

Opposing the closure of McVitie's Tollcross, Scotland: The lessons of the destruction of the steel industry

Steve James

16 September 2021

This month, a Scottish parliament debate on the proposed closure of the McVitie's biscuit factory in Tollcross, Glasgow, was opened by the Labour Party's Paul Sweeney. Sweeney made clear that the proposal developed by the Pladis Action Group, which includes the Scottish government, the trade unions, enterprise agencies and Glasgow City Council, was aimed at enticing food transnational Pladis into expanding its operation in Scotland at the expense of the company's other production sites in Britain.

After some obligatory references to the impact of closure on Glasgow—the factory has been a major employer in Tollcross area since 1925—and denunciations of Pladis, Sweeney shed more light on the action group's offer. He noted that it had been developed with the Interpath Consultancy, formerly the corporate restructuring arm of accountancy giant KPMG.

According to Sweeney, the proposal addressed Pladis' complaints that the Glasgow plant suffered “a high cost per ton and low volume relative to production capacity across the United Kingdom.” The solution centred “around a purpose-built, state-of-the-art 250,000 square foot factory on Government-owned land at nearby Gartcosh, giving Pladis a blueprint to develop a new, highly efficient factory system in the future to replace what is admittedly an aged portfolio of seven production sites acquired by United Biscuits [taken over by Pladis' parent Yildiz Holding in 2014] over the years.”

Sweeney did not elaborate on what this would mean for the other sites in the “aged portfolio,” but the implications are clear. One or all of them could be closed, replaced by the new highly exploitative Scottish platform at the cost, potentially, of thousands of jobs elsewhere. Sweeney demanded the Scottish government make capital available for the new factory. Replying for the Scottish National

Party (SNP) government, Finance and Economy Minister Kate Forbes reported that both she and First Minister Nicola Sturgeon had offered Pladis whatever it wanted to keep the company in Scotland and were awaiting a reply.

Sweeney's remarks make clear that the action group plans are based on dividing workers in the Pladis group by setting those in immediate danger of losing their jobs in Tollcross against their class brothers and sisters in Carlisle (750 employees), Leicestershire (250), Manchester (around 500), Liverpool Aintree (around 500), Harlesden (around 600) and the company's many other locations worldwide employing 16,000.

The proposed site is significant. Mention of Gartcosh places the closure firmly in context of the catastrophic industrial destruction imposed across Britain over the last five decades. In terms of the political betrayal of workers' interests by the Labour Party, the trade unions and the SNP, Gartcosh and nearby Ravenscraig, former sites of vast steel works employing thousands, should be considered crime scenes.

The entire steel industry in Britain was taken into state ownership by the post-World War II Labour government of Clement Attlee. In 1953, Winston Churchill's Conservative government handed the industry back to its former owners but made cheap loans available to operators such as Motherwell based Colville's, who had long dominated steel production in Scotland. Under government encouragement, Colville's completed the vast Ravenscraig works in 1959, one of the largest hot strip steel mills in Europe and one of four such sites in Britain. At its peak 7,000 workers were employed at Ravenscraig alone.

In the early 1960s, Colville's built a huge cold strip mill at Gartcosh, designed to transform Ravenscraig's output into sheet steel. By the late 60s, however, Colville's was

near bankrupt and the steel industry in Britain was uncompetitive globally.

Colville's was one of 14 companies re-nationalized by Labour in 1967, into the British Steel Corporation, employing as many as 268,000 workers. Successive Labour and Tory UK administrations sought to re-organise the industry and prepare to re-privatise it, by slashing the workforce and increasing productivity. Plant after plant was closed. Workers' collective efforts to defend themselves were left isolated by the trade unions, particularly following the defeat of 13-week steel workers strike in 1980 which was betrayed by the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation.

In 1985, weeks after the end of the 1984/85 miners' strike, and still faced with surplus capacity, British Steel announced its intention to close Gartcosh, barely two decades after it was opened. Ravenscraig was understood to be threatened as part of a drive to rapidly eliminate over half the number of steel workers' jobs in Britain.

In response, the Labour Party and trade union apparatus in Scotland, along with the Scottish nationalists and "civic society" sought a "Scottish solution" based on arguing that the government of Margaret Thatcher was particularly hostile to "Scottish interests." Labour MP, the late Donald Dewar, who went on to become First Minister in the inaugural Scottish parliament in 1999, claimed in a 1986 Westminster debate that the decision was "born out of obstinacy and an insensitive disregard for the needs of Scotland."

In fact, Thatcher's government was bitterly hostile to the entire working class and was able to carry out its agenda solely because of the refusal of the Labour Party and trade unions to make the slightest move that could be interpreted as a call to the working class in Britain to drive the Tories from power.

The Gartcosh steel plant was closed in March 1986 with the loss of 700 jobs. Ravenscraig finally closed in 1992 after a protracted campaign driven along nationalist lines. Ever since, every factory closure, every assault on workers in Scotland, every one of which has been a component of an attack across Britain, has been presented by Labour, the trade unions and the SNP—in power in Edinburgh since 2007—as an argument for more devolved power, wealth and influence for the Scottish parliament and big business.

Labour, the union apparatus and the SNP itself, for all their tactical differences over Scottish independence, all function as instruments and allies of a regional ruling elite just as hostile to workers' interests as their peers and

rivals in England and Wales. That is why the Pladis Action Group proposal, amounting to a call to close Pladis factories somewhere else, weakens and divides Pladis workers everywhere.

McVitie's workers in Tollcross seeking a way forward in the fight against the threat to their factory must consciously break with this bankrupt perspective. Instead of being dragged behind one or other representatives of the Scottish establishment, an alliance must be sought with other sections of working people.

There is a huge escalation in the global class struggle, borne out of the mounting crisis of the capitalist system and the unprecedented levels of poverty and social inequality intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Powerful movements of workers are developing worldwide, which all confront a direct assault by the employers and attempts by the trade union apparatus to suppress and strangle opposition to the systematic lowering of pay, terms and conditions.

In Britain, workers in struggle in transport, in education, in health and local government, are posed with launching a rebellion against the pro-company trade unions. Workers must take matters into their own hands and act independently of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy based on the methods of the class struggle. The first step forward that McVitie's workers must take is the rejection of the corporatist Pladis Action Plan and the formation of a rank-and-file organisation of their own. This would enable a struggle against the plant closure based on uniting with workers throughout the Pladis group in Britain and internationally, putting the interests of workers jobs and livelihoods first and not the profit interests of a multi-billion-pound transnational.

We urge workers to contact the International Workers Alliance of Rank and File Committees today to discuss the way forward.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact