

Scotland: Oppose Diageo job losses by mobilising the working class

Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
25 July 2009

The following leaflet is being distributed by the Socialist Equality Party (Britain) to Sunday's march and rally in Kilmarnock against the announcement by Diageo, the world's largest drinks manufacturer, that it is shedding 900 jobs across Scotland.

Diageo's July 1 announcement of the closure of the Johnnie Walker whisky bottling plant in Kilmarnock and Diageo's cooperage and distillery plants at Port Dundas, Glasgow, has generated broad opposition. In addition to the 900 jobs threatened in Scotland, 107 workers face redundancy in Ireland as part of an ongoing reorganisation of Guinness production.

The depth of local opposition testifies to the huge impact the closures will have. But much more is necessary beyond protests. Diageo workers are confronting a large, globally integrated corporation with massive resources. To oppose the company's plans demands the broadest possible mobilisation of working people far beyond the endangered plants.

No confidence should be placed in the official campaign backed by the Labour Party and the Scottish National Party (SNP). The ruling parties in London and Edinburgh both speak for the financial elite, and are both seeking to offload the cost of the huge bailouts handed out to the British banks onto the working class in the form of public service, education and health cuts.

Speaking in Westminster last week, local Labour MP and former defence secretary Des Browne, who is complicit in the bloodbath in Afghanistan, explained that the official campaign involved the GMB and Unite unions, East Ayrshire Council, Scottish Enterprise, the Scottish government and the Scottish youth parliament. Its purpose, he stressed, is to produce an "alternative proposal" acceptable to Diageo.

Twelve years ago, Diageo attempted a similar reorganisation, Browne said. On that occasion a similar

campaign convinced the company that a "combination of efficiency, loyalty and profitability, embedded in a credible heritage and provenance, which is in the bottle, was a winning combination."

In other words, greater exploitation and taxpayers' money were used to bribe the company to stay in Kilmarnock and Glasgow. Twelve years later, Diageo are back for more.

One of the Diageo board members is Baron Clive Hollick, a leading Labour Party supporter, adviser to Margaret Beckett and Business Secretary Lord Peter Mandelson. He typifies Labour's transformation into a tool of the financial aristocracy and a party with direct interests in the destruction of workers' living standards.

Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond of the SNP boasted, following a meeting with Diageo CEO Paul Walsh, that the company would "listen constructively to the alternative business case." Salmond said he was looking for a deal that is "acceptable to the Scottish community, but meets the financial objectives of Diageo as a company."

What meets the "financial objectives" of Diageo is more cash handouts diverted from social spending on which the young, the sick and the elderly depend, as well as speedup and wage cuts. But more and more is being demanded, given the ability of the company to locate wherever taxes and wages are lowest.

Nothing more should be conceded to the parasitic layer who dominate modern corporations and political life, of which Walsh and Hollick are prime examples. Last year, according to Diageo's 2008 accounts, Walsh's annual income was £2,317,000. He made another £1,692,000 in share options. Walsh also owns 637,833 shares in the company. Hollick scraped by on £100,000, but Diageo is only one of a number of companies in which he holds directorships.

Equally, no perspective to defend Diageo workers can

base itself on a nationalist perspective. Over the last three decades, every single campaign against industrial closure in Scotland—at Ravenscraig steel works, Timex, NCR and stretching back to the UCS shipyard in the 1970s and the 1981 closure of the Linwood car factory—has been fought on the basis of defending “Scottish” interests. Assiduously promoted by Labour, the trade unions and the SNP, this nationalism serves to separate workers in Scotland from those in England and internationally and prevent a successful, unified, struggle in defence of jobs and livings standards.

Diageo workers must mobilise independently of all those who would subordinate them to the financial elite. Any struggle in defence of jobs and conditions should immediately seek to involve all Diageo workers. Worldwide, the company employs 22,000 workers in 180 markets. It should seek to involve workers at other companies in the areas affected who also face job losses or closure, such as at Mahle, the former Glacier Metal works in Kilmarnock, and at Vesuvius Crucible in Newmilns.

It should involve all those whose public services, schools and hospitals are under threat. Twenty-two primary schools and nurseries have just been closed in Glasgow.

It should seek common cause with postal workers across Britain facing a 40 percent cut in staffing levels and whose trade union is desperate to prevent a national strike.

Such a struggle cannot be organised through the trade unions, which have become fully integrated into corporate and local government management and serve only to impose their demands on workers. Rank-and-file committees of workers should be established to defend jobs, utilising the methods of the class struggle which the unions long ago abandoned.

Most important of all, the working class needs a new party to advance its interests on the basis of socialist policies—the Socialist Equality Party.



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