Britain: More charges of union complicity in mass sackings at BMW’s Oxford plant

Liz Smith, Elaine Gorton
24 February 2009

Workers reported for shifts at the BMW plant in Cowley, Oxford, on Monday after a one-week shutdown, still uncertain as to the future of some 500 agency staff.

The previous week, 350 agency staff had been given just one hour's notice and told to hand over their uniforms and security cards. The mass sacking led to angry scenes as it became apparent that the union, Unite, had been aware for some time that the cuts would be made but had concealed the information. At the time of the sackings, it was said that a further 500 temporary staff would be cut from weekday shifts and 150 workers would be transferred from the Swindon plant to Oxford.

Subsequently, it was claimed that the agency workers who supplied the weekend shifts at BMW's Cowley plant, despite being fully paid-up members of Unite, were not part of a vote in mid-January on a proposed reduction in shifts. One worker told the *Oxford Mail*, "We pay the same amount as contracted staff into the union, but we don't have the same rights. We can't go to the meetings and we have no right to vote. When we asked the union why, they said their hands were tied. I think it's totally wrong."

Unite plant union convenor Bernard Moss defended the situation, stating that, "The problem is the core workforce is contracted to BMW. Any agreements we have for shift changes are only decided by BMW people, not agency labour."

Moss said that a meeting had been held three weeks before the sackings, involving only the contracted workers, at which the union informed them that the choice was between keeping shift patterns the same, with the consequence of a large and possibly increasing number of stand-downs, or a reduction in shifts, with "possible job losses."

The workers had accepted the latter, he said. This is disputed by a number of BMW workers who insist there was never a vote on the shift changes.

Defending the fact that the union had not informed the agency workers of their impending firings, Moss stated, "The problem we had was that we were under clear instruction we could not give out any information until the company said so.... Although we are a trade union, we are employed by the company. If they give out an instruction, it would be a brave person to defy that."

The choice of words is telling. The union is "employed" by the company. It therefore follows that it is contractually bound to management, including keeping silent on potential job losses. In short, it is a company union and behaved accordingly.

Moss told the newspaper that the union "have negotiated the new shifts." He continued, "The weekend shift has had a good run since 2001—the weekend shift at Peugeot only lasted about three years. Nothing is forever...."

As for the agency staff, many of whom had worked at the plant for years, Moss said, "the whole nature of agency labour means we cannot have flexibility. There is only a limited amount we can do for these people."

Moss's response is completely in line with the perspective and practice of the trade union bureaucracy—which is to conspire with management to sow divisions on every level possible. It is legitimate to take £2.90 weekly dues from agency workers, but not to fight to include them in any votes that may affect their jobs and conditions, as "only a limited amount" can be done for them anyway.

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. With agency staff representing some 1.5 million of the UK workforce more generally, with large numbers involved in the public sector, the implications are enormous.

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 shutdown and the sackings announced at the last moment, they effectively ensured there was no possibility of the workers meeting up to discuss events.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to current and former workers at the plant at the nearby Job Centre.

Jamie McFarlane explained, "I worked at BMW on the wax line for 20 months and was sacked three weeks ago from the weekend shift. They told me late Friday evening that the Sunday would be my last shift. In my books, they should give you at least a week's notice, not two days!

"This was the second week back after the six-week shutdown.

© World Socialist Web Site

In order to get through this, I used up all my holidays and returned with a massive minus hours in my WTA [Working Time Account].

"The WTA was sold to the Cowley agency workers as an alternative to overtime work. Workers can bank their extra hours and use these for emergency days, which are good if you have something to go to at the weekend, like a wedding, for example.

"As a result of the six-week shutdown, they have forced us into massive debts. I went back with minus 96 hours. They ended up deducting £980 from my final pay cheque. I offered to come in to work that back, but they weren't interested.

"I'm finding it really hard as I've got a baby and girl friend, who works, with another one on the way. They didn't fire me, but eliminated me as I am still employed by Manpower on a zero hour's contract.

"We are just a disposable workforce. They have so many more rights in Germany.

"The unions voted against us to take out the weekend shift. We are paying £2.90 a week union subs and got nothing out of it. In the meeting where we were given two days' notice, there were 35 affected. They must have known they were about to release the 850 workers. There is no doubt that they knew about this. These are big decisions and have been in the pipeline for several months. Occasionally, we would get wind of things, but these would be put down to rumour."

Piotr Dunak worked in the paint shop at Cowley. He was let go on December 5 during the first wave of sackings.

"They gave us five days' notice when I had already booked a holiday, and it confused my Christmas time as well," he said. "When I finished work, they were still producing cars. They sacked people because of expenses, not because the work wasn't there. Last month, they were still producing the same number of cars."

"You can't expect any help from the unions. When they gave me my five-day notice, they were in the same room as the Manpower guy. The unions looked like they didn't care. Some who had been working there for less time were kept on, some who had worked for four years were sacked.

"My friend was given one hour's notice last Monday to give his uniform and card back. He said they were saying, 'Sorry, there's no work, give us your card and f**k off.' My friend has gone back to Poland now. It feels like the union is helping Manpower and not the workers."

Naveed Ramzan was sacked just before the six-week shutdown in December, when BMW got rid of 350 workers.

He said, "We were aware the orders were dropping because they kept cutting shifts. I worked the weekend shift every week, which is three shifts. They kept taking one-and-a-half hours off, which is 10 percent of the work.

"Their criteria were that those who had been there the shortest time or had disciplinary issues were selected to go. I had been there nearly two years and was surprised and thought that two years would be long enough to survive. My friend who worked there for eight years was never given a contract!

"When you have an inside picture, the union bureaucracy have done nothing for us except negotiate a pay rise. They are supposed to fight for our rights when BMW wanted to do anything unethical. At the meetings, the unions make excuses for BMW.

"An example of this was when we were scheduled to finish early one day. If they were going to change that, they need to tell us before the 8 a.m. deadline on the Friday morning. They didn't tell us until after this, and people were complaining. There is an agreement between the unions and management that if they want to keep us on to work longer then they have to let us know in advance.

"This particular time, we were told if anyone has a problem with it they can sit and talk to a manager with the union rep. I complained and stated my case that I had other plans and they had not told us in time. The union guy said, 'We know you don't have to stay, but if there was any manager you should do a favour for, it should be this one. When you scratch our back, we scratch yours.'

"During the interview given when we were laid off, the union guy there didn't say a word in my defence, or reasons why we should be kept on. It's not BMW's fault, it's the economic climate, but a company of that size could afford compensation."

A current employee at the Cowley plant explained, "I worked for three years with an agency for the company, but I am now on contract. I know people that have worked there for longer than me but have never been given a contract. Friends of mine have been told to come in on Monday, but they believe that they will be told to go.

"I think that the same thing will happen to the weekly workers that happened to the weekend shift. I can't believe what's happening. Friends I have worked alongside for four years—gone. I reckon it's going to be an absolute nightmare. There were rumours kicking around before Christmas that everything was going to Swindon. But to let people go like that—we were all shocked.

"They keep from telling you anything till the last minute to keep you working. It makes me angry when the papers say the workers were treated fairly. That's not true. That place has always been able to do whatever they want. Workers are frightened. We all know that the unions do not fight for us, but what can we do?"

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site