

Britain: Last steel plant on Teesside mothballed

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Outside the entrance a sign proclaimed, “Corus—Passionate About Steel.” Beneath it a brass band played the last salute as several hundred steel workers, past and present, their families and members of the Teesside community mingled around the gates of Teesside Cast Products (TCP), a company run by Corus, a subsidiary of the Tata Group.

They gathered on February 19 to witness the beginning of a process called “salamandering,” the shutting down—or mothballing, as Corus management and politicians wish to call it—of the last steel- and iron-making furnace at Redcar Teesside. More than 1,600 jobs will go immediately and others will follow after the work to close the furnace is completed. An additional 8,000 local jobs are threatened at contractors and firms that rely on TCP business to survive. The loss of these jobs will blight the towns and communities surrounding the plant.

As late as the evening before the closure, local and national politicians were talking of a consortium headed by venture capitalist John Moulton, who made £142.4 million by floating his private equity firm Better Capital in December 2009. While head of another venture capital enterprise, Alchemy, Moulton led the failed bids to buy out Vaux brewery in 1999 and MG Motors in 2000. Most workers did not believe a deal would be done.

The plan to mothball the plant was first advanced early in December of last year. The sole action of the unions since then has been to plead for government intervention. All they received from the Labour Government was a promise of community funds to aid the area and a visit by Business Secretary Lord Peter Mandelson, who pronounced that the plant was not dead, just resting until a new buyer could be found.

The “protest” called by the steel workers unions had

more the character of a funeral. While the plant’s brass band, dressed in black, played sombre music, trade union functionaries from Unite and the main union, Community, handed out flags bearing their logos.

As the train carrying the massive tanks needed for the salamander process passed behind his back, Keith Hazlewood, national officer of the GMB union, told the gathering that permission had been granted by the National Executive Council to hold a national strike ballot of its Corus members in support of the TCP workers.

Community announced later it had also called for a ballot to engage in what one of its representatives described as “surgical strikes.” The *Independent* newspaper quoted a Community representative as saying the union would also appeal to Ratan Tata, the president of the Tata Group. “Ratan Tata is a good and decent person who wouldn’t allow this to happen, and we are asking him to intercede to prevent this devastation to the Teesside community,” he said.

A young electrician, just out of an apprenticeship, married, soon to be a father and with a big mortgage hanging over him, was concerned for his future. “I expected to be here a lot longer,” he said. “My father, grandfather and uncles all worked here. It’s in our blood. If my child is a boy, I would have been proud for him to come and work here.

“I hope someone does buy us. It’s going to be hell if not. I thought the government would step in. They helped the banks after all, didn’t they? There are seven of us electricians still working inside the plant. Three will go next week. We don’t know who is going. The union has told us nothing.”

During the 1980s, under the Conservative Thatcher government, tens of thousands of steel jobs were lost in the Teesside region, where in 1840 iron ore was found

in the Estonhills surrounding the area. At its height, there were 50 blast furnaces along the riverbank.

Janet joined Corus's predecessor, British Steel, straight from school at 16. She was one of the 29,000 workers made redundant 10 years later. She said, "It's a very sad day, this closure. My father worked here for 42 years. My brother worked here too. He had to go away to work, and that's what will happen more and more. Skilled workers will find work outside the area, and we will lose a lot of skilled people.

"My family can go back to 1851, coming here as ironstone miners, and generation after generation came to work in the steel works. Today, there's no future for the youngsters. There will be no more apprenticeships. Everyone knows a family who worked here."

Reg, from Middlesbrough, had worked at the plant for 35 years before he was laid off on Friday. Like Janet, he joined British Steel straight from school.

In an emotional interview, he expressed his bitterness towards the Labour government and the unions at the plant. "Can I swear, mate?" he began. "I feel absolutely let down by our government! Thirty years I have voted for a socialist government, and this is what they have given us—kicked out!"

Reg is a member of the Unite union. We asked him how he felt about the role of the unions at the plant.

"I haven't seen any trade union, mate," he replied. "It's an absolute disgrace. I expected more fight. We have never had a meeting with our unions.

"Years ago we would have had a meeting if the tea was cold in the canteen. I have never even seen a mass meeting over the closure. Unions are more involved in running the welfare services. I wish they had gotten us all together and asked us what we actually felt and what we wanted to do. It's the other way around—they are telling us what we are doing."

Responding to the news that an eleventh hour buyer had come forward, Reg said, "Corus wants to shut the plant, and they don't want another competitor, and we don't want a venture capitalist making money off the back of us and selling us on to someone else."

Pointing to the plant, he said, "I can't see this ever making steel again. I feel for the lads I work with. I am an electrician. I have a trade, but most don't."

Eddie Pheonix is the third generation in his family to work at the steel mills around Redcar. He said, "I am part of the mothballing squad. So I'll be here until the

final closure.

"We have not been told there is going to be a final closure, but the writing is on the wall, isn't it? When that blast furnace is tapped, it's going to take an awful lot of money to get it back online again. Tata have got it in their back pocket, but they aren't going to spend it here. They bought us to asset-strip us, to take our knowledge and expertise. They bought us to close us down."

When asked about the role of the unions, Eddie replied, "I am a trade union member and, to be honest, I am not really sure what they have done.... We had a brief meeting yesterday, and they told us nothing we didn't already know."



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