

Thousands of steel workers' jobs set to go, as UK unions preach nationalist campaign to "Save our Steel" industry

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British Steel, owned by the China-based Jingye Group, is preparing to cut 2,000 jobs—40 percent of the workforce—at its Scunthorpe plant in north Lincolnshire. The company telegraphed its intentions earlier this year when it announced plans to close the coke ovens at Scunthorpe, with the loss of 260 jobs.

The plan follows reports that up to 3,000 jobs could go at Tata Steel's UK operations at Port Talbot, south Wales. According to a *Guardian* report Thursday, many could be "gone as soon as March 2024". While the company has delayed an announcement confirming the cuts, a deal is being worked out with the trade unions.

Thousands more jobs in subsidiary industries and supply chains are threatened, as are many small businesses and shops ultimately reliant on wages paid to steel workers.

Britain's entire steel industry today employs only about 33,000 workers, just over one tenth of the formerly nationalised industry's 300,000 strong workforce in the 1970s.

This latest jobs massacre is part of a switch to greener steel production replacing blast furnaces with electric arc furnaces. The restructuring plan conceived between the Conservative government and the Jingye Group will see the firm receive a £500 million support package to facilitate the transition.

Domestic steel production, crucial for wartime production, is a hot topic in ruling circles and among the trade union bureaucracy, acquiring increasing significance with NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine and Israel's assault on Gaza threatening to metastasise into wider conflicts and even a Third World War. Steel made in an electric arc furnace is not the higher-grade steel produced in blast furnaces and is not suitable for the motor vehicle, aerospace, and construction industries—those associated with military production.

The Labour and trade union bureaucracy is basing its opposition to the closures on these nationalist, jingoist

concerns.

Vaughan Gething, economy minister of the Labour Party-run devolved Wales government, said, "If all blast furnace activities end without an alternative way to make primary steel then the UK could be the only G7 country not to have primary steelmaking capability ... which has consequences if you are then reliant on a future where all of that steel needs to be imported."

The *Daily Mirror*, a Labour-supporting tabloid, has been running a "Save Our Steel" campaign alongside the unions since 2015. The *Mirror's* campaign makes four demands: an immediate cut in business taxes on the UK steel industry and a fairer system of valuation; no green taxes and high energy bills for the steel industry; block China from "dumping cheap steel on the UK market" and "Buy British", stating that all major infrastructure and construction projects and government contracts should use British-made steel wherever possible.

In mid-October the *Mirror* and its union allies were up in arms because Ministry of Defence chiefs failed to guarantee British steel would be used to build a £1.6 billion fleet of naval supply vessels which restock frigates and destroyers on military operations.

Supporting the *Mirror's* campaign, Labour Party Shadow Defence Secretary John Healey said it was "another example of the Government failing to ensure the use of British steel in shipbuilding". Healey added, "The Type 31 frigate and Fleet Solid Support Ship programmes highlight the Conservatives' failure to recognise the strategic value of British steel."

Assistant general secretary of the Community trade union, Alasdair McDiarmid, told the *Mirror*, "Our Royal Navy and the ships in them are crucial to our national security. It's therefore important that the Government ensures that we have a domestic steel industry to supply the materials needed to build these ships whenever we need them. Ignoring the UK's long-term security needs for short-term savings is a

dangerous game for the Government to play.”

McDiarmid continued by fawning, “Labour has already committed to making Royal Navy ships out of more UK steel.”

Unite has been instrumental in the nationalist campaign. The union is running a petition calling on politicians to sign their so-called “Workers’ Plan for Steel” and support a change in government procurement rules so that UK public contracts are required to use 100 percent UK-made steel.

Instead of urgently mobilising workers for industrial action, Unite boasts that “throughout the autumn” their “organisers have been working in Port Talbot full time with members of the public and community groups as part of their campaign” with “over 100 local businesses and community groups” signed up. This is aimed at “engaging voters to pressure politicians”.

Unite specialises in these “leverage” campaigns designed to avoid any class struggle and which have seen strike after strike sold out with below-inflation pay cuts imposed, jobs lost and conditions worsened.

Last Saturday, the Community union led a demonstration of 400 Tata Steel workers along Aberavon seafront. Community’s national officer for steel Alun Davies said ahead of the rally that Tata’s plan would see “Britain would become reliant upon for virgin steel—steel which we should be producing here and is vital to our economy and security.” He complained how that Tata’s plans would see “UK taxpayer money being spent to support jobs around the globe, at the expense of jobs here.” The march was led off by a banner reading, “BRITAIN We Need Our STEEL Now!”

The refutation of this reactionary nationalist perspective was provided only days later when Tata Steel announced Monday that its Netherlands unit would scrap around 800 jobs at its plant in near Amsterdam, citing the necessity to “improve market conditions and bring down costs”. The plant employs 9,200 workers, with the company pointing to the fact that its plans are going ahead with the participation of the Dutch unions. Tata commented, “Forced redundancies cannot be ruled out and the company will discuss a social plan with the unions.”

The trade union bureaucracy has no intention of mounting a struggle by Tata and British Steel workers in the UK, let alone a unified international fight. When the plans for job losses at British Steel were leaked in late October by the *Sunday Times*, Roy Rickhuss, Community general secretary, called for a “long, robust consultation” between the steel corporations and the unions.

Trades Union Congress General Secretary Paul Nowak has lent his support to the proposed partnership between the steel companies and the trade unions and called for a “Biden-style

industrial and climate plan” from the government. US President Biden’s industrial plan is centred around efforts to build on US soil, with the backing of the union bureaucracy, crucial industries presently dominated by Chinese and Taiwanese manufacturers.

The bureaucracy’s wish to get their feet under the table was granted on November 7 when Tata announced talks with the unions had begun. According to Davies, the company has been considering a report filed on November 10 by consultancy firm Syndex, commissioned by the union to study Tata’s plans and present alternatives. Tata will present its plans to the unions in a joint meeting Friday.

No worker can place their faith in this process. Syndex advises unions and corporations across Europe on pro-business solutions, describing themselves as “company specialists who have been providing strategic, financial and social expertise in various sectors since the first European Works Council Directive.” Their expertise includes offering advice on “restructuring”. Among the companies they have been involved with are ArcelorMittal, the second largest steel producer in the world.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on Tata Steel and British Steel workers to prepare a united struggle to defend every threatened job against the machinations of the steel corporations, the Tory government and their assistants in the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. Workers must place their trust in their own strength and their only real allies—their colleagues throughout the steel industry and all of Tata’s and Jingye’s global operations. Rank-and-file committees outside the control of union bureaucracy should be formed at Port Talbot, Scunthorpe and all UK sites run by the two companies in order to democratically organise this fightback.

Contact the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees for assistance today.



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