

# Workers occupy car parts factories in England and Northern Ireland

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4 April 2009

Hundreds of workers at car parts maker Visteon have launched occupations and sit-in protests at three of the company's sites. Up to 200 workers are occupying the Finaghy plant in west Belfast, 130 are on the roof and around the premises in Enfield, North London, while protests are ongoing at Basildon, Essex.

The occupations follow the summary decision on Tuesday by the company's UK arm, formerly part of car giant Ford, to place itself in administration and sack 565 of its 610 workforce.

Workers, many with three decades of service, were given just moments to collect their belongings and leave. Summing up their experiences, a placard at the Basildon protest complained "20 Years Work, Zero Minutes Notice."

Protests began in the Belfast plant, where 210 workers have been sacked. One hundred workers occupied the plant on Tuesday night, demanding either that the plants are kept operational or the redundancy and pension pay-outs are the same as their entitlement would have been if Visteon UK, spun off in 2000, had remained part of Ford.

John McGowan told the *Belfast Telegraph*, "Last year they were offering redundancy packages of £30,000 minimum. Now they're telling me for my 30 years loyalty to this company I'm getting a redundancy package which is capped at just over £9,000. That's totally unjust and unfair."

Workers insist that they were offered guarantees on pay and conditions when Visteon was established.

At the Enfield plant, some 130 of the 227 workforce are still on the roof or in the surrounding grounds. Workers have been supported by families and friends, who have passed food and sleeping bags to them. The company has sought a court order for their removal.

Carl Benjamin from Enfield told the *Gold Radio* "We just want to show them that they can't pick people up and put them down. We're not mannequins."

Angry scenes were reported in Basildon. Workers were called off the production line at 1 p.m. to be informed by administrators from corporate auditing firm KPMG and security guards that the company had been closed. Workers were given a leaflet and told to leave. The plant was briefly occupied and protests at the neighbouring Visteon Customer and Technology Centre (VSTC) took place on Thursday morning.

Workers returned to the plant late Thursday. Thirty marched inside and have since refused to leave. Police were called and stopped more workers entering the plant.

While workers were taken wholly by surprise by the closure, it is clear that the company has been preparing some sort of move for weeks, if not months.

Visteon's UK arm, which has lost £669 million since 2000, is being wound up. It is likely that closing the UK operation is part of the company's survival plan.

Worldwide, the Michigan-based company employs some 33,500 workers. It narrowly avoided filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy earlier this month, making a last-minute \$16 million interest payment. Annual turnover is around \$9.5 billion.

Concern has been growing for months about its capacity to survive the crisis overwhelming the global car industry. Moody's cut Visteon's credit rating recently, querying whether it would survive as a "going concern."

The company makes air conditioning, interior and power train parts mostly for Ford, Jaguar and Land Rover. Ford in the UK informed the press, "We have been in close contact with Visteon, as we would be with any supplier in distress—especially so over the past

few months."

Supplies to Ford's UK plants are being maintained from other Visteon plants. The company operates in some 27 countries, with major manufacturing operations in China, Europe and North America. It also has operations in South Africa, Brazil and Argentina.

The closures will not have come as a surprise to the trade unions. The union bureaucracy has decades-long relations with all the major producers in the UK and discusses all aspects of production and factory life with corporate and plant management on a regular basis.

Speaking to the *Enfield Independent*, car worker Lee Cowell said of the union officials who had arrived at the occupied plant, "Where were they when all this was happening? It's only now they want to do something. We thought they'd do something before this happened. They should've known something was coming up."

None of the protestations of support and promises of action for Visteon workers from union officials should be taken at face value.

Speaking to sacked workers in Enfield, the national secretary of Unite for the vehicle industry, Dave Osborne, claimed that "the action will spread not just into Visteon plants but into Ford and right across the UK, not just in Dagenham."

Jimmy Kelly, regional secretary for Unite in Ireland, claimed there was "no time limit" on the sit-in in Belfast. He added, "The Finaghy workers deserve fairer treatment from Visteon and Ford—and a better redundancy package to see them through the tough times ahead."

These statements are a smokescreen to give the unions some veneer of credibility while they devise a strategy to contain the occupations. The British and Irish unions are opposed to any struggle by workers that damages corporate profits.

This is the lesson of the recent occupation of the Waterford glass factory in Kilbarry, Ireland. Workers occupied the plant in January after it was faced with closure as part of a move to sell the firm's viable global components to a venture capitalist—a measure fully supported by the unions.

The occupying workers intended to save their jobs and improve their redundancy terms. Workers, many of them employees of decades standing, showed considerable initiative and determination in launching the occupation. But despite maintaining a seven-week

occupation, they were not able to translate this first step into a successful defence of their living standards, and in this the role of the unions was central.

Waterford workers were feted by union officials, placed at the head of demonstrations and assured by the unions of their support. But the vast amount of popular sympathy was not utilised. Neither was there any attempt to contact Waterford Wedgewood workers internationally.

All the while, the Unite union worked with the Irish government and the new and former owners to arrange a deal whereby the Waterford plant was shut down in return for no extra redundancy payments and some temporary posts. The initiative showed by the workers in taking over the plant was effectively isolated and neutralised by the unions. The takeover by KPS Capital, Unite's preferred purchaser, is now going through, while the glass blowing furnace is to close.

In this instance, and in others, the role of the unions has been to isolate and undermine the workers' resistance.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls for all necessary defensive initiatives, such as factory occupations, protests and blockades to be supported and extended. Workers should reject every effort by the unions to confine their struggle within narrow, sectional boundaries and seek the widest discussion and unity with working people locally and globally.

Above all, workers require a new political perspective based on a socialist program that challenges every attempt to place the burden of the crisis onto their backs by addressing the fundamental questions of ownership and control of the means of production and the principles upon which the economy is organised.



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