

Mahle workers in Kilmarnock, Scotland, vote to strike

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Workers in the Mahle Group's engineering plant in Kilmarnock, Scotland, are set to strike against company plans to shed up to 270 jobs following an 85 percent vote in favour of action.

Mahle's operation is highly globally integrated, and a determined struggle by workers in any of its locations would immediately have a sharp impact not only on Mahle, but on car production worldwide.

Mahle Group makes a wide range of engine-related components for the automotive industry. The German-owned company employs 47,500 workers in around 100 production and development centres and claims that half of all cars on the road use its components. Major operations are based in Detroit, Stuttgart and Tokyo. In 2010, Mahle turnover was €5.3 billion (US\$7 billion), on which it made €641 million (US\$850 million) profit.

The workers in Kilmarnock make bearings, bushes and thrust washers for major clients in the vehicle industry, including BMW and Ford, as well as the Formula One motorsports series. The Kilmarnock plant, formerly owned by Glacier Metal, opened in 1947 and has been sold repeatedly over the last two decades. At its peak, as many as 3,000 workers were employed at the factory. Mahle took over control in 2007 from the Dana Corporation and appears to have been running it down ever since. In 2009, 150 jobs were lost after the immediate onset of recession.

The company is currently refocusing its operations toward the Asia and South American markets, which are growing, in contrast with the static North American and European markets. Mahle is rationalising European operations to extract the highest productivity from its remaining workforce across 18 countries, including the UK, Germany, Spain, Italy, Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

When Mahle first announced a new wave of job losses last October, management suggested that 60 jobs were at risk following the loss of a major contract with Ford. Shortly after, another 72 job losses were announced as the firm's bushing production operation was moved to Dolny Kubin, a small town in Slovakia. Other production is being moved to Italy.

The company operates an internal market, with management and unions in each location working together to bid against rival Mahle locations. In this instance, according to the Unite union in Kilmarnock, Mahle "offered profitable parts of the existing Ford contract" at "significantly less than the asking price in Kilmarnock."

Unite has responded by seeking to extract new productivity terms from Kilmarnock workers. Union officials have covered this over with nationalist bluster and expressions of mystification, as if the company's motives are unfathomable. Industrial officer Jim Winter complained that the company was throwing "Scottish engineering jobs on the scrapheap." The plant, he insisted, was "viable and there is no economic reason why Mahle cannot continue to deliver world-class products from Kilmarnock."

The threat to Kilmarnock was presented as an inexplicable act of "economic vandalism" by Mahle director Mathias Longbein, which bore no relationship to Mahle's drive for profitability and market share.

In November of last year, following the initial announcement of job losses, Unite demanded a feasibility study from Mahle into the Kilmarnock plant. Winter told the press that Mahle's study would be compared with Unite's own study into "productivity and profitability in Kilmarnock." Unite used the study to delay any strike vote into 2012.

Only when Mahle's study announced that an

additional 130 jobs would go, bringing the total to 260, did Unite concede a ballot. The result was overwhelmingly for industrial action.

This only prompted the union to offer further concessions. Unite and Mahle management held extended meetings, which were following by a management offer to delay imposition of the job losses for one year in return for a strike ban and increased productivity. Workers rejected this overwhelmingly.

Winter duly stated he will now “be serving due notice on the company outlining future strike dates.”

In the intervening period, however, Unite will inevitably collaborate with both the company and the Scottish government’s enterprise agency Scottish Enterprise to find a slightly varied package to present to the workers. The union will call off any industrial action at the slightest pretext.

East Ayrshire, which includes Kilmarnock, formerly a major manufacturing town, has one of the highest unemployment rates in Britain following the closure of the town’s large Diageo-owned Johnnie Walker whisky bottling plant in 2009.

According to the TUC, 19 unemployed workers are pursuing every vacancy in the area. This puts East Ayrshire alongside Haringey and Lewisham in London with similar rates, while the highest rate is in West Dunbartonshire, Scotland, where the ratio is 30 workers to every vacancy.

The Johnnie Walker closure generated significant opposition, with 20,000 people marching through Kilmarnock in the largest demonstration the town had ever seen.

Again, Unite mounted a fraudulent campaign in defence of Walker’s workers. General Secretary Len McCluskey promised, “We will take this fight to every plant and every country where Diageo operate.... We’ll be organising meetings with the UK Diageo plants, plants in Ireland, America and the rest of Europe. If Diageo don’t listen to us, then they’ll get the fight of their life”.

Five months later, Unite and the GMB union ended their campaign at the cost of 900 workers’ jobs. The union has subsequently supervised the bottling plant’s closure, to the extent of organising, and no doubt benefitting from handsome consultancy fees, to retrain Walker’s workers as customer service staff.

The lesson of the Walker’s closure is that any

possibility of effective opposition to this next round of company job slashing depends on a break with the nationalist and pro-management perspective of the trade unions. New organisations of workers, their supporters, family and friends must be built to coordinate the type of struggle long ago renounced by the unions.

Mahle workers must appeal both to other sections of working people in the local community and to Mahle and car industry workers internationally to launch a unified offensive against all job losses and social spending cuts. This is inseparable from the struggle to build a new socialist political party in the working class.



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