# GKN auto workers to strike against closure of Birmingham UK factory

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GKN Automotive workers in Birmingham are set to take all-out continuous strike action from September 27 against the closure of the factory with the loss of 519 jobs.

The factory in Chester Road, Erdington, GKN Driveline, produces drivelines for the UK operations of major auto companies, Jaguar Land Rover, Nissan and Toyota.

The date for the strike was announced on September 13 by the Unite union. In its press release the union made clear that its aim had been to prevent strike action at all costs against Melrose Industries, the venture capitalists and FTSE 100 company which owns GKN Automotive (Melrose GKN).

The release stated, "The union initially delayed issuing strike action and instead arranged a meeting with all interested parties to reach agreement on future production and support. However, Melrose GKN refused to attend the meeting after initially accepting an invitation to do so. As a consequence, Unite had no option but to initiate strike action."

Steve Turner, Unite assistant general secretary, had already warned after the vote for strike action earlier this month, "It is now incumbent that everyone concerned with the future of GKN Driveline come together to hammer out a future for the plant and the UK's supply of key components. The alternative is a long-drawn-out dispute that will damage both GKN and the company's customer base."

As far as Unite is concerned the profits of Melrose must not be hit to apply pressure on behalf of workers to defend their livelihoods. The reference to a long-drawn-out dispute is as a threat by Unite against GKN workers and not the company. It underlines the fact that they can expect no support to be mobilised by the union among its 100,000 members in the automotive sector.

During the pandemic Unite and the trade unions have allowed sweeping redundancies with an estimated 10,000 jobs losses during 2020 across the car industry in the UK.

At GKN Automotive Unite has suppressed any independent action by workers in favour of winning endorsement for its alternative business plan from the Conservative government and senior management. It delayed a strike ballot for eight months after the announcement was made in January that the factory would close in 2022, ending more than half a century in production. The depth of opposition Unite has sat on was indicated in the August ballot, which on September 1 returned 95 percent vote to strike on a 95 percent turnout.

Newly elected Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham issued a statement combining moral hand-wringing with the promotion of nationalism aimed at pitting GKN workers in Birmingham against their co-workers in Europe:

"GKN's cynical attempt to close its Erdington plant is a disgrace. We will not stand by and let this employer offshore British jobs without a fight. We will leave no stone unturned in the ongoing battle to ensure the future of the Birmingham factory and our members."

GKN will be one of the first major disputes under Graham's leadership. She has boasted that Unite will be returned to doing "what it says on the union tin" and defend "jobs, pay and conditions."

Her fraudulent boasts have been trumpeted by pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP), which hailed Graham as the "Workers Candidate" and have drawn a veil over the back room deals she cut to end major disputes against fire and rehire at British Airways in 2020 and Go North

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West buses in May of this year. The false narrative of victories she claims to have secured through the removal of the ultimatum was predicated on Unite signing up to inferior terms and conditions and ending strike action.

This is the content of the “leverage” strategy championed by Graham. Leverage is based upon a repudiation of strike action in favour of public relations stunts, directed towards winning favour with the political establishment and corporate heads. It is about the union being welcomed into the boardrooms as full partners in imposing cost cutting while smothering widespread opposition.

The “rescue plan” advanced by Unite over the closure of the Birmingham factory is taken from this playbook. It aims to assure Melrose that its profit interests can be met through government hand-outs to transition from the assembly of drivelines to the new propulsion units needed as car production switches from petrol and diesel to electrification by 2030. In addition, the union will enforce “high value” operational savings based upon ensuring a “highly adaptable workforce.” This corporate speak for job losses and speed ups is faithfully echoed by Unite.

The combination of Unite pledging greater competitiveness while lobbying the Tory government and corporate heads was the same “leverage” campaign it launched in 2019 over the closure of the Honda plant in Swindon, which closed for production in July this year with the loss of 3,500 jobs.

GKN Automotive workers do not have to look any further than the fate of their colleagues at GKN Aerospace in nearby Kings Norton, whose site was announced for closure in 2019 with the loss of around 170 jobs. Unite prevented any mobilisation of workers against this and instead lobbied shareholders meetings to convince the Board to reverse its decision. Since its £8.1 billion hostile takeover bid of GKN in 2018, Melrose has been provided a free hand to fill its coffers and those of its wealthy investors.

In defence of their jobs GKN Automotive workers do not need an alternative business plan aimed at bolstering the profits of Melrose and pitting them against their co-workers internationally. GKN’s global workforce of 27,500, employed in 51 manufacturing centres across 20 countries, face the same enemy. They should reject the economic nationalism of Graham, Turner and the entire Unite bureaucracy. Dividing workers across national lines only dictates a never-ending race to the bottom.

An official silence has been maintained by Unite over the fact that GKN Automotive workers in Florence, Italy are also faced with the same threat of closure. In the same month of July that Birmingham workers staged their protest, workers at the Camp Bisenzio site downed tools and occupied the factory to defend the 422 jobs under threat.

No appeal has been made by Unite to the workers in Poland or France where the UK work is due to be transferred.

Auto industry workers are fighting to defend their jobs and conditions all over the globe, including Volvo workers in the United States. Thousands of US workers employed by the auto parts conglomerate, Dana, which has 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 throughout GKN’s global network, in Birmingham, Florence and every other production location, must unify their struggles. To take matters out of the hands of the union bureaucracy, they must form rank-and-file committees that can 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 (IWA-RFC). Contact us today to discuss the way forward in this struggle.

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