

UK local elections: Former Delphi worker explains how unions assisted in factory closure

Our reporter
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The Socialist Equality Party spoke to Jeanette in St. Helens town centre on Saturday, while campaigning for our candidate, Danny Dickinson. Now made redundant, Jeanette worked at the Delphi car components plant in nearby Kirkby for 27 years.

The plant, at Knowsley Industrial Park, closed last month and manufactured components for car makers including Jaguar, Vauxhall and Peugeot. It was owned by the US-based Delphi Automotive System, which has nearly 200 factories in 38 countries. It had been in operation for more than 40 years, providing secure jobs in one of the northwest of England's unemployment blackspots. Delphi moved production to a cheaper site in Hungary.

The Unite trade union worked with management to ensure that the closure went ahead as smoothly as possible. When the plans were first announced in 2010, Roger Maddison, Unite's national officer for motor components, merely complained, "This is another disaster for British manufacturing".

No campaign was mounted to fight the job losses. Instead, Maddison said, "Should the company's plan go ahead, Unite will do everything it can to ensure our members receive generous redundancies from this global player."

Unite had long worked in partnership with management to assist in driving up productivity and cutting costs. As Maddison commented, "Our members have worked exceptionally hard to improve efficiencies and quality over the past few years to secure a future in Kirkby". The union regretted that "once again a UK plant has failed to secure new work against competition from lower cost economies."

As the plant closed last month, Unite organised a

publicity stunt in which the newly unemployed workers stumped up £7,000 from their redundancy payments, with the company also putting up the same amount. The £14,000 was then given to 14 local charities in a ceremony at the plant, overseen by the local Unite convenor.

Jeanette explained, "When I first started there were about 4,500 workers at Delphi, and they whittled it down to about 150 shop floor workers. They've been winding it down from about 15 years ago. They called it being 'lean and mean'. Everything was cost-cutting.

"Two years ago this summer, we were told it was closing. It was the longest close down in history. It just went on and on and on. Two years ago, there were about 200 or 300 people there. They said we weren't cost-effective, so that was the assumption. Obviously, the workers in Hungary are on a lot less than us."

Jeanette said the closure "will have a massive effect. It's not just the unemployment. The area itself is really downtrodden. It's the same with Huyton and Page Moss. Before this, people were spending. It was good wages at Delphi. Therefore, people are now not going to spend. The car park at Delphi was full of new cars. Every year people got a new car. That is going to stop, and that has a knock-on effect.

"Delphi got parts from other factories. It's a ripple effect. People won't be able to buy the same amount of food, etc.

"Delphi is a multinational company. Originally, it was part of General Motors and then they broke away. It's not just a little factory. They have factories all over the world."

Jeanette expressed her concern that General Motors was now considering the closure of its Vauxhall car

plant at Ellesmere Port in Merseyside. She agreed with the SEP that workers should unite together across borders to oppose companies like GM and Delphi closing plants and pitting worker against worker. “Something has to be done to stop this. You all have to get together,” she replied.

“We were in the Unite union, and they said, ‘Oh we’ll do the best for you. We’ll get you the best deal’. It wasn’t ‘a deal’ we wanted. I wanted my job. They didn’t even put up a fight, and that’s another thing we couldn’t understand. Why couldn’t we even go on strike to fight for our jobs?”

“I’ve paid my union dues all those years. And all I’ve done is lined the pockets of the union’s top fellas, so they can drive around in their Jaguars and have their lovely houses, on the backs of the likes of us union workers.”

Speaking about the Labour Party, she added, “I think they are all just lining their own pockets.

“Fortunately I’ve got a new job, but unfortunately it’s only on minimum wage. I don’t how people can survive on this minimum wage.

“It costs me about £70 a fortnight to get to work. There are no jobs in Knowsley. It’s terrible. All the jobs are on £6.08 or £6.50 an hour. How can somebody live on £6.50? Look at the price of gas, of electricity, of water. The price of food is constantly going up. I don’t know which land they are living in, because it ain’t this one. It’s so expensive now.”

Jeannette said her income has dropped “absolutely dramatically” from what she earned at Delphi. “I would say it has dropped by something like 65 percent because I was also on shift rates. That was my choice to work shifts.

“I was watching the news the other morning before I went to work and I couldn’t believe that in the 21st century, in this day and age, that people are having to go to Food Banks. I thought, ‘where I am living?’ I feel as though I am living in a third-world country.

“We really have got to do something. We shouldn’t be living now saying, ‘Can I buy that can of beans? Can I buy that loaf?’ It’s sad, it really is.

“I think the way things are going, when the younger generation retire, there won’t be any such thing as a state pension. You won’t have a decent job. There will be no such thing as the National Health Service. They are trying to crucify that as well, aren’t they? In the

NHS, they are just cutting corners left, right and centre, and the ones that are suffering are the nurses and doctors that have to put up with it all.”



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