

Reject trade unions' sellout of strike vote against Tata Steel's Port Talbot closure

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After seven months of negotiations with trade unions, Tata Steel is to close the two remaining blast furnaces in South Wales with the loss of thousands of jobs.

Last week, the conglomerate ended its consultation with unions at the UK's largest steelworks in Port Talbot, saying the first blast furnace would close at the end of June, and the second by the end of September.

Tata plans to replace blast furnace production with electric arc furnace steelmaking that requires far fewer workers. The investment will cost the firm £1.25 billion, but £500 million of this comes as a subsidy from the government. Up to 2,800 jobs will go, with the company launching a "voluntary" redundancy process this month.

If the jobs are to be saved, workers must take the fight out of the hands of Unite, the GMB and Community trade unions and reject the nationalist campaign of appeals to Tata and the Conservative government. What is needed is the industrial mobilisation of steel workers, not just in South Wales but in Scunthorpe at the British Steel plant, and most importantly uniting the struggles of workers in Britain with steel workers throughout Europe.

Tata made clear last September it was intending to slash jobs "within months not years." The unions' responded with a campaign to convince the company to accept alternative "business plans", based on a corporate alliance between company, government, and the bureaucracy. This operation continued until April 25 when Tata announced its final closure plan.

Tata Steel chief executive Rajesh Nair said the offers put forward by the unions would have meant "significant additional costs of at least £1.6 billion", concluding, "It is not feasible to accept their plan, and it is not affordable."

In response, Community general secretary Roy Rickhuss complained of the rejection of his unions pro-capitalist solution, "It would have returned the company to profits, and the additional capital expenditure needed to make it a reality could have been funded by an additional

£450mn from the government."

The plan, initially commissioned by Community, the GMB and Unite and developed by restructuring experts Syndex was hailed as the basis to "protect more than 2,300 jobs over a decade and would see no compulsory redundancies in Port Talbot". It centred on keeping one blast furnace open for eight years and reducing immediate job losses down to 700—meaning the company would have been able to shed them via a voluntary scheme.

When the combined unions' business plan accepted the necessity for job losses, Unite moved in December to publicly dissociate itself. Its demand was for an expansion of the UK steel industry, which "only produced 60%" of the steel it needed last year. But General Secretary Sharon Graham also based Unite's campaign on winning the support of Tata and local businesses in Wales, boasting in November of "More than 130 Port Talbot businesses, community groups, sports and social clubs" signing "an open letter calling on the government to save the town's steel industry."

Graham declared businesses were "joining with Unite in their droves to call on our politicians to act now." This was typical of the "leverage" campaigns Graham specialises in, centred on appeals to big business to work with the union bureaucracy as the best means to achieve their aims and boost profits.

Speaking at a rally in Port Talbot in February, Graham stated, "For years and years, politicians and profiteers have delivered cut after cut to UK steel," listing nearly 6,500 losses just over the last decade at Port Talbot's Tata, Newport's Liberty Steel, Scunthorpe's British Steel, Rotherham, and in Redcar.

But where were Unite and the other unions when all this was taking place? It was they who collaborated with the management of the nationalised British Steel for decades and then with the private owners ever since—overseeing the decimation of around 270,000 jobs in the industry

since the 1970s.

Graham's central argument is that with British imperialism up to its neck in backing the genocide in Gaza and the war against Russia in Ukraine, steel production in Britain cannot be jeopardised. She told the rally, "Together our politicians have sat by and watched our steel industry be decimated. They have handed our steel to overseas corporations, undermined our economy and our national security." Unite's campaign, she said, was "making the very last stand for UK steel."

"Make no mistake, the money is there to protect our steel industry," she insisted.

Graham invents a rosy picture of the steel industry in other countries, Germany in particular, where the government, steel corporation owners and workers all cooperate and are living happily ever after.

The Unite leader said, "They [the UK government and Tata] say that it is unrealistic to protect jobs, that it is unrealistic for capacity to be saved, that mass steel making has no future here", adding, "if what they are saying is true, how is it happening in Germany, where they can make more steel on one site than we do in the whole of Britain? If Germany can have investment for that to happen, why can't we even save the jobs we have in Britain? If the German government can protect German workers—why can't our government protect us?"

Steel workers in Germany in fact face job losses greater than those being imposed in Britain. On Tuesday, several thousand steel workers demonstrated in front of the Thyssenkrupp headquarters in the north of Duisburg. Facing 5,000 job losses, they came from Thyssenkrupp's plants in North Rhine-Westphalia and from the Krupp Mannesmann (HKM) ironworks south of Duisburg.

German workers are as much in a fight against the IG Metall union as against Thyssenkrupp. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted in its report on the rally, "When [Thyssenkrupp Steel Europe] Supervisory Board Chairman Sigmar Gabriel [who is also the former Social Democratic Party Foreign Minister and vice-chancellor] and the management hinted in February and March that up to 5,000 jobs could be cut, IG Metall and the works council reacted immediately. They agreed to the job cuts. They just wanted to have a say in how it was organised."

IG Metall's only plea is that jobs are cut on a "voluntary basis". But as the WSWS explained, "This mechanism has led to the destruction of more than half of the 179,000 jobs in the German steel industry since reunification in 1990. Not a single job has been cut through compulsory redundancies."

No industrial action ballot was put forward at Port Talbot for six months, with Unite eventually calling one on March 1. Unite took pains to note this was St. David's Day, for the patron saint of Wales. The ballot closed on April 9, but despite its 1,500 members at Port Talbot voting to strike nothing has been organised since.

Community's ballot gave the company even more time to prepare, launched on April 11 and not closing until May 9, the same day as the GMB's ballot.

Even if industrial action is called, this will be of a token character with no call to other steelworkers to support it in Britain, Europe and internationally. No call is being made to the 77,000 workers spread across five continents employed by Tata Steel Ltd in its subsidiaries and joint ventures. And without such an appeal workers will continue to be played off against one another in an endless race to the bottom.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) calls for an international movement uniting workers throughout the entire steel industry, and drawing in workers in manufacturing, to halt and reverse job cuts. Workers must demand:

- An immediate end to all job cuts!
- A reduction of the length of the working week, with an increase in pay, to account for more efficient production of steel and reverse decades of stagnant wages!
- Unite the struggles of the workers across borders to fight job losses!
- Place the steel and manufacturing industry under social ownership and democratic workers' control!

To wage this fight, workers at Tata Steel and elsewhere must develop a network of rank-and-file committees in all plants, independent of and in opposition to the trade union bureaucracy. To discuss the formation of a rank-and-file committee contact us on the form below.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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