

Workers protest closure of Wrightbus in Northern Ireland

Our reporters
3 October 2019

Hundreds of workers sacked from collapsed bus manufacturer Wrightbus, protested last weekend outside the Green Pastures Church in Ballymena, Northern Ireland.

The protest came days after the company, without warning, closed its doors last week, throwing almost its entire workforce of 1,200 onto the dole queues, as it appointed Deloitte administrators. A further 3,400 jobs in Wrightbus's supply chain are immediately imperilled.

Workers, supported by their families, tied their work polo shirts to the church's railings in protest at the role of the Wright family, particularly Jeff Wright, a Protestant evangelical pastor, who control both the company and the church, and who have channelled millions of pounds from the company into their religious and business projects.

Many polo shirts and homemade placards relayed messages pointing to the contradictions between the religious values the company claimed to promote, which some of the workers share, and its actual activities. "Criminals not Christians—shame on you Jeff," said one. "Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their maker, but whoever is kind so the need honors God" said another.

One former worker, Andrew French, had previously left the company because "what they teach is different from what they do." He held a placard "You can't serve God and money."

Workers organised the protest on their own initiative. The unions left workers entirely unprepared for the closure. Unite the Union's response was to organise a session in a Ballymena hotel to advise workers on the welfare benefits they can claim as they are unemployed. There was no call to occupy the plant, despite the fact that members of the same unions are

currently occupying Harland and Wolff's shipyard in Belfast, which is threatened with closure.

Rallies and protests have been called later this week by the unions, but these will undoubtedly be directed towards appealing to the British government to bring together alternative employers that can be persuaded to take over the company in return for concessions from the workforce.

One worker at the protest, Norman Stephens, told the BBC that he had worked at Wrightbus for 30 years.

"For the last five years, management has told us that they can't give us a wage rise as they were investing it in the company. Who is going to employ a 62-year-old man? I have nothing now. That's it."

A press release from a group of workers focused on the relationship between Wrightbus and the church. "We are in distress; our families are in distress and we want answers. We want to know why money from the profits of Wrightbus Ltd and its affiliates (profits we made through our labour for the company) were siphoned off to Green Pastures Church in millions without our knowledge or consent."

The statement demanded the British government bail out Wrightbus, noting, "when the nation's banks went bust, the government offered banks a bailout package of 500 billion GBP." Workers also demanded an independent inquiry into financial mismanagement and a focus on money sent "from company profits to Green Pastures Church, the Wright Evangelical Trust, the Salight Foundation and other similar for profit AND not for profit concerns that have been established by any member of the Wright family." It called for "an immediate release of all documents" related to the meetings with prospective buyers of the company.

Workers are asking questions about £15 million in donations known to have been directed to Green

Pastures, while there are rumours of another pot of £19 million waiting to be spent on another site on the edge of Ballymena.

Jeff Wright, the leading pastor in Green Pastures Church, and major shareholder in Wrightbus is building the “GateWay” complex which includes housing, a new church, hotel, retail outlets and leisure facilities. In addition, there will be a 1,650-seat auditorium, a gymnasium, an indoor play area, cafe and restaurant. The entire project, Project Nehemiah, is viewed as a lucrative, self-contained luxury religious village.

Wrightbus is the latest in a series of devastating closures to hit the small town of Ballymena, with a population of just 30,000. In 2015, Gallaher’s tobacco manufacturer closed, and Michelin closed its truck tyre plant. Ballymena is in the heartland of Protestant Northern Ireland. The constituency’s Westminster MP is the Democratic Unionist Party’s Ian Paisley, Jr., son of infamous preacher and former Northern Ireland First Minister Ian Paisley.

Wrightbus’ collapse, while doubtless contributed to by the siphoning of funds to Green Pastures, is an expression of global trends in world capitalism with corporations seeking to slash costs everywhere and close unprofitable concerns.

The original incarnation of Wrightbus was founded in 1946 and in its first decades specialised in re-bodying lorries. In the early 1990s it entered the bus bodybuilding sector.

The company, only a few years ago, won orders from the then London mayor, and now UK Tory Prime Minister Boris Johnson, for his New Routemaster project, and 1,195 vehicles were delivered. In subsequent years, however, worldwide bus orders have declined.

Last year, almost 200 jobs were cut in two separate rounds of redundancies, in February and June, while the company closed an operation in Malaysia. Wrightbus began experiencing increasing financial difficulties, particularly as it appears to have been slow to respond to the shift from diesel to alternative power sources. Although it recently won orders for hydrogen powered vehicles, it has only belatedly moved towards investment in the skills and equipment needed for electric passenger vehicles.

The instability around Brexit is said to have played a role. William Wright was one of the most prominent

business supporters of the Leave campaign in Northern Ireland. But in contrast, many of the company’s customers are state-owned transport operators, many with European Union-based headquarters. The company reported changes in their clients’ investment plans as a result of Brexit.

A number of copies of recent WSWS articles were circulated at the Ballymena protest on the strike by US auto workers at GM. Workers responded with interest. Fundamentally, the questions workers face in Northern Ireland and the US are the same. In the face of a relentless assault on jobs and living standards, workers can place no confidence in any section of the ruling class or in the trade unions.

What is required is the setting up of new, democratic, rank-and-file committees, organisations of struggle independent of the unions. They must demand that the books at Wrightbus are opened and that the jobs of Wrightbus workers be defended on the basis of mobilising the support of workers throughout the transport and manufacturing industry, for international class unity and a socialist perspective.



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