

After Bridgend strike vote in opposition to plant closure

Ford workers in Wales must adopt an international strategy

Robert Stevens
22 June 2019

Workers at Ford's Bridgend engine plant in Wales have voted to strike in a consultative ballot to save the plant from closure with the loss of 1,700 jobs.

In a vote last week, over 80 percent of Unite trade union members at the plant voted to oppose closure. The union's June 14 statement reported "an overwhelming mandate for Unite to fight for the future of the plant. 83 percent of those who voted have indicated that they would be prepared to fight the plant closure proposals, through industrial action if necessary."

The plant is scheduled to close by September 2020, inflicting a devastating blow to workers and their families in an area decimated by decades of deindustrialisation.

The closure is part of the One Ford global restructuring programme. Bridgend was to produce the new Dragon three-cylinder 1.5 litre engine from this year, but demand is dwindling. The plant was equipped with capacity to produce 750,000 Dragon engines annually, but predicted volumes fell first to 250,000, then to 125,000, and later, according to reports, to just 80,000. Ford is not abandoning the Dragon engine but will shift production to its plants in India and Mexico that already make them. Dragons are also produced in Brazil, China and Russia.

Workers at Ford must oppose all attempts by the unions and their appendages in the pseudo-left groups to sabotage the strike vote. Unite only called the vote because it recognises how angry workers are that the closure announcement was the only result of months of talks between management and the unions over the job losses Ford was planning to impose.

Last January, Ford announced that it was cutting

1,000 jobs at Bridgend, with 370 going in the first wave. That month, *Walesonline* reported that the unions would be party to a Ford presentation outlining how the company planned to cut the workforce over the next two years. Ford spoke throughout in glowing terms regarding the trade unions. It would work with "union partners" and other key "stakeholders" to implement a "comprehensive transformation plan aimed at strengthening the Ford brand..."

"The strategy will result in fewer jobs—both hourly and salaried—but it is premature to speculate on how many, as we have just begun discussions with our Works Council and union partners... [W]e aim to achieve the reduction in labour costs through voluntary employee separations and will be working closely with social partners and other stakeholders."

Unite had intensified its collaboration with management over the previous two years. The previous strike vote by workers in Bridgend was in August 2017, with workers fearing the consequences of leaked plans showing the company could shed 1,160 jobs. Over half (52.1 percent) of those who voted were in favour of industrial action. Nearly three quarters (71.9 percent) were in favour of action short of a strike.

Unite responded by calling on Ford to enter talks. The strike vote was not even made public, with *Walesonline* making it known only after receiving an internal union memo. The website reported that Unite shop stewards and other officials met with Unite Wales Secretary Andy Richards in Swansea to discuss the results. The union dispatch noted, "Given the [strike ballot] results it's clear that a strategy now needs to be formulated with the aim of persuading the company to have meaningful talks about the protection of jobs and the

future security of the plant.” A meeting with Ford management was due to take place later that month and “Until further notice, members are expected to continue to work as normal, pending updates from the shop stewards committee after negotiation with the company.”

Ford’s ability to begin the process of mass sackings in January, while planning for Bridgend’s closure, depended on its “partner” unions suppressing any fightback by workers.

Unite’s response to last week’s strike vote is that such action is not in the offing. If Ford would only keep the plant open—and secure a continuation of dues into the union coffers—then Unite will help impose whatever job losses are required. Peter Hughes, Unite Wales regional secretary, stated, “Unite’s objective is to save this plant and secure the maximum amount of Ford jobs for future generations. Ford must now engage in meaningful discussions with Unite and government at both Welsh and UK level, to put together an alternative plan for the Bridgend site.” This is all double-talk aimed at chloroforming the workers and preventing a struggle.

Unite can count on the backing of the pseudo-left groups. The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) falsely presents the unions as fighting organisations which workers must turn to, not just in Britain but internationally. They assert, “The battle at Bridgend has to be coordinated with resistance in Germany, where the firm has announced it plans to cut ‘more than 5,000 jobs’ as part of a major restructuring to boost profitability. This is a huge attack on the workforce in Cologne, Aachen and Saarlouis.”

Socialist Worker also points out that Ford workers in Russia face mass redundancies this month with the closures of three plants in Naberezhnye Chelny, Vsevolozhsk and Elabuga.

This “internationalism” is bogus. While noting that the “Bosses have played plants off against each other to drive down wages and force through worse terms and conditions,” the SWP conceals the fact that these divisions are enforced via the trade unions.

To channel workers behind the union bureaucracy, of which many of their members are part, the SWP focuses on a June 29 rally organised by Germany’s IG Metall union. “British Ford workers should be there arguing for joint action,” it insists. By “workers” the

SWP means a few trade union bureaucrats to lend IG Metall’s demonstration some credibility. It declares that IG Metall is waging a fight, adding that it “will call for the securing of jobs through a ‘restructuring of industry—socially, ecologically and democratically’.”

IG Metall is waging no struggle whatsoever in defence of jobs. In January, Martin Hennig, IG Metall chairman of the joint works council at Ford in Germany said, “I expect a large number of job cuts... When it comes to job cuts, Cologne will certainly be hit the hardest.” Asked if he thought the measures were appropriate, Hennig replied in the manner of a Ford executive that it is “correct in principle to subject everything to review and deal with the issues that are affecting the entire auto sector.”

To oppose Ford’s global strategy, workers must reject the unions’ nationalist, pro-company agenda and adopt an international socialist strategy. Workers in Bridgend, Germany, Russia and the US must turn to the 200,000 workers that Ford employs internationally as their allies. The fight against job losses requires a coordinated offensive against all the auto companies laying off tens of thousands of workers to maintain profitability. General Motors is slashing 14,000 jobs, Volkswagen 7,000, Jaguar Land Rover (Tata Motors) 4,500 and Tesla 3,000.

This strategy means breaking from the trade unions and forming new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file factory committees, to coordinate the growing resistance of the working class to exploitation and social inequality.

The WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* will do everything to assist workers in building rank-and-file committees and to link up the struggle of autoworkers with other sections of workers in Wales and internationally. Contact the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* today to join this fight.

The author recommends:

The global socialist strategy to fight auto layoffs
[22 May 2019]



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact