

Britain: Dundee packaging factory occupied

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A small group of workers in a Dundee packing case factory have taken an important stand in defence of their living standards. Twelve workers have occupied Prisme Packaging's industrial unit near central Dundee in order to force their employer into paying legally required redundancy payments, following the company's decision to dispense with its entire workforce.

Workers were informed, March 4, with no prior warning, that the managing director had resigned and that they were all losing their jobs. Some have been employed by Prisme for as many as 14 years.

At midday the same day, an unknown individual claiming to be a company director turned up. Workers sent him away, but Kenneth Andrews, appointed a director only in the last month, returned with instructions for the workers to quit the company's premises by 5 p.m. that day. They were issued a letter explaining that the company was going to give no redundancy pay, no holiday pay, and no payment in lieu of notice.

The letter baldly stated that "we regret that we cannot make this payment...and can't foresee that there will be circumstances in which we could make this payment to you in the future."

The workers, seven women and five men, refused to sign copies of the letter and, over the course of the afternoon, decided to take control of the factory to prevent potentially valuable materials and equipment being removed. The factory is packed to the ceiling with cardboard and contains cutting and folding gear.

Seven workers spent the initial night in the plant's office. Friends and supporters delivered sleeping bags and food. Workers also made contact with the press.

One worker, Matthew Duffield, held a number of media interviews making clear that this was understood by all involved as a general stand in defence of workers' rights:

"We have decided to dig in until we get what we are due. The company have shown us a complete lack of respect. We will make a stand and hopefully stop this sort of thing happening in the future."

Another worker, David Taylor said, "We are not leaving this factory until we have been advised of the reason for its closure and we are given reassurance about our redundancy."

Referring to the company's tactics, Taylor continued, "Everything they have done is underhand. They are not changing their stance. The only option we have got is to expose them for what they are, and hopefully they won't be able to do this again."

He noted that the company had not even gone into administration. It was simply refusing to pay anything:

"We feel we have to see this out until either they change the terms and conditions, or the bank puts the company into liquidation."

Workers have also campaigned in the local area and have won significant support around Dundee, despite being told they could not collect money by the local police.

In a few days, despite their small numbers, Prisme workers, none of whom are union members, have shown considerable determination, campaigning abilities, and have turned to other sections of working people for support.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team was made welcome at the occupation and held a wide ranging discussion with a number of the workers. Some points emerged repeatedly.

The workers were confident in their capacity to achieve a successful outcome. They were also clearly buoyed by the levels of broad support they had been able to win. During our discussions, friends and supporters turned up from attending a demonstration in Dundee town centre. Over the last period there have been a number of closures in Dundee, and the

experiences of the workers with unscrupulous and bankrupt employers will have been experienced widely.

However, like the workers occupying Waterford Wedgwood crystal factory in Ireland, their demands were primarily for decent redundancy terms. Since Prisme's position was hopeless, there was little prospect of their jobs being maintained.

There was a tendency to see Prisme's collapse as an example of "bad management," rather than primarily the result of the worsening economic crisis. Various suggestions were made as to whether it could successfully be reconstituted and win contracts.

The company was at one time a subsidiary of Texol Technical Solutions that went bankrupt last year, laying off some 150 workers following the withdrawal of major Dundee employer NCR from the area.

Prisme seems to have maintained an independent existence thereafter, with much of its work bound up with supplying specialist cartons to the luxury end of the Scotch whisky industry, via Edrington Distillers of Glasgow. The company has also moved assets around and ownership of some of the equipment is unclear. However, in the last weeks a whisky contract providing around 60 percent of its work was lost.

The workers have been seeking advice to identify to what extent legal avenues can be pursued against the employers, and what their current status is. They have also been trying to piece together the web of relations around their former employer. David Taylor was adamant that legal measures should be put in place to ensure that nobody is ever left in the position they have found themselves in.

Workers responded favourably to the points made by the reporting team regarding the significance of the stand they had made. We noted that attention had to be given to the general financial crisis and the efforts being made by big business, with the support of the unions, to offload the costs of the financial calamity onto the working class.

The example of Prisme demonstrates how the trade unions work to prevent struggles against the employers, rather than organise them. These non-unionised workers have been forced collectively to take matters into their own hands in a way that would have met with stiff opposition or even sabotage had they belonged to a trade union.

Many workers are posed with similar challenges. In

Dundee alone, in the same week as the Prisme occupation, Day International, a printing and image transfer maker employing 100 workers, announced it will be halting work for a week to reduce stocks. Similar measures have been introduced by NCR, which has halted work until April, and Michelin, both of whom retain operations in the city.

Letters and messages of support should be sent to studio@prisme.co.uk



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