

UK: Honda slashes nearly one third of jobs at Swindon

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Honda UK Manufacturing Ltd (HUM), the UK subsidiary of the multinational auto company, has announced the loss of 800 jobs at its Swindon plant. Taking into account the previously announced loss of 325 temporary jobs, 1,100 workers are to lose their jobs, nearly a third of the Swindon workforce.

The announcement comes less than six months after British politicians, business circles and the media praised Honda to the skies for its plans to invest £267 million at Swindon, creating 500 jobs and increasing production of the new Civic car from 183,000 to 250,000 a year by 2015, its biggest single UK investment programme for a decade. Business Secretary Vince Cable held up Honda as the prototype for the solution of Britain's economic woes, saying, "The investment supports the government's ambition to encourage new investment and exports as a route to renewed growth and a more balanced economy."

"The Honda story is part of a much bigger picture of optimism, of feeling that Britain is a really good place to manufacture and make cars," Cable concluded.

HUM managing director Dave Hodgetts stated that the £267 million investment "underpins Honda's commitment to manufacturing in Britain and to our UK workforce... It reaffirms the Swindon plant's position as the cornerstone of Honda's European operations, as it has been for the last 25 years."

Employment at the Honda plant reached a peak of 5,000 workers in 2006. Seven years and 2,000 lost jobs later, Honda's "commitment" to its workers and Cable's expressions of optimism have been shattered. Swindon's two Conservative MPs, Justin Tomlinson and Robert Buckland, spoke of how "devastating" and "extremely disappointing" the redundancies were and how they have "taken steps to make sure Honda and the Job Centre work closely, so that the people affected

will get the best support during what will be a difficult and traumatic time for their families."

Tomlinson's claims that he has personally received assurances from Honda of their "long term commitment to Swindon" should be taken with a bucket of salt by Honda workers. The hypocrisy of both MPs is demonstrated in their vote only last week for the cuts in the Welfare Benefits Up-rating Bill.

Honda workers should reserve their anger primarily for the trade unions. Over the years, under the guidance of the Unite union, they have made concession after concession in the name of saving jobs and remaining competitive. In 2009, after too few staff took up the offer of voluntary redundancy, Unite led a "successful" campaign for workers to take a 3 percent pay cut for 10 months under the pretext of saving 490 jobs. Unite regional officer Jim D'Avila had the audacity to dress up the pay cut as socially progressive, describing it as "a measure of the calibre of industrial relations at the plant" and a reflection of "true solidarity in difficult times to protect hundreds of jobs."

Since the latest announcement, the *Swindon Advertiser* reports that D'Avila has assembled a team of 14 shop stewards for negotiations with Honda and an additional 3 stewards "to cover areas where previously we haven't had much representation" who will undergo three days of training by Unite "to cover all matters relation to redundancies" (sic).

D'Avila told the *Swindon Advertiser* that Unite "will be pressing Honda incredibly hard to minimise the number of compulsory redundancies" and would be "pulling no punches under the banner of 'Honda jobs for Honda associates'."

Such promises carry little weight with workers, who have drawn lessons from the years of inaction and systematic betrayals of their struggles. D'Avila's

interview with the *Swindon Advertiser* resulted in a striking debate in the paper's comments section. One response hoped "that Unite negotiate for the best deal for the workforce rather than themselves.... There is a growing resentment within the factory that Unite are only in it for themselves." Another reader wrote: "Jim D'Avila trying to sound like he is doing something, when all he has done is confirm what we already know."

It is only five months ago that a *Daily Telegraph* article, "How Britain won the global car war," was celebrating a renaissance of the British car industry that was leaving "industry veterans—hardened by years of failure—pinching themselves to make sure it's real.... Over the past 18 months, virtually all those involved in the British automotive industry have announced expansion of some form, a collective total of around £4.5bn of new investment."

The basis for the so-called renaissance of the British automotive industry is the super-exploitation of car workers in the UK. Achieving this by offering up their members' pay and conditions for sacrifice has been the central preoccupation of the trade unions over an extended period.

The unions in the UK, like their counterparts in Europe, have promoted a divisive struggle by car workers that has already resulted in the closure of GM's Opel car plant in Antwerp, Belgium. As a partner in the exploitation of the workforce, the unions are helping management use high unemployment and the threat of transferring production overseas as a means to pressure workers to accept ever-higher levels of exploitation for lower rates of pay.

In August 2012, after a summer shutdown at the Tata-owned Jaguar Land Rover (JLR) plant in Halewood, workers switched to three-shift, continuous production with 20 percent pay cuts for new employees. Nearly half of the 3,400 workforce is now on this lower rate, and half are under 25. Tony Woodley, Unite's executive officer and former general secretary, described the negotiations on a new two-year contract as "delicate and interesting".

The JLR deal followed hot on the heels of a similar deal at General Motors, in which a pay freeze, an increase in weekly hours from 37 to 40, shift working, flexibility and other major concessions were made in return for paper promises that the nearby Vauxhall

plant in Ellesmere Port would stay open until 2020. At the same time, GM was preparing to close its plant in Bochum, Germany, with the loss of 3,000 jobs.

The British unions have made it clear that they view the closure of Bochum as a positive development, since it will supposedly protect jobs in the UK. John Fetherston of Unite described the Vauxhall deal as a "saviour" for Ellesmere Port. The Conservative/Liberal Democrat government's business secretary, Vince Cable, said the plant had been saved by a "team UK effort" in which he included Unite officials led by Woodley.

The fact that Unite is a full partner in the exploitation of the workforce was hailed by Roger Maddison, the union's car industry national officer, who stated, "We've seen a lot of the car industry leave the UK. Thankfully, a lot of that is coming back now because we're much more flexible on shifts, mobility of labour, and so on."



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