

Britain: What can be learned from the occupation of Vestas?

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The 19-day occupation of the Vestas wind turbine factory on the Isle of Wight ended August 7, after its Danish owners secured a court order allowing them to repossess the plant. The six remaining workers left the plant after the eviction notice was served. On August 12, dismissal notices were sent to all the employees, confirming the closure of two sites in the Isle of Wight and Southampton.

Up to 25 workers had been involved in the occupation, called to protest the closure of the factory with the loss of up to 600 jobs. The firm had said that it intended to relocate production to the United States due to the lack of orders in the UK.

That the workers were unable to prevent the job losses was not due to any lack of determination and courage on their part. Sealed in behind a hastily erected fence, with only occasional rations being allowed through, they were prepared to risk even the meagre compensation on offer for their jobs in taking their stance. It remains unclear as to whether those involved will receive redundancy payments.

The defeat inflicted is the responsibility of the ex-radical groups such as the Alliance for Workers Liberty and the Socialist Workers Party, as well as the Campaign against Climate Change (CACC) comprising Liberal Democrats, Labourites, and the Green Party. From the beginning, they subordinated the occupation to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, arguing that it could succeed by embarrassing the government, particularly given its declared commitment to developing renewable energy sources.

Following the evictions, Jonathan Neale of the CACC said, “What these people [those occupying] have done has changed the whole argument about wind power in this country. That’s a massive achievement.”

The *Socialist Worker* similarly hailed the sit-in as a victory, arguing that it had “forced the government to talk about what is happening at Vestas” and citing meetings between the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union and climate change minister Joan Ruddock in the days before the eviction notices were served.

Responding to arguments that the government had spent billions bailing out the banks and so it was only right to take the same approach to ailing factories and workplaces, Ruddock had

stated, “We are not going to nationalise, because we are sticking to our principles.”

The Labour Party is a right-wing party of big business, which regards its sole obligation to be increasing the profits and wealth of a tiny handful of the super-rich and the major corporations at the expense of working people. It is only too willing to hand out billions in taxpayers’ monies to the City of London, while allowing tens of thousands of workers to lose their jobs.

Under conditions of economic recession and unemployment expected to reach 3.5 million, any strategy for the defence of jobs would have to make its starting point the mobilisation of the broadest layers of the working class against the Labour government and its pro-business agenda. Those politically responsible for the campaign over Vestas took an entirely opposed approach. Despite widespread sympathy and support for the Vestas workers, the sit-in was directed to appeals to the Labour government—as if this moribund clique of well-paid functionaries and careerists has any loyalty to, let alone concern for, working people and their families.

This enabled various Labour bureaucrats to parade outside the occupied factory, utilising the workers’ struggle for cheap publicity, while committing themselves to nothing. Mark Chiverton, Labour’s parliamentary candidate for the island, hailed the Vestas occupation as the “most courageous fight for jobs” even as his party is conniving with business leaders in the restructuring of industry and public services with the loss of tens of thousands of jobs.

The trade unions also piggybacked on the occupation in an attempt to salvage their dwindling credibility and were hailed by the ex-radicals for doing so. The RMT union provided limited practical assistance to the occupation, while a letter published in the *Guardian* on August 4 by a number of leading trade union bureaucrats argued that, “with the political will, even at this late stage, there is still time to take positive action to explore all the options that are available to save the production of wind turbines at the site and secure jobs for the future.”

Behind these words, the trade unions did their utmost to ensure the sit-in remained isolated. Protest marches and rallies were used to cover over the fact that not a single union

mobilised any genuine solidarity between the Vestas occupation and other sections of workers. The aim of the trade unions was to park the Vestas occupation in a dead end, while protecting the government's exposed political rear in the run-up to next year's general election.

Typical was the Open Letter penned by Trade Union Congress leader Brendan Barber to Energy and Climate Change Minister Ed Miliband, applauding his "absolute commitment to tackle climate change" and "the considerable efforts you have already made to intervene in respect of the planned closure of the Vestas plant."

The ex-radical groups played the crucial link in the chain of betrayal. Even after the workers had been evicted—without any significant protest from the RMT and other unions—the *Socialist Worker* claimed victory was still within sight provided there were "leafleting, rallies, meetings and protests" and "solidarity action from workers on barges, canals, ferries and lorries as well as a blockade of the site."

The *Socialist Worker* et al. are fully aware that the trade unions were and are wholly unprepared to act in the Vestas workers' defence. The August 12 so-called "National Day of Solidarity with Vestas Workers" consisted of token protests and pickets. The unions did not organise any contingents of postal workers, rail workers and others involved in strike action and have no intention of doing so.

The necessary lessons must be drawn. In Britain, as elsewhere, the working class is being made to carry the cost of the economic recession. In many instances, corporations are utilising the crisis to restructure their businesses at the expense of workers' jobs and pensions. Workers with years of service have been sacked and told that their entitlements have gone.

Such contempt has sparked occupations across the UK, as workers seek to resist mass sackings and rationalisation—at Waterford Crystal in Ireland, Prisme Packaging factory in Dundee, Visteon car suppliers in England and Northern Ireland.

It is indicative that these actions have been taken without the sanction of the trade unions, and in defiance of them. Had the trade unions had any say, they would have ensured each plant was closed without any struggle. One has only to recall the experience of those workers employed at the BMW plant in Cowley, Oxford, in February of this year who were informed of 850 job losses, at just a moment's notice, by the trade union representatives on management's behalf.

With no political alternative to the pro-business agenda promoted by the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, however, the unions and their apologists have been able to assert their control over these recent disputes. In every instance, they have sought to wind down workers' opposition and achieve the very outcome that the businesses involved had sought in the first place.

At Waterford Crystal, the Unite trade union directed the eight-week occupation towards efforts to find a buyer for the ailing plant. When that failed, the union played an invidious role in

using the pledge of a €10 million "ex gratia payment"—to be shared amongst the workforce—to encourage the workers to end their sit-in.

At Visteon, the occupation was turned towards pressurising Ford, its former owner, to "honour" workers' original contracts. In the end, workers won increased redundancy payments, but only so that the company could close down the conflict and dump an even greater penalty on the workforce—the loss of much of their pension. Months later, former employees have had to employ their own legal team in an effort to recover their pension entitlements. The Waterford employees' pension scheme is also in jeopardy.

At Prisme, the occupation ended after 51 days when the workers obtained funding from a private investor and a bank to take over the plant and launch their own packaging company.

At Vestas, the workers had rejected the claim that because the plant was not taking enough orders it should be closed. They argued instead that the criteria for the factory's future must be determined by broader social considerations. Their demand is entirely correct. The fault-line at the heart of occupation, however, was the claim pushed by the ex-radicals that the Labour Party and the trade unions were a means for achieving these ends. These organisations are bitter opponents of any measures that undermine capitalist private ownership and production for profit.

The fight to defend workers' rights and living standards poses point-blank the fundamental issue of who controls the means of production and in whose class interests. The occupation of Vestas confirms that this question can only be decided through a political fight against the Labour and trade union bureaucracy and their apologists. It requires the building of genuine rank-and-file organisations, independent of the bureaucracy, the development of a conscious, socialist understanding amongst broad layers of workers and a new party determined to lead such a struggle.



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