not possible, they are not to be given any say so in the first place.

All "the unions can achieve is to have some collective input in the process to try to make it fair and transparent, and to try to protect the workforce as much as possible," he states.

Newman, along with the Communist Party, Respect Renewal and the Socialist Party, was an enthusiastic supporter of the strikes at the Lindsey Oil Refinery.

There, union officials appeared on picket lines to condemn what they described as "unfair" competitive practices by an Italian sub-contractor at the plant. Through these strikes, which called for "British jobs for British workers", the unions diverted the legitimate grievances of workers against rising unemployment in the energy sector into a divisive campaign against foreign labour.

Newman defended the strike as an example of a genuine rank and file movement. Defending the "Britons First" axis of the dispute, he asserted approvingly that it only meant that "jobs in Britain should be open to workers who live in Britain".

Those criticising the strike were accused of turning their backs on the "actually existing working class", and waiting for "a nicer, more middle class one to come along, before getting involved with its struggles".

Fast forward a couple of weeks and Newman is now attacking the "actually existing working class" at Cowley for demanding the union should protect them!

This is not accidental. As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained, the 'unions' involvement in the "Britons First" dispute did not contradict their role as the industrial policemen of the working class. Rather, it presented an opportunity for them to bang the drum for economic protectionism as a means of defending the interests of British capital.



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