

UK: GKN Birmingham workers must not allow Unite to divide them from co-workers in Europe in fight to oppose plant closure

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GKN automotive workers in Birmingham, England fighting the planned closure of the Chester Road factory by the end of 2022 with the loss of over 500 jobs must oppose the isolation of their struggle by Unite.

The closure was announced by GKN in January but Unite waited until mid-August before balloting workers for strike action. The determination of workers to wage a fight was demonstrated by the huge turnout and mandate delivered by the vote, both 95 percent.

Unite has refused to announce any dates for strike action, assuring the company that this will only be taken as a last resort. Any industrial action would cut across the appeal which Unite has made to the government and senior management for its “rescue plan” which is aimed at delivering increased competitiveness at GKN and across the auto manufacturing sector within the UK.

Since February, Unite has set itself the task of winning the company’s backing for keeping the Birmingham site open based on a Conservative government intervention to subsidise a transition from the manufacture of drivelines to the supply of components for electrification of the car industry, in addition to enforcing a reduction in operational costs.

The appeal, which Unite national officer Des Quinn described as “developing a water tight business case”, is exclusively based on appealing to the profit interests of GKN and its private owner Melrose Industries, a FTSE 100 company and private equity venture capitalist group. By the same token, Unite’s opposition excludes the independent interests of GKN workers.

As Quinn stated earlier this year, “The union will be creating a coalition of workers, the local community, business groups, local politicians and others to secure the future of the Chester Road site.”

According to Unite, it is the Tory government and

senior management at the plant who are the allies and potential saviours of GKN workers in Birmingham, while their co-workers in Europe are presented as rivals.

Until now, GKN Automotive CEO Liam Butterworth has refused to endorse the alternative business plan promoted by Unite, and the Tory government has emphasised it will not intervene without the agreement of the company. All the efforts of Unite and the Labour Party are aimed at convincing the transnational that its drive for greater competitiveness and profitability can be achieved through the adoption of their alternative business plan.

Local Labour MP Jack Dromey, who has backed the rescue plan of Unite, tried to assure the company, “It is now clear that modest investment in the plant would allow it to be more productive than GKN’s other European plants.”

It has been reported that the closure of the Birmingham factory will see the work transferred to Poland and France. GKN Melrose can play all ends off against the middle because the labour and trade union bureaucracy can be relied upon to mount a divisive campaign to pit workers against each other plant by plant and country by country. At the same time, the company is offered government inducements to retain production in countries where sites are under threat.

Unite and the Labour Party have indulged in a nationalist binge over the export of UK jobs while maintaining a public silence over the fact that GKN workers in Italy are faced with the same fate as their fellow workers in the UK. To draw attention to this would expose the fact that their nationalist campaign is not a defence of workers but an auctioning off of their jobs, terms and conditions to GKN Melrose and its shareholders.

In the same month, July, as GKN workers were protesting the Birmingham site closure plans, their co-workers in Florence had occupied the factory in Camp Bisenzio against the threat of closure and loss of 422 jobs.

The main complaint by the Italian IndustriALL trade union, like its counterpart Unite, is that they have not been fully consulted and treated as proven, reliable partners of the company. It has made similar plaintiff calls to GKN Automotive Chief Executive Liam Butterworth to remove the threat of closure and consider all options, as well as insisting—as with Unite—that the company take up available hand-outs from the Italian government.

Unite's opposition to the closure of the Birmingham GKN plant follows in the footsteps of the campaign it organised over the closure of the Honda plant in Swindon in south-west England in 2019. This failed to defend a single job, with the plant finally closing on July 30, ending 36 years of production and leading to the loss of 3,500 jobs at the site.

The union did not mobilise any action against the closure, instead staging a token local demonstration in April 2019. Everything was confined to futile appeals to Honda and the Tory government, with Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey stating that the union was focussing on a “leverage strategy”—including travelling to Japan with the government “to meet the highest individuals in Honda and request them once again to keep the plant open.”

Over the preceding years, Unite demonstrated that it was prepared to act as a direct appendage of Honda in imposing pay cuts and jobs losses at the factory. In 2009, it agreed a 3 percent pay cut for 10 months on the pretext of saving jobs, with a Unite regional officer describing the concession as “true solidarity in difficult times to protect hundreds of jobs.” Four years later, it collaborated with the shedding of 1,100 jobs. Unite's show of opposition to the planned closure quickly evaporated, with the union accepting the business rationale presented by Honda and seeking only to negotiate the most favourable redundancy terms.

In opposition to the reactionary alliance promoted by Unite and its pro-company position, the Socialist Equality Party and *World Socialist Web Site* intervened in the struggle at Swindon calling for the formation of rank-and-file committees to link up the fight against the closure at Honda with workers at Jaguar Land Rover and Ford who were also confronting major redundancies.

In an article titled “Build rank-and-file factory committees to fight Honda job losses!,” we wrote, “To

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

“Rank-and-file factory committees must be established, controlled by the workers themselves. They must take as their point of departure the global nature of the working class and the need to organise production in the interests of the working population, not the profitability of a handful of corporate billionaires.”

The fight of GKN workers in Birmingham to defend their livelihoods today takes place within the context of developing opposition among car workers around the globe, who are no longer prepared to accept the race to the bottom enforced by the economic nationalist agenda of the trade unions.

In June-July, Volvo truck workers in the United States went on strike for five weeks against a sell-out deal imposed by the United Auto Workers union. A rank-and-file committee was established and won support from Volvo co-workers in Belgium, who themselves walked out in a wildcat action against their union's extension of the working week in agreement with management.

At the Dana auto parts producer in the US, workers across the country have overwhelmingly rejected a rotten contract backed by the unions and have established their own rank-and-file committee to link up their struggle with workers in America and internationally and provide leadership in a fight to end sweatshop conditions.

GKN workers in Birmingham should follow these examples and establish the closest links with their fellow workers in Britain, Florence, across Europe and internationally and take their fight out of the hands of the union bureaucracy, which will only demand greater concessions to boost the competitiveness and profitability of GKN Melrose. We encourage you to study the experiences of the US Volvo and Dana workers and read our statement calling for the formation of an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. Contact us today to discuss how this fight can be taken forward.



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