

UK: Thousands protest in Derby against job cuts at Bombardier

Our correspondent
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Thousands of demonstrators took to the streets of Derby in England's East Midlands on Saturday to protest the elimination of 1,400 jobs at Bombardier, the global transportation manufacturer based in Canada, and the threatened closure of its works once order books are empty in 2014.

The job losses were announced following the Conservative/Liberal government decision to award the £1.4 billion contract for building a fleet of passenger trains for the Thameslink rail service to Bombardier's rival, Siemens, the German conglomerate.

The demonstration drew support from family and friends of Bombardier workers, as well as many workers from related industries. Some 12,000 jobs in the supply chain are dependent on work from Bombardier.

The mood was generally one of anger and disbelief at a decision that effectively pulls the plug on the last train-manufacturing facility in Britain and at the dire social consequences this will have for the wider community and future generations. However, any legitimate class sentiment or independent perspective to oppose the socially destructive drive for profit was ruled out from the start by the bankrupt political line of the march's union organisers—the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union (RMT), Unite, GMB and the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA).

Since the coalition government announced its decision to award the tender to Siemens in June, the unions have pursued a course aimed at lining up workers behind Bombardier and pressuring the government to reverse its decision.

The rally was dominated by invocations of the “national interest” by the trade unions to justify their deepening collaboration. On this basis, the unions claim that a government committed to the biggest austerity cuts since the 1930s can be forced to backtrack because it simply has not factored in the social costs of the job losses at Bombardier. While seeking common ground with the representatives of the financial elite, union officials declared that Bombardier workers had no other option than to pit themselves against their co-workers in Europe.

This lay behind the unions' alignment July 23 with all the

establishment parties responsible for prosecuting the attacks on the working class, from the Labour Party to the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives. Also on hand was the entire management team from Bombardier, including its UK chairman, Colin Walton, who addressed the demonstrators.

In evidence at the demonstration as well were the services of the *Morning Star*, newspaper of the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain, which continues to provide the trade union bureaucracy some left veneer for its promotion of nationalism and class collaboration. The newspaper was given away free on the day courtesy of the fact that it was sponsored by the Unite and GMB unions. In a promotional blurb, the *Morning Star* argues that “It exposes the myth that the fight for jobs in Britain is somehow directed against workers in other countries, and asserts that such struggles in fact reflect real internationalism.”

Nothing could be farther from the truth. The central demand advanced by the unions at the rally was “British jobs for British workers,” a thoroughly reactionary slogan. Union leaders went to some lengths in attempting, in vain, to detoxify the slogan and argue against those who correctly identify it with the far right, where it originated.

Gerry Doherty, the general secretary of the TSSA, addressed the Conservative/Liberal coalition government: “The people of this country will not forget that you turned your backs on them in favour of Germans, and in favour of the French, and before someone claims I am being anti-European or anti-German, next Saturday I will be in Germany. I'll be in Dusseldorf, my son is marrying a German girl. So I am not anti-German, I'm not anti-French, I'm not even anti-competition. But I'll tell you what I am. I'm pro British.... This is not a Derby fight, it's a British fight for British jobs.”

Tony Woodley, the head of organising at Unite and its former joint general secretary, followed up, “In a recession this government has got to show a lead. And I will use the words, by giving British jobs to British workers.”

Bob Crow, the supposedly “left” general secretary of the RMT, offered this comment, “I'm told if we say we have got to keep the work in Britain we're protectionist, but I thought the job of an MP [Member of Parliament] was to be protectionist. To protect the people you are meant to represent....

“I don’t want to see Germans on the dole, or French. They are my friends. But I have a duty, as well as you, to defend the people where you come from.”

He criticised the government for being inconsistent with its nationalism, arguing, “It’s no good them running around with a Union Jack...saying ‘Britain’s Best’ and then transferring the work to somewhere else.”

Far from defending jobs, the lining up of the unions behind Bombardier and their entreaties to the government are based on deepening their class collaboration, which will mean further cuts and the destruction of workers’ past gains. The unions have no record of defending jobs at Bombardier or anywhere else. At the start of the consultation process over the 1,400 job losses, Len McCluskey, general secretary of Unite, the largest union, stated, “Unite will be working tirelessly to maximise voluntary redundancies and natural wastage and we expect the company to cooperate with us.”

This is why Bombardier UK Chairman Colin Walton could thank “our unions” (an excellent phrase!) from the platform. The latter have fully cooperated with the casualisation of the workforce at Bombardier, as indicated by the fact that of the 1,400 job losses planned, 983 are agency staff.

A WSWS reporting team spoke to employees contracted to work for Bombardier. In some cases, although they had been working for as long as seven years, they were still employed as agency staff to be called up and laid off based on fluctuations in the order books.

While the charges made by the unions against the cutthroat practises of Siemens are undoubtedly true, Bombardier is just as much a predatory transnational. In 2004, it cut one in four of its total UK workforce, closing sites in Doncaster and Wakefield and a smaller one in Derby. This was part of the company’s reduction of its European workforce by 18 percent. This included closing seven of its production facilities in five European countries.

Demonstrating their common nationalist perspective, the various speakers read from essentially the same script, whether they were Conservatives, Labourites or trade union officials. The present situation at Bombardier was presented within the framework of reinterpreting the procurement process on the grounds that Britain must establish more favourable terms vis-à-vis its European rivals.

To this end, the speakers offered figures about how much of train production in France and Germany still remains within these countries to justify the claim that British workers had no other option than to ally with their own government against their co-workers in Europe. The purpose of this was to divert attention from the world economic breakdown of capitalism and the reality that workers throughout Europe have entered into major battles against the imposition of austerity measures.

With Bombardier being placed on standby, in case of problems with the Siemens bid, all criticism of the government and its broader economic and social policy—particularly the

austerity cuts—was strenuously avoided so as to avoid antagonising it.

Margaret Beckett, a leading figure in the former Labour government and MP for Derby South, stated, “We are not here today—any of us—to attack this decision, but we have to get it changed.” She called for “fair competition.”

In an attempt to curry favour with the government, Chris Williamson, Labour MP for Derby North, quoted none other than the chancellor of the exchequer, George Osborne, “We want the words ‘made in Britain,’ ‘created in Britain,’ ‘invented in Britain’ to drive our nation forward. A Britain carried aloft by the makers. That is how we will create jobs and support families.” Williamson added, “I could not agree more.”

Even the Conservative leader of Derby City Council, Philip Hickson, was afforded a place on the platform. As part of the austerity programme, the Conservative council is imposing major cuts, which will mean the loss of between 1,400 and 1,500 jobs over the next three years. The fact that Hickson can be presented as an ally of Bombardier workers exposes the bogus character of the unions’ claim that they are involved in a fight to defend jobs. It further demonstrates their hostility to unifying the struggle of public and private sector workers in a common struggle against the government and its attacks on the working class.

The Socialist Equality Party distributed copies of the statement, “Reject appeals to government ministers: Saving Bombardier jobs means mobilising against the Tory-Lib Dem government.” As that statement explained, “Workers must take their stand on the arena of class struggle, not economic protectionism, which as in the 1930s would end in disaster.”

The leaflet outlined a perspective to make the fight against the job losses and threatened closure of the Bombardier works in Derby the focus of a mobilisation of the working class to bring down the government. It called on working people in Derby to take independent class action, including the occupation of the factory against closure, as part of the fight for a workers government. Only such a government would provide the necessary investment by taking the railway network out of private ownership and reorganising society on the basis of social need not profit.



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