

# Britain: Nationalist campaign by Unite union bureaucracy over Vauxhall-Opel takeover

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The sell-off of General Motors' European operations, Opel and Vauxhall, to the Canadian-Russian consortium Magna has elicited a poisonous "us first" response by the trade unions involved, that stomps all over any notion of class solidarity.

GM agreed to sell a 55 percent stake in its European auto operations to Magna and Russian bank Sberbank earlier this month. Magna's co-chief executive, Siegfried Wolf, stated that up to 10,500 jobs would most probably be lost, with 4,000 of those in Germany and the remainder at other European sites.

According to the *Financial Times*, preliminary figures outlined by Magna indicate that "1,373 of GM's 4,475 UK jobs and 2,090 of its 6,401 in Spain—about a third in each case would be lost. All operations in Belgium would close."

The various national trade unions have eschewed any common action in defence of all jobs, in favour of a fratricidal beggar-thy-neighbour policy—premised on the full acceptance that workers should bear the cost of the auto industry's rationalisation.

The way is being led by Germany's IG Metall and works councils, who lined up fully behind the Merkel government in brokering the Magna deal based on the foreign and economic policy objectives of the German ruling elite. The German unions have made clear their utter indifference to the fate of GM employees in Spain, Belgium and the UK.

This is only the most open expression of the contempt of the trade union bureaucracy towards their own members. It is not only that IG Metall is not prepared to lift a finger in defence of workers elsewhere in Europe. It has no intention of waging any fight to save the thousands of jobs already slated to go in Germany. It will play the lead role in further rationalisations of jobs and working conditions that are inevitable over the next period.

IG Metall's stance is not unique. It is able to play a disproportionate role in this instance solely because it is acting as the loyal flunkey of the European government with the most financial clout. The position of the Spanish, Belgium and British trade unions is no different, however.

In Britain, for example, some 1,200 jobs are set to go at Vauxhall's plants at Luton and Ellesmere Port (near Liverpool) under Magna's restructuring plans. At present the Vauxhall plant at Luton, which employs 1,400 staff and produces the

Vivaro van at IBC Vehicles, does not have a contract to produce vehicles beyond 2013 and may close.

The Ellesmere Port plant, currently employing 2,200 workers is facing the prospect of up to 840 job losses and the reduction of its operation to just two shifts. The loss of jobs at the British plants will have a devastating knock-on effect. It is estimated that 431 supply companies, employing thousands of workers, rely on the operation of the Ellesmere Port Vauxhall plant.

Following the announcement of the agreement with Magna on September 10, assorted trade union bureaucrats used the annual conference of the Trades Union Congress to call on the British government to do its utmost to secure a better deal for UK employees to the detriment of their European counterparts.

Speaking at a TUC fringe meeting titled "Saving Vauxhall jobs, defending the UK car industry," Unite General Secretary Derek Simpson defended IG Metall for doing what the other European national unions could only dream of.

Simpson declared candidly regarding the present situation, "We need to get in a position where trade unions work together, not against each other."

But he then asked, "Who can blame the German unions, the German government, when we are tackling one company?"

Simpson complained that, as a result of Germany pumping in bigger sums as a sweetener for Magna, "Our government is going to stump up money but it may not matter."

The British, Belgian and Spanish trade unions had favoured another buyer for GM's European operations, RHJ International. Having lost that possibility, Unite's "Save Vauxhall" campaign is based on convincing the new owners that its economic interests can best be served by preserving its British operations at the expense of those elsewhere in Europe.

The *Financial Times* (FT) quoted Dave Osborne, Unite's national representative in the automotive industry, complaining, "As a percentage, we're losing significantly more than Germany is, and significantly more than any other country. Therefore the plan as it stands is not acceptable."

Speaking at the TUC fringe meeting, Unite's Tony Woodley said, "We want a replacement model at Luton. At Ellesmere Port it happens to be lucky, they are the lead plant for Astra."

Unite's fundamental concern is not to safeguard the livelihoods of workers in Luton and Ellesmere Port, but to

preserve the union bureaucracy's privileged relations with the auto companies as their workplace enforcers.

The *FT* reported that further talks are scheduled between Magna and the European works council. The talks, it stated, "are viewed as particularly important, as General Motors, the current owner of Opel, has imposed a condition for the sale to *Magna that the latter reaches agreement with unions over hundreds of millions of euro in cost savings.*" [Emphasis added]

Workers in Luton and Ellesmere Port are already on short-time working. Having consistently opposed any industrial mobilisation against job losses, Unite is offering up its services to the new owners to introduce the necessary attack on jobs and conditions that will "sweeten" decisions by Magna on future production.

A Unite statement argues, "These workers have worked tirelessly to help GM Europe succeed, and will do the same again for Magna."

Calling on the Brown Labour government to intervene, Unite insists, "Our jobs and plants can be secured by our government negotiating now with Magna, equipped with the finances needed to deliver meaningful agreements. The German leader, Chancellor Angela Merkel, has so far committed 1.5 billion euro to the takeover process. Inevitably this money has led to concerns that promises have been made on German jobs at the expense of jobs elsewhere in GM Europe.

"This is not yet clear and while this remains the case we need our government to be battling for British jobs."

As Unite is well aware, the government and the corporate elite are not involved in a battle for "jobs," British or otherwise, but a battle for profit against their major competitors—profit that can only be secured at the expense of the working class.

Even if the unions were able to cook up a deal to safeguard some "British jobs"—or Belgium or Spanish for that matter—it would inevitably come at the cost of other job losses, wage cuts and an assault on workers' pensions and conditions.

That is the lesson from the US, where the "saving" of General Motors saw 14 plants closed, the loss of 27,000 jobs, the wiping out of pensions and health insurance and savage cuts in wages for new employees. The real beneficiaries, besides the bankers and investors, was the United Auto Workers union (UAW), which was made joint owner of the new GM, with a direct share in increasing the exploitation of the remaining workforce.

Whether in the US, Britain, Germany or elsewhere, the union bureaucracy functions as nothing more than the policeman of its membership in the auto plants, where it has fully accepted and imposed every attack demanded by management over the previous decades, leading to numerous plant closures and the loss of thousands of workers jobs.

Despite a membership of two million, Unite has not organised a single strike or industrial action to oppose the relentless

attacks that have been carried out by various auto companies in Britain. Its sole response over the past year was a fraudulent "March for Jobs," held in the city of Birmingham on May 16 and attended by 5,000—mainly trade union officials. Held amidst job losses at Vauxhall and Jaguar Land Rover and the imminent closure of the locally-based van manufacturer LDV, the protest was a cynical photo opportunity during which the union sought to further cement its ties with corporate interests.

The demonstration was called at a press conference that included Unite and Lord Digby Jones, the former director general of the Confederation of British Industry, alongside Paul Everitt, the CEO of the Society of Motor Manufacturers. The following month LDV closed, with the loss of 850 jobs in an area of east Birmingham already blighted by high unemployment.

Auto employees must reject the nationalist and pro-capitalist agenda of the trade unions, which pits worker against worker. The defence of jobs can be successful on the basis of international solidarity. Auto workers face a common struggle against global companies. This requires the adoption of an international strategy and the unity of all car workers based on their common class interests.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for such an offensive. In order to take forward such a struggle, workers must organise independent rank and file shop floor committees in opposition to the moribund trade union apparatus.

All threats of job losses and factory closures must be met with a programme of action including factory occupations, strikes, and mass demonstrations. Workers must call on the support of their class brothers and sisters employed by GM internationally, as well as auto workers employed by other companies.



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