

UK: Vauxhall and Cammell Laird workers strike against mass job cuts

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Car workers at Vauxhall's Ellesmere Port plant and Cammell Laird shipyard workers in Birkenhead, both in the northwest of England, began strikes last Friday against the loss of hundreds of jobs.

At Ellesmere Port, where the Vauxhall and Opel Astra models are produced, hundreds of workers walked out in wildcat action after being informed by Unite union shop stewards that 241 jobs were to be lost at the plant by the end of next year.

According to the *Liverpool Echo*, one worker said those on the production line described the redundancies as "absolutely barbaric." A worker said that his workmates "upped sticks and went" when told of the news.

The BBC cited John Cooper, a Unite convenor at the plant, who said, "There's been a growing frustration at the lack of clarity about the future. The frustration turned to anger and people took a decision. They're walking out."

The latest job cuts come after 60 percent of the jobs at the plant have been lost in just the last two years, with the collaboration of Unite. A total of 400 jobs went last year and another 250 earlier this year, leaving just 1,100 remaining.

The Ellesmere plant owner PSA, the French firm which also owns Peugeot and Citroën, said it had launched a 45-day consultation with the unions. Unite has been locked in negotiations for months, and no doubt the new job losses would have been imposed without any fight had workers not walked out.

The wildcat disrupted Unite's collaboration to such an extent that it has refused to acknowledge, beyond the convenor's initial statement, that a strike by all its members took place. On Friday morning, Unite issued a news article reporting that the jobs were to go at the plant but, as workers downed tools later that day, issued no more statements on its web page or Twitter account.

The company said the redundancies were "critical to

ensure that the Ellesmere Port plant develops its competitiveness during this difficult time within the industry. The restructuring is necessary to make it a competitive plant when compared to the benchmark."

The plan, as always in collaboration with the unions and to assist the company in imposing layoffs, is to "achieve this essential restructuring without having to utilise compulsory redundancies."

Unite said nothing about fighting the job losses, with its statement calling only for "urgent assurances" over the plant's future. It would be "pressing for guarantees of no compulsory redundancies..." and for PSA "to remove the uncertainty surrounding the plant by committing new models to Ellesmere Port beyond 2021."

The job losses are part of PSA's strategy to pit its global workforce against one another in a fratricidal war to the bottom, imposed by the trade unions, as the only means to secure future contracts. Last year, PSA CEO Carlos Tavares bluntly informed employees at Ellesmere Port, "We need to reduce the total manufacturing costs significantly. If you look at the plant in Zaragoza [in Spain that produces Citroën models], the unions demonstrated a high level of maturity in our negotiations and we agreed a deal to make the Corsa and electric Corsa there. Yes, the negotiations were difficult, but that is what it takes."

In January, PSA announced a five-year deal with three unions at the Zaragoza plant: UGT, CCOO and ACUMAGME. "In exercise of responsibility, both parties have understood that competitiveness and performance in comparison to other plants within the Groupe PSA portfolio, as well as to competitors' sites, is the only way to create a sustainable future for the plant," it said. The deal "includes wage moderation, variable pay linked to business performance indicators and individual performance, increase of working time, adapting working practices and operational flexibility to changing business

conditions...”

At Cammell Laird, hundreds of workers walked out to begin an overtime ban to oppose the planned layoff of 291 workers, possibly by next March. They voted 80 percent in favour of strikes on a turnout of around 75 percent.

The jobs represent about 40 percent of those remaining at the shipyard, which first opened in 1828. Cammell Laird closed in 1993 and began operations again on a much smaller scale in 2007, after the Peel Holdings conglomerate purchased the Cammell Laird shipyard site and surrounding land.

The job losses are proceeding despite the shipyard winning a £619 million contract to support and maintain vessels for the Royal Navy over the next decade. A Cammell Laird spokesman said the cuts were required “as a result of numerous contracts entering the latter phases, and without certainty in the award of similar contracts in the immediate term, the company needs to address its cost base to remain competitive.”

The unions did everything possible to avoid any action, admitting that they were not in the business of fighting the cuts but only delaying them and opposing only compulsory redundancies. Unite regional official Ross Quinn said, “Unite put a proposal to management using the company’s own figures proving that the company could avoid dismissing anyone until February.”

A GMB statement read, “We have recently put to the company a credible alternative that could avert the first group being made redundant in December. If the company agree it would allow time to re-evaluate the workload throughout January and into February 2019.”

Quinn said the union’s plan “would have allowed time for additional contracts in the offing to be secured and come on stream,” and “it would have also given the breathing space needed to clearly demonstrate that all compulsory redundancies can be avoided.”

He pleaded, “Instead of provoking industrial action, we would urge Cammell Laird to think again and sit down with the government to discuss how work can be managed to avoid compulsory redundancies.”

Unite is seeking to pit shipyards in Britain against those in the rest of the world with a nationalist campaign based on the defence of “British manufacturing.” Last October, Unite assistant general secretary for shipbuilding, Steve Turner, said, “The loss of jobs at Cammell Laird would see skills gone for a generation and be a further blow to the UK’s shipbuilding industry.” He called on Conservative government ministers to “wake up and smell the coffee by dropping their obsession to offshore

the construction of three fleet support ships for our naval carrier fleet. This is work that should be done in UK shipyards using British-made steel as part of an industrial strategy that supports jobs and communities across our four nations.”

The unions at Cammell Laird, unable to prevent the strike’s outbreak, have ensured that the shipyard will remain in operation for the sporadic and limited action it has sanctioned, beginning today. Altogether 16 different categories of workers will strike, but in isolation from each other. This week, fitters and welders will be out on Monday, platers and plumbers on Tuesday, and stores, riggers and labourers on the following day, etc.

If workers at Ellesmere Port and Cammell Laird are not to suffer further mass redundancies, they must adopt an alternative strategy to the dead-end offered by the unions.

The attacks on auto and shipyard workers are being imposed with the collaboration of the Labour Party. Nominally left party leader Jeremy Corbyn has refused to utter a word about the latest job losses, let alone mention the strikes. Ellesmere Port Labour MP Justin Madders said only that he wanted “confirmation from the PSA Group that no compulsory redundancies will take place.”

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers at Ellesmere Port and Birkenhead to unify their struggles in a joint offensive against management. Central to this must be the formation of rank-and-file factory committees, independent of the trade unions, to forge links with autoworkers and shipyard workers throughout the UK and internationally, as the only way to combat the race to the bottom being enforced by transnational corporations.



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