

Ireland: Workers occupy Waterford crystal factory

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Two hundred workers have occupied the historic Waterford Crystal plant and visitor centre at Kilbarry near Waterford, Ireland. The occupation was launched on Friday in response to the decision by the failed company's receiver to cease manufacturing production, lock out and sack some 480 workers. Local shops have supplied food and drinks.

The move by the receiver, in conditions of deepening economic crisis in Ireland and internationally, emerged after David Carson, of receivers Deloitte, reneged on a previous pledge to maintain production at the site that produces luxury crystal for the world market.

Negotiations have been ongoing for some weeks with two prospective buyers. Both KPS Capital and Clarion Capital are considering buying the Waterford Wedgewood group, but reportedly only intend to maintain 300 jobs at the plant out of the current 800.

Union officials had made clear they would do nothing to protect workers' jobs. Clarion has now submitted a bid that has been given approval by the Unite trade union, with regional secretary Jimmy Kelly stating that the union was "encouraged". Clarion's plans for the plant would retain only 300 workers. It specialises in leveraged capital investment in luxury, healthcare, insurance and advertising industries. KPS do the same in basic manufacturing. Both are New York-based venture capitalists.

According to RTE, just 200 workers were asked to turn up for work yesterday—those who were not served with termination of employment letters on Friday evening. Unite urged the 200 employees to report for work as normal.

Waterford Wedgewood was placed in administration last month following a refusal by bankers to extend credit. The company employs 800 workers in

Waterford and 6,000 worldwide, including 1,500 in Indonesia. Other outsourced operations are in Brazil, Romania and Slovenia. The company collapsed after missing a deadline on €449 million debt. The pension scheme is also €111 million in debt and is likely to be wound up. Some 367 redundancies have also been confirmed in Staffordshire in the UK, where 1,900 remain employed by the company.

The occupation is proof that broad sections of workers are seeking collective means to resist the sharp onslaught on living standards that the world financial crisis is bringing in its wake. The same day Ireland was warned that its state creditworthiness faced being downgraded on Moody's, the international credit agency.

Carson's intention to cease glass production and close the popular visitor centre was leaked by former managers to workers and union officials. Word spread quickly to Waterford Wedgewood workers and 60 or 70 rushed to the site to prevent the entire workforce being locked out. For others the first indication of a lock-out was when the security staff shut the doors. No official notification was issued to either staff, or apparently the trade union Unite.

Private security teams that had been on site over the last few weeks attempted to bar access, but workers were able to seize control of both the visitor centre and the production plant. One person reportedly received minor injuries when a pane of glass was smashed in scuffles.

Around 100 workers slept in the factory over Friday night. Colleagues and relatives brought bedding and food, while an eight hour shift rota was drawn to ensure up to 40 workers were on site at any time. Workers say they are committed to remain on site until the decision to close the plant is reversed. A demonstration was held

outside the plant Saturday, which was attended by some 2,000 supporters.

Many of the older workforce have been employed at Waterford for decades, have built up pensions that are now imperilled, and have little prospect of alternative employment.

John Dooley, one of the workers involved, told the *Irish Times* that he is still due €30,000 in redundancy payments out of €55,000 from the company. "€55,000 is small enough money for 46 years service, and it would take small enough money from the government to keep this place open, at least until a new buyer can be found. We are going to stay here for the long haul. We have nothing to lose".

Dooley joined the company in 1962.

"Today they've pulled the plug on us", said Jean Croke to the *Irish Independent*. "We're being forgotten. A lot of us came here straight from school, we've worked nowhere else. How are we going to get jobs now? There's nothing out there for us".

Statements by union officials make clear that Unite has been working closely with the company since it was placed in receivership earlier in January. Throughout the decay of Waterford Wedgwood, a process in which many thousands of jobs have already been lost, relations between the company and Unite have been amicable.

Unite's primary concern is to ensure that job losses are packaged in a manner that can be easily foisted upon the workforce—through "natural wastage" and so-called "voluntary" redundancy. Kelly promised on January 5, "The union will work closely with any prospective purchasers of the business so as to ensure we save the maximum number of quality jobs".

Walter Cullen, another Unite regional official, told the press of a phone conversation he had with Carson, shortly after the closure was announced.

"I reminded him that he was breaking his word, that he had given us a firm commitment that there would be no large-scale redundancies similar to what was imposed in Wedgwood, and that if a decision was made to close the company, he would meet with us to hold discussions, because we have alternatives. What we need now is to re-establish the process, and this decision has to be reversed".

As well as collaborating with potential buyers, the Irish trade unions are currently involved in talks with

the Irish government to create a new "partnership" agreement to ensure that the costs of the collapsing economy and the huge bailouts to Irish banks are passed onto the working class in the form of an extended pay freeze.

At this point no agreement has been reached, since the government are seeking support for swinging public sector pay cuts, which the union bureaucracy do not relish seeking to impose. The government are seeking to save €2 billion immediately. But new agreement, formal or informal, there will be, following on from decades of partnership agreements between the trade unions, business and government.

Nothing can be defended through trade unions tied in every aspect of their existence to Irish and international capital. Rather the first steps taken by Waterford Wedgwood workers should be a point of departure in the development of independent workers' committees, aiming to mobilise the immense reservoir of support amongst the broader working population, in Ireland and internationally, who face the same pressures on their living standard from the same source—the breakdown of world capitalism.



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