

Britain: Vestas workers occupy wind turbine plant to stop closure

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Workers occupying the Vestas Blades UK factory have been threatened with arrest and a court injunction. On Monday evening, some 25 workers began an occupation of the factory, to oppose the closure of the plant, which is scheduled for July 31, with the loss of 525 jobs.

Vestas Windsystems, a Danish firm, operates the plant, the only large manufacturing facility for wind turbines in the UK. The company also plans to close another plant in Southampton, in Hampshire, England, employing 100 people because of a lack of demand. Employees have been offered redundancy package of less than £1,000.

Tony Kelly, the secretary of the Ryde Trades Council on the Isle of Wight, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “Management has issued an ultimatum to the workers tonight. At about 7.00 pm, a spokesman for the Vesta workers outside called everyone together and said management said that if the lads would like to leave the plant before the company issued a press statement, they would be arrested but would not be charged, and they would have their jobs back. If they were still in the plant after the press statement was made, they would lose their jobs, and they would have an injunction served on them.

“What happened then was that the people on our side of the fence asked them inside if they going to stay, and they all held their fists up and said they were staying.”

The Isle of Wight has been hit hard by job losses. A survey by the Trades Union Congress in March found that 60 people were chasing every new vacancy advertised at the local job centre in the town of Cowes on the island. This compares with a UK national average of ten. Last year saw a 15,000 increase in the number of unemployed on the island, which has a population of just 140,000.

Vestas is closing its European plants in order to compete in markets in China and the United States, nations that it views are more amenable to future wind turbine construction.

Opposition to the closure of the plant has been increasing. On July 11, 50 protesters gathered in St. James' Square in the town of Newport in support of the threatened workers. Despite rainy weather more than 1,000 signatures were collected from local residents opposed to the decision.

The workers entered the offices of the factory on Monday evening. A worker quoted in the *Guardian* Tuesday explained how the occupation began:

“We took the upper floor, the management floor, the hub, where all of the planning gets done. There was an open door, we took our opportunity....

“External supplies coming in have been stopped by the management. They seem to want to starve us out. We've got enough to last us a couple of days.”

The occupation is being supported by protesters gathered outside the plant. From the beginning, management took aggressive steps to end the occupation.

A worker told the *Times*, “From what I can gather we've lost our redundancy money. It'll be £9,000 I'll lose. I've got a young daughter and a mortgage, but it's something I feel passionately about.”

The company has also begun legal action in an attempt to gain an injunction allowing them to remove the workers occupying the plant.

According to <http://savevestas.wordpress.com>, the Web site set up by the occupying workers and their supporters, “a security firm specialising in siege breaking” has been hired by management. Riot police have also been drafted in attempt to break the occupation.

Police entered the building in a clear attempt to intimidate the workers in the plant. The report read, “12:30—Riot police were spotted outside the doors occupying workers had secured and were testing the doors and intimidating us by also rattling shields. Then Vestas' managers and security wedged the doors shut from the outside using chocks.”

These military style tactics by the police were conducted on private property, without the resort to any injunction.

On Tuesday morning three protesters were able to break through police lines from the outside and joined the occupation. Some 200 workers also demonstrated outside the plant after being turned away as they arrived for work.

Management and the police have worked to ensure that no one else would be allowed to join the occupation and to deny the occupying workers food. On Wednesday morning police arrested two protesters at the site. According to the Save Vestas Web site, “At 5.10 am this morning, a climate activist at the protest outside the Vestas plant attempted to take a bag of food to the occupying workers by means of a rope which the workers had lowered from the balcony. The activist was grabbed by 5 police officers and arrested.”

The arrested man was held for several hours and released without charge. According to a *Times* report, his custody sheet referred to him being “armed with supplies of food.”

On Wednesday management and security staff completed building a fence around the factory. The company has also switched off Internet communications at the plant.

Robert Brown, a member of the Law Society’s criminal law committee, said, “Since when has it been the function of police officers to starve out protesters? And since when has it been a crime to carry sandwiches to protesters? It never has been. It is scandalous that the police refused to allow the food through. Giving the protesters food would help keep them calm and be more likely to prevent a breach of the peace.

“There is no law in this country that says that protest is unlawful. There does not appear to be any evidence that a breach of the peace is taking place at the factory.”

On Wednesday the Press Association reported one worker who stated, “It’s appalling. We are convinced this is against the Human Rights Act, because we are being denied humanitarian aid. But the more the management try to flush us out, the more determined we are to dig in our heels.”

The workers have two main demands—that the government steps in and nationalises the factory, enabling it to remain open, and that the company improves on the derisory redundancy terms it is offering.

A posting on the Save Vestas Web site stated that at 3 pm on Tuesday, “Vestas management and police agreed to meet with workers to begin negotiations.”

The statement continued, “Demands for nationalisation of the plant or higher redundancy pay were made. Workers also called for a meeting between themselves and Ed Milliband [the Energy and Climate Change Secretary] to discuss the future of the plant and the possibility of nationalisation. Discussion were also had about the appalling level of redundancy pay offered compared to previous settlements at the same site and abroad in the light of record profits for Vestas in the first quarter of 2009. Workers also argued that any negotiations should be followed by a mass meeting of all Vestas workers to discuss the results and that no worker should be victimised for supporting the occupation.”

On Wednesday, a representative of the Unite trade union was also reported to have been engaged in talks with management alongside Andrew Turner MP. The involvement of Unite in the dispute will be aimed at demobilising the occupation on the basis of allowing negotiations to take place. The trade unions today function openly as an arm of management and work to impose the agenda of the corporations and the government.

The struggle by the Vestas workers can only be successful on the basis of a further escalation of class struggle against the company, the trade union bureaucracy and the government. This requires the mobilisation of the broadest sections of the working class and young people.

The Labour government, far from being ready to step in to defend the jobs of workers is committed to intensifying its attack on the jobs and living standards of the working class on behalf of the transnational corporations and the City of London. The Socialist Equality Party calls for the plant and the energy industry as a whole, to be nationalised under workers’ control, a task that can only be achieved through the building of a new mass socialist party of the working class.



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