

Thousands of UK auto jobs to go

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Japanese-based car manufacturer Nissan is to cut hundreds of jobs at its Sunderland branch, in the northeast of England. This is only the latest in a series of job losses to hit the UK car industry, responding to a downturn in Europe.

Jaguar Land Rover (JLR) will be cutting around 1,000 jobs and reducing output at its two factories in the West Midlands. Owned by India Tata, JLR has seen its sales to Europe fall in March from 45,000 to 35,000. The biggest car maker in Britain, it will cut the jobs from its 2,000 temporary-contract workforce at its Solihull plant, which employs 10,000.

The biggest job losses are not in production. Last week, Vauxhall—owned by French-based PSA—said it would terminate the contracts with its 326 dealerships in the UK, citing falling sales. The dealerships employ 12,000 people. This follows January’s announcement that Vauxhall is shedding 250 jobs at its largest UK car plant at Ellesmere Port, in the northwest of England, amid fears that the entire operation could close within two years.

Earlier in October, 400 jobs were lost through early retirement and voluntary redundancies—reducing the workforce from 1,900 to 1,150—with plans to reduce the plant to just one shift in April.

PSA is also aiming to cut a massive 3,700 jobs by 2020 in its German Opel plants—acquired from General Motors (GM) last year. Two thousand jobs have already been eliminated through buyouts and early retirement, with another 2,000 expected to go.

GM is eliminating a shift in its factory in Ohio in the US, laying off 1,500 employees. In South Korea, where it employs 16,000, it is closing its Gunsan plant, while the jobs at its three other factories hang in the balance.

Nissan is the sixth largest automaker globally, after Toyota in first position and GM in second. It is the largest producer of electric vehicles (EVs) in the world. Its sales in the UK have dropped by a third so far this

year, which is proving a dismal year for the industry overall, with a 12 percent decline in demand for new cars.

Nissan’s exports to Europe are also falling, from 75,000 in March compared with 91,000 in the same month last year. Eight out of 10 Nissan cars assembled in the UK are sold on the continent.

Nissan dismissed its job losses in Sunderland, where it employs 7,000, as temporary while it is “transitioning to a new range of powertrains [motors] over the next year,” insisting the move was “not related to Brexit.” The company urged its workforce to vote to remain in the 2016 EU referendum.

In 2016, Nissan announced it would build its next-generation Qashqai, Juke, Infinity and its new X-Trail model in Sunderland, where it manufactures the EV Leaf marque. The company and government both denied they had agreed to a sweetheart deal to protect sales from EU tariffs post-Brexit.

Nissan promised the new models would secure more than 7,000 jobs and 28,000 more in the supply chain and not cause redundancies. Labour Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell applauded the news.

JLR put the market slowdown to a combination over uncertainties over Brexit and increasing hostility towards diesel cars following the “Dieselgate” emissions scandal that erupted in the car industry in 2015. To bypass EU clean air targets, German auto giant Volkswagen AG (VW) fitted its cars with “defeat device” software designed to fool laboratory emissions tests—thus contributing to air pollution, which results, says the Royal College of Physicians, in 40,000 unnecessary deaths in the UK per year.

VW was singled out over Dieselgate because of the escalating trade war between America and the EU. The device, however, is used widely throughout the car industry.

The legal air-quality thresholds in 23 out of the EU’s

28 countries and 130 of its cities, as reported by the *Guardian*, have been consistently breached.

The sale of diesel cars declined by 37.2 percent in March this year across the industry, according to the Society of Motor Manufacturers. Consumers have been deterred by a small government tax on diesel cars, and reduced resale values due to uncertainties over EU tax levies.

UK car industry bosses all supported a remain vote in the referendum and have since pressed the Conservative government of Theresa May to opt for a soft Brexit, including tariff-free access to the single market. Substantial sections of industry and finance regard Brexit as disastrous for their prospective profits. Manufacturing exports from the UK could be cut by a third. This is underlined by recent remarks to the *Observer* by Japan's ambassador to the UK, Koji Tsuruoka. He warned that firms such as Nissan and Toyota in the UK that sell in the European Union (EU) market will relocate if they no longer have access to the single market after March 2019.

Workers in the UK car industry, which employs 169,000, and throughout the world face an onslaught on their jobs and conditions in a race to the bottom as global competition for markets grows. The US imposition of tariffs on steel and aluminium ushers in trade war.

In response, the auto workers' unions line up with management to increase the competitiveness of their own companies in the global market, at the expense of their members.

The response of the Unite union to the present UK redundancies has been to work with management to facilitate the job losses and suppress any opposition from its members.

Unite officer Steve Bush said the union was "working with Nissan to minimise job losses." He said Unite was assured that there would be no compulsory redundancies and "any job reductions will be on a voluntary basis and on enhanced terms. ... We expect to see temporary workers at the plant move into permanent positions as volumes pick up again in future years."

Unite also agreed to the previous job losses at Vauxhall "on a voluntary basis." It has nothing to offer its members but job losses today and the forlorn hope of a permanent contract tomorrow.

The unions act as company spokesmen in the escalating trade war.

The United Auto Workers in the US has played a vital role in suppressing strikes over the last decades. At GM in South Korea—where union membership has plunged by half in the last two decades to fewer than 10 percent of the workforce—the unions will not put in a pay rise or bonuses this year.

The UK car unions are no different. Commenting on a union report advocating the expansion of the manufacture of EVs, Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey said, "We want to see high-skilled secure jobs on decent pay and for the UK automotive sector to hold its own against Germany, the United States, Southern Asia and China."

Unite Assistant General Secretary for Manufacturing Tony Burke agreed, saying, "The government must do more to put the UK in the fast lane of electric vehicle technology and to secure our automotive industry's world leading status for the years to come."

The WSWs opposes this nationalist programme with a unified struggle by autoworkers internationally, who face the same global corporations attacking their jobs, wages and conditions. The *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* appeals to workers to establish rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions. A fight to defend jobs and living standards demands new organisations to link the struggles of the working class worldwide in a fight against the global auto corporations.



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