British print workers in fourth week of lockout

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Workers at the Mayr-Melnhof Packaging UK (MMP) factory in Bootle, Merseyside, have been locked out since February 18.

They have rejected by 138-1 the latest redundancy terms offered by the Austrian based company. The lockout followed a series of 24-hours strikes that began on February 10. The Unite union has called the lockout the first in the print industry since 1958.

Mayr-Melnhof controls 32 factories in 15 countries. Its major UK customers include Kellogg and the giant Unilever group. The cutback is thought to be connected to the loss of a major contract. Discussions between Unite and the company resulted in the proposed 49 redundancies being reduced to 37, with the terms and conditions of the remaining workers being reduced and involving a £1,000—£2,000 per year loss each.

When talks on this proposal reached a stalemate, Unite's regional officer Phil Morgan commented in the local press, "We had accepted the fact that there would be job losses. However, there have to be the right conditions."

A ballot was held of the 139 Unite members. The result was a 98 percent yes vote to take action.

Phil Potter, the Father of the Chapel (senior steward), pointed out to the *World Socialist Web Site* that the terms offered are "significantly inferior to terms negotiated on previous occasions."

He explained that the amount lost to redundant workers could be as much as £10,000 ($16,000 US).

The union has never mounted any serious opposition to job losses, which has clearly emboldened management in its latest offensive. Negotiated redundancies at MMP's Bootle factory took place in 2008 and 2010.

In a press release at the start of the dispute the company stated, "At present there is only one thing which we would like to point out—that strikes in the past were always brought to a solution. The door has always been open so that disagreements could be solved, and the door is open now as well."

MMP UK then escalated the dispute by locking out the workers on February 18. As news of the lockout grew, a large number of pickets came together outside the padlocked factory gates. They were held back by the police as wagons loaded by management from Bootle and another MMP factory on Deeside passed through the gates.

Workers told of how the frustration and anger pushed a large number to enter the factory and occupy it. After attempts to remove them by the police failed, agreement was reached between management and Potter that would see the occupation halted on the condition that a meeting between both sides would take place early the following week.

A number of workers disagreed with the decision to end the occupation, but they reluctantly left the factory. Unite national official Ian Tonks then went into the factory and arranged the details of the meeting for the following Monday.

Three days of discussions from February 20-23 produced nothing. MMP came back on March 7 with what they called a new offer. It is based on the company operating a "social fund" to bridge the new payoff and what was agreed in 2008 and 2010. This would be tied to the company using its discretion to pay out from the fund. It also involves the reinstatement of the original 49 redundancies, and their intention to going ahead with disciplinary procedures against 15 of the pickets thought to be connected to the four-hour occupation in February.

Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey visited the picket line February 25, where he said, "The only way

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forward is to sit down, negotiate and reach an acceptable deal that recognises the historical arrangements we have here."

What he calls "historical arrangements" amount to the union selling jobs at a price the company are willing to pay, including the negotiated job losses of 2008 that resulted in compulsory redundancies and 2010's voluntary redundancies.

McCluskey made much of the union seeking support from the European Works Council. In his comments to the WSWS, Potter gives an insight into the nature of these works councils. He disclosed that contact had been made already with unions in Germany. The reaction, he thought, was favourable, but he feared any support given by the unions could be halted by the European Works Council. He is well placed to know, as he is a member of this body.

The response from the European unions to date is they have sent letters of support to Unite, without of course offering anything more substantial. The German and Austrian unions have also written to the company "urging them to settle."

The level of support that is being asked from the European unions can be gauged by what is being asked of MMP's Deeside factory just 20 miles across the River Mersey. Unite claimed at the start of the dispute that union representatives at Deeside "are seeking assurances from the company that there will be no reduction in the redundancy agreement applicable to Deeside. If no assurances are forthcoming then members at Deeside could seek a ballot for industrial action."

Unite claim the shortfall in production from the Bootle factory is being taken up throughout Europe. If so they have allowed this to continue under a smokescreen of meek appeals to the MMP management for further talk on one side and tall tales of support from European unions on the other. Passing letters to and fro suits the unions as it ties them to nothing.

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