

Thousands of jobs threatened at Bombardier plants in Belfast and Casablanca

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Thousands of aerospace workers' jobs are threatened following Canadian aerospace and transportation transnational Bombardier's decision to sell off its wing-making operation in Belfast.

Four sites—Belfast, Newtownabbey, Dunmurry and Newtownards—currently employ around 3,600 workers.

Bombardier has owned facilities in Northern Ireland since 1989, when the company took over the historic Belfast-based Shorts Brothers.

The company's Moroccan plant, employing around 400 workers at the Midparc free economic zone in Casablanca, is also for sale.

Bombardier's move is the next phase of a global restructuring, necessitated by ferocious competition in the world airline industry. The company is attempting to defend its profit margins and shareholder dividends at the expense of its 70,000-strong international workforce.

The announcement was made by Bombardier President and CEO Alain Bellemare, whose annual salary and other compensations amounted to over \$12.5 million in 2018.

Late last year, the company announced 5,000 jobs were imperilled included 2,500 in Canada and 490 in Northern Ireland. The redundancies followed Bombardier's decision to sell its narrow-body commercial 150-seater "C" Series aircraft to Airbus, with the aircraft re-designated the Airbus 220. The aircraft's wings are currently made in Belfast.

The "C" Series was the last technically competitive airliner to challenge US-based Boeing and European conglomerate Airbus. But even with a US\$16 billion turnover, Bombardier was in no position to fund the huge development costs required. Bombardier also sold its Q400 turboprop aircraft programme, and its de Havilland trademark, to Longview Aviation Capital.

Over the same period, rival regional jet producer Brazilian-based Embraer sold 80 percent of its commercial jet business to Boeing.

Airbus and Boeing now between them control most of the world market for advanced commercial airliners. Bombardier intends to limit its aircraft production to private business jets and aims to integrate operations in Montreal, Mexico and Texas into a single unit.

The Belfast and Casablanca plants are not certain to close. Aerospace component manufacturers are said to be eyeing both. These include Airbus, GKN Aerospace, US Spirit AeroSystems and Triumph Group Inc. According to JPMorgan, the Belfast wing-making plant site is viewed as a "prize asset" while the Casablanca location is already a concentration of primarily European aerospace component production. No further redundancies have been announced.

Bids from Chinese companies are possible. According to Stephen Kelly, chairman of Manufacturing Northern Ireland, the Aviation Industry Corporation of China and the Commercial Aircraft Corporation of China are believed to be exploring options regarding taking over.

Bombardier states that the British government's paralysis over Brexit—with Parliament yet to pass Prime Minister Theresa May's European Union (EU) withdrawal deal—was not a factor in its decision. However, the impasse and the UK's post-Brexit future must impact any decision of future buyers. Bombardier management pressured the pro-Brexit Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to support May's proposed deal to avoid a "no-deal" EU exit and disruption of Airbus's supply chains, without success.

The threat to thousands of jobs is a searing indictment of the Unite and GMB trades unions and their pseudo-left apologists.

Union officials have, since the first announcement of redundancies last year, and in line with their long-standing close integration into corporate management, done everything possible to prevent any mobilisation in defence of jobs and living standards.

Speaking in November, Susan Fitzgerald, Unite regional coordinating officer and member of the Committee for a Workers International-affiliated Socialist Party (Northern Ireland), sowed illusions that the unions would organise a fightback. She told *Belfast Live*, “Unite is already engaging with trade unions representing workers across the Bombardier sites in Europe and North America to bring forward a global workers’ response to this race-to-the-bottom agenda.”

As with any such promises of cross-border action by the nationalist trade unions, this amounted to nothing. Instead, the unions merely sought to limit job losses to “voluntary redundancies.” This is a tried and tested method used by the trade union bureaucracy everywhere to collaborate with companies to impose job losses. The result is always the same: The company gets the job losses it wants, with the unions cementing their position as reliable corporate partners in policing the workforce.

In early April, under pressure from Bombardier workers who held factory gate protests, union officials reluctantly acceded to a ballot on industrial action against 30-35 compulsory redundancies. By April 29, Bombardier withdrew the compulsory layoffs. The unions claimed a great victory. Unite Assistant General Secretary Steve Turner hailed the “great news for the workers affected and a tremendous win for the entire workforce; this success demonstrates the power of our unions when we stand together for jobs and skills.”

This was just three days before the sell-off announcement. Union officials immediately pledged to work with whatever buyer emerged. “It doesn’t matter whose name is above the gate—what matters is that we safeguard jobs and skills in this critical industry,” said Jackie Pollock, Unite regional secretary.

Steve Turner admitted Unite was already “in close contact with other global aerospace companies which could come forward as a potential buyer for Bombardier’s aero structures.”

Turner and Pollock reach out directly to aerospace industry management teams to offer their skills in ensuring industrial peace during any selloff. The role of

the pseudo-lefts, such as Fitzgerald and the Socialist Party, is to prepare the way for this, and blind workers as to the transformed character of the unions.

Over the last four decades, the unions have ceased to be the limited defensive organisations they once were, when workers were able to extract improved terms and conditions from the employers in this or that country. This has been utterly undermined by objective developments in the world economy that have globalised every single area of economic life.

The aerospace industry and the fate of Bombardier is a pivotal example. Faced with giant corporations, organised across continents and employing tens and hundreds of thousands of workers in many regions and countries, the trade unions are not able to extract concessions based on pressure on companies within the nation state. Today, the role of the unions is transformed, with their function to assist firms and attract investment through offering better rates of exploitation of the workforce and industrial peace to the companies.

While workers have seen their jobs, conditions and security evaporate, the union apparatus has become a loyal partner and adviser to corporate management. The unions are populated at the top by a layer of well-paid officials, and as in Unite, many of whom are members of pseudo-left outfits.

Bombardier workers are posed urgently with bringing their struggle into line with objective international developments.

New organisations of rank-and-file workers—independent of the unions, seeking to unify struggles nationally and across borders and continents—are needed to take up the struggle in defence of jobs and living standards. In response to the global race to the bottom in living standards organised by the companies, and facilitated by the unions, workers must act as an international force and unify their fight with that of other aerospace employees fighting the same battles.



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