

At UK demonstration over factory closing, unions plea to Tory government and Honda

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Around 1,000 people took part in a demonstration Saturday organised by the Unite trade union against the threatened closure of the Honda car factory in the west England city of Swindon in 2021.

Around 3,500 workers are set to lose their jobs if the factory closes, and a further 15,000 workers in the supply chain across the UK will be affected.

Copies of the statement “Build rank-and-file factory committees to fight Honda job losses!” were distributed by Socialist Equality Party members and supporters to marchers and crowds lining the streets. The statement says: “[N]o viable struggle to defend Honda jobs in Swindon is possible through the Unite trade union. As with all the unions, it operates as a de facto labour management organisation, working with Honda and other corporations to increase productivity and profitability at workers’ expense.”

It further explained: “Beginning in the 1980s, production in the auto industry and other key sectors began to be reorganised across national borders, leading to today’s integrated world economy. Under these conditions, the unions, confined to the nation state, have long abandoned any effort to secure wage rises and other concessions for their members.

“In order to maintain production and win investment at this or that plant the unions have joined with management in enforcing wage cuts, productivity hikes and job losses in the name of maintaining global competitiveness. This pits workers against one another plant by plant, company by company, nation by nation, setting each against all.”

This analysis was borne out at Saturday’s demonstration.

A significant proportion of the demonstration comprised Unite officials and stewards, many of whom who had come from elsewhere in the UK on coaches furnished by the union. Members of the Socialist Party, Socialist Workers Party and other pseudo-left parties were there in abundance. It was clear—and a fact backed up by those Honda workers who did attend—that the event hardly attracted many employees from the plant.

Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey, speaking before

the march set off, blustered, “We’ve got no intention of allowing this company to close our plant.” Honda should stay in Swindon because, he said, “For nearly 35 years this world-class workforce has delivered a fantastic profit and significant profitability for this company.”

McCluskey complained that the manner in which workers found out about the planned closure, though media announcements—itsself an indictment of the role of the union—was “nothing short of disgraceful. ... It’s no way for a first-class company to behave.”

Opposed to a unified offensive of Honda workers internationally, he stated: “This company would never have dreamt of doing this to Japanese workers. We demand that British workers be treated with the same respect.”

McCluskey said that in his experience with Japanese companies “none of them like bad publicity” and that the union was focussing on a “leverage strategy” to make them think again.

This is not to be centred on a mobilisation of the workforce, but on futile pleas to the Conservative government and Honda. “We have strong viable alternatives to put to the company and I’m pleased to say the Secretary of State [for business] Greg Clark has committed his support to the alternatives,” McCluskey said. “We’ll be travelling to Japan with the government in order to meet the highest individuals in Honda and request them once again to keep the plant open.”

Speaker after speaker at the post-march rally, nearly all Unite bureaucrats, echoed McCluskey in fawning over Clark—a minister in a right-wing Conservative government that has imposed endless austerity, slashed public services and extols the capitalist market—for his “support” and “solidarity.”

Unite Assistant General Secretary Steve Turner attempted to build up to the moment when he was to read out Clark’s “incredibly supportive” message. When he did, and all it amounted to was Clark’s statement that the closure was a “massive blow” that he would try to reverse, one could hear a pin drop as no one applauded.

A similar muted response greeted Turner's reading out of a solidarity message from Valter Sanches, general secretary of IndustriALL-Europe, which claims to represent 7 million workers across Europe. Sanches called only for a "fair and viable alternative" that would satisfy the company and workers.

Patrick Renard, who works at Honda Logistics in Ghent, Belgium, and is chairman of the European Workers Council Honda, acknowledged that the closure of Swindon plant would be the prelude for Honda to exit Europe. "We are pretty sure there will be a domino effect on the rest of Europe. There are production plants in Italy, Spain and France, and we believe this is the first step of Honda leaving Europe as an organisation." He said the Honda unions in Europe would be holding a joint meeting in London on April 5. However, no genuine opposition can be expected from these quarters either, as the unions on the continent have the same corporatist relations with Honda as Unite.

Swindon Labour Party Mayor Junab Ali pleaded, "Swindon was there for Honda at their time of need like when the financial crash [2008] led to Honda reducing production and working hours of their employees."

"We want you here, Honda," Ali continued as he expounded the pro-capitalist agenda of the demonstration. "We will provide perfect transport routes to distribute your cars. Our trade unions have shown they will work with you. Our council and MPs will do all they can to make your company as profitable as possible."

Honda convener Danny Brennan took to the stage with the Honda Unite shop stewards as a backdrop to reveal that the union had "bailed the company out in good times and bad," adding, "That's fair exchange and moderation." But instead the company had come back about "their global rebranding and that we don't care."

Having bent over backwards to demonstrate how reasonable the union had been to the company, Brennan denounced workers in the plant, who he described as the "f---ing idiots who decided to work today in that factory. We should give them short change when we go back on Monday," he blustered, without acknowledging that the majority of workers have no confidence in union, which is in bed with management.

Labour Shadow Business Secretary Rebecca Long-Bailey told the rally that "the economic shock of Honda closing will not just be felt by thousands here in Swindon, but it is estimated to wipe £1.5 billion from GDP and £48 million lost in tax." She claimed that Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and deputy leader John McDonnell "will fight with you, and even the government to change the decision. ... We must reindustrialise, not deindustrialise."

But what this amounted to, said Long-Bailey, was a list of

nationalist demands to be put to the Tories to encourage the transition to electric and low-carbon vehicles that Honda needed and to provide the infrastructure for them. They should force public services to buy vehicles from Honda and other British-based companies and support supply chain companies to develop new technologies such as batteries, she said.

When Honda first began production at Swindon in 1989 it was fiercely anti-union. But in 2001, following legislation by the then Labour government, 75 percent of Honda workers voted in favour of recognition of Unite predecessor, the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union, as their bargaining agent. A no-strike deal, kept in place for almost two decades, was central to the agreement.

In the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crash, Unite ensured a 3 percent pay cut at Honda went through, claiming it would guarantee the future of the company. At the time, the Unite regional officer, Jim D'Avila, proclaimed the pay cut "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."

Hundreds of jobs were lost in the next few years. D'Avila later complained, "We took that cut in pay to save jobs and the company promptly turned around and cut the very jobs we were trying to save."

Within a few months, in 2011, D'Avila was saying: "From a Unite perspective we've been working closely with Honda for nearly 10 years. We've had our ups and downs.

"We have had a long relationship with Honda, done some good business, and when the chips have been down, we've not been afraid to make agreements that might not be that popular [with the workforce]."

In the UK, in Europe and worldwide, hundreds of thousands of car workers' jobs are being destroyed under conditions of international crisis, trade war and mounting instability.

To confront this immense assault from globally organised employers, car workers in Swindon and in every factory must break from the bankrupt, nationalist trade unions, and create new independent, fighting organisations to take up the struggle the unions have long ago abandoned.



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