

UK unions call off strikes against redundancies at Cammell Laird shipyard

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The suspension by the Unite and GMB unions of rolling strike action by shipbuilding workers at the Cammell Laird shipyard at Birkenhead, Merseyside is a gift to management.

The strike began in response to plans by the company to lay off 291 workers, representing 40 percent of the workforce. The official notification of redundancies was due to be issued December 10, to take place over the months leading up to March next year.

Unite and GMB members voted by an 80 percent majority on a 75 percent turnout to impose an immediate overtime ban and undertake a series of rolling 24-hour strikes involving 16 different sections of the workforce, each taking strike action in isolation from one another.

The December 7 suspension of the strike action came in a joint statement by the two unions with the company, which agreed not to press ahead with the redundancies while further discussions take place during what was described as a four-week “breathing space.”

Discussions will involve a specially created “taskforce” facilitated by the Labour Party Mayor of Liverpool, Joe Anderson. The taskforce comprises the Unite and GMB unions, Cammell Laird and its major shareholder Peel Port Investments, which also owns the Cammell Laird site. The Peel Group incorporating Peel Ports is one of the UK’s leading privately-owned investment companies. The taskforce also includes representatives from central and local government, along with Cammell Laird customers. It held its first meeting on December 7.

The pro-business nature of the taskforce was spelled out in the joint statement, which read, “The agreement recognises the need for the yard to remain competitive in bidding for new and future work and all parties agree to work together to ensure this remains the case... All parties agree that Cammell Laird has a positive future and that short-term measures are required to address immediate problems of workflow into the yard.

“The task force will examine every opportunity to bring forward work scheduled for later in 2019 while seeking new work orders and financial assistance for a major up-skilling programme to ensure the skills necessary to compete in a highly competitive market are available from within the local community.”

The taskforce was welcomed by local Labour politicians. Anderson, along with Wirral council leader Phil Davies, Liverpool City Region Mayor Steve Rotherham and Liverpool council cabinet member Ian Maher issued a joint statement, declaring, “This is an important company locally but we should not forget that this is also a strategically important industry for the whole of the UK. The taskforce recognises the complexity of the situation and that all parties are acting in good faith... The (taskforce) has been established after a meeting with Government ministers...”

The unions also welcomed the setting up of the taskforce. Steve Turner, Unite’s assistant general secretary, said, “The agreement... is fantastic news for a workforce fearing the worst just before Christmas... we have today established a multi-agency ‘task-force’ to develop and put in place measures designed to avert *unnecessary* job losses. We now have a period time during which a long-term solution can be found that manages future workload in the yard...” [emphasis added]

Prior to the setting up of the taskforce, the unions had made clear they accepted the need to reduce costs, urging only that there were no compulsory redundancies. The treacherous nature of this demand was made clear by Unite regional official, Ross Quinn, who said, “Unite put a proposal to management using the company’s own figures proving that the company could avoid dismissing anyone *until February*.” [emphasis added]

Unite has pushed a nationalist and militarist campaign, pitting UK workers against shipbuilding workers throughout the world. In October, 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."

Despite naval contracts to support and maintain Royal Fleet Auxiliary vessels in October totalling nearly £700 million and securing work for the next decade for the company, the contract is not due to start till March next year. The company insists it must nevertheless cut costs in the short term.

Speaking to the *Liverpool Echo* in October, a spokesman said, "Cammell Laird is principally a marine and engineering contracting business...we can have peaks in demand for skilled and semi-skilled labour... Contracting is our business model... the company needs to address its cost base to remain competitive. Consequently there are jobs at risk."

Cammell Laird workers fear one of the options being considered by the company to reduce costs is the use of casual agency workers.

The start of the industrial action by the Cammell Laird workers on November 23 coincided with the wildcat walk out by Vauxhall car workers in nearby Ellesmere Port. The Socialist Equality Party called on both groups of workers to unify their struggles and set up rank and file committees, independent of the unions. The creation of the taskforce and suspension of the strike action at Cammell Laird underscores the need for such rank and file committees.



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