

GKN automotive workers in Birmingham, Britain vote to strike to oppose plant closure

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This week, automotive engineering workers at the Birmingham, England plant of the multinational GKN Automotive voted to strike to against plans to close the facility.

The closure plans, first announced in January, would see the loss of over 500 jobs and an estimated 1,000 across the supply chain. The workers delivered a majority of 95 percent, on a turnout of 95 percent.

The plant plays a key role in the UK auto parts industry, supplying driveline systems for petrol and diesel cars to auto companies Jaguar Land Rover, Toyota and Nissan. The Birmingham workers are part of GKN's global workforce of 27,500—employed in 51 manufacturing centres across 20 countries.

GKN is owned by Melrose—the private-equity venture capitalist group. The plant is slated to close in 2022, with work being transferred to other countries. According to a February 25 *Guardian* article, citing sources close to the plans, “about four-fifths of Birmingham’s work” could be “moved to a plant in Olešnica, south-west Poland. The rest of the work could move to locations in France...”

Melrose chief executive Simon Peckham justified the closure by saying there was falling demand in the UK car industry for its products, with the factory having lost a quarter of its orders. The plant was outmoded and the industry-wide move away from fuel-run vehicles to electric ones meant another 40 percent of its output was threatened. GKN Automotive Chief Executive Liam Butterworth declared, “Sadly, an increasingly competitive global market means the site is no longer viable.”

Having voted to strike, workers at GKN should be under no illusion about who they are up against in the fight ahead. They are in a battle on two fronts: against GKN and the Unite trade union.

Unite has done nothing to mobilise a single worker among its automotive membership outside of GKN to fight the Birmingham closure, despite boasting on its web site that its “Automotive sector represents 100,000 members across the UK, including vehicle assembly and the supply chain.” No joint struggle has been organised with the hundreds of workers at GKN Wheels and Auto Structures in Telford—members of Unite and the GMB unions—who were involved in strikes for several days in July over a pay deal and strikes over pay and

detrimental attacks on redundancy terms. The Telford plant was taken over by another private equity firm, Aurelius, in 2020.

It has instead waged a reactionary nationalist campaign aimed at herding workers behind a campaign to defend “British” industry, which has only served to isolate GKN workers in the UK from tens of thousands of their GKN co-workers employed in Europe and internationally.

Only now, fully nine months after the company announced the closure plans, have workers been given the opportunity to vote for industrial action. Unite sanctioned the ballot through gritted teeth, having no choice after the workforce at the end of June “In a consultative ballot... overwhelmingly voted in favour of strike action”. The aim of the consultative ballot, a favoured tactic of the union bureaucracy, was to delay for months any possible conflict with the company as it sought to win GKN’s support to keep the plant open based on a cost-cutting agenda that would enable it to remain competitive.

Unite pleaded with the company that the strike “is a last resort and it will inevitably cause severe disruption to production schedules for the company’s key customers. The solution is obvious. The government needs to make good on its promises to support the company through a period of change and GKN Melrose needs to end its threat of closing a strategically important and valuable asset.”

Rather than naming any dates for strikes to hit GKN’s production and profits, Unite responded to this week’s overwhelming mandate for industrial action by begging the firm to accept its corporatist proposals to keep the plant open.

The union declared Wednesday, “Following the decisive yes vote, Unite has called together all interested parties to reach agreement on future production and support, given the plants key role in the transition of the automotive sector to electrification. These include the government, local politicians, GKN’s customers—such as JLR, Toyota and Nissan—the Advanced Propulsion Centre and GKN Automotive CEO Liam Butterworth.”

This was a reference to a plan put forward by Unite in February to bring together senior union officers, shop stewards from the plant, and local politicians including the Labour MP Jack Dromey—a former leading official of Unite’s predecessor, the Transport and General Workers Union.

There was no need for workers to immediately mobilise against the plans, claimed Unite national officer Des Quinn back in February, as “Thankfully, with an 18-month window before the factory closes, Unite is hoping to develop a watertight business case guaranteeing the factory’s future.

Commenting on what it described as fruitful talks with Kwasi Kwarteng, the Conservative government secretary for business enterprise and industrial strategy, Quinn stated, “Melrose is guilty of breaking its commitments to shareholders and investors. It claimed it wanted to build a UK powerhouse, but the reality is it is planning to export UK jobs to Europe. Unite made the case to the business secretary that this is a highly viable factory that has a vital role”.

Dromey, a leading member of Unite’s “coalition”, admitted in a debate in parliament in April on the Birmingham closure, “I have been involved, sadly, in many, many workplace closures over the years...”

On May 6, Unite outlined its business plan to keep the site open. Under the subheading “Operational savings” it boasted that, “The alternative business plan details a high value of operational savings and establishes a set period when potential investment will be paid back. In a further boost to the alternative business plan, the government has made it clear that it will provide significant assistance to ensure that the Birmingham plant is a success.” The plan was worked on jointly by Unite and senior management.

Such entreaties were not enough for GKN Automotive execs, however, who rejected the offer and proceeded with plans to close the plant. This was the cue for Unite to escalate its nationalist campaign, during which time it organised just one protest of the workforce, on July 7, outside the plant.

This was done under conditions in which there was a powerful basis to mobilise workers across Europe to oppose GKN’s attacks.

On July 9, all 422 workers employed by GKN’s Campo Bisenzio plant in Florence, Italy, were issued with dismissal notices and told that their plant would close, with the work relocated across its European operations. Workers immediately began an occupation of the plant in opposition. A protest of several thousand took place in the city on July 24 in support of the workers’ struggle.

As with Unite in Britain, the Italian IndustriAll trade union did nothing to unify the struggles of workers across borders who are employed by the same company hellbent on destroying their livelihoods. Instead, they appealed to *management* in Britain, including Liam Butterworth, to keep the Florence plant open in collaboration with the unions!

In a July 24 letter, IndustriAll General Secretary Luc Triangle said the decision to announce the redundancies “completely ignores the role of the social partners [the unions] in the case of collective redundancies.” Triangle insisted that the move was not necessary as the GKN could help itself to yet more funds from the taxpayer: “The decision to proceed with mass

redundancies also takes no account whatsoever of existing support measures for the economy from the Italian government in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Job losses should be conducted with the collaboration of the trusted European Works Council, Triangle declared, urging GKN to “engage in a proper dialogue with worker representatives and trade unions, both at national level in Italy and at European level with the EWC.” If the company would at least drop the plant closure threat, he pledged in conclusion, “On the trade union side, we are available to evaluate all options that see the production continuity of the site...”

All such “options” promoted by the unions are based on offering corporations the necessary cost-cutting and job losses to convince them to keep one plant open at the expense of a plant across borders. Just prior to the latest strike ballot result being announced, Labour MP Dromey laid out the reactionary agenda of Unite’s coalition: “The company is not just sacking British workers here But they are then going to export British production to continental Europe, to France, to Germany and to Spain... it’s a betrayal of the British national interest.”

Workers at GKN must oppose all efforts by the pro-company Unite and its partners to divide them on a national and plant by plant basis. The fight of workers in Birmingham is a global one. Auto industry workers are fighting to defend their jobs and conditions all over the globe. In recent weeks Volvo workers have struck in the United States and thousands of US workers at auto parts conglomerate, Dana—who have an axle producing facility employing hundreds of workers in Birmingham a few miles from GKN’s plant—have just thrown out a union backed sweatshop company contract.

Workers in Birmingham, Florence and every other production location must unify their struggles by taking matters out of the hands of the union bureaucracy. The first step must be the formation of rank-and-file committees that can reach out to and organise GKN and automotive workers in Britain, Italy and all over the world. To take that fight forward, the International Committee of the Fourth International has called for the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, or IWA-RFC.



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