

# Unite calls off south Wales steelworkers strike, partnering with Labour government and Tata Steel UK

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Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham pulled the plug on a strike by 1,500 steel workers due to begin at the start of this week on July 8.

Action had been planned against Tata Steel UK's plans to cut 2,800 jobs at the plants in Port Talbot and Llanwern, South Wales, announced last September. Unite had withdrawn from talks with the company and union members were working to rule with an overtime ban from June 17 and an all-out indefinite strike to follow.

In a bid to halt the strike voted for in mid-April, Tata waged a vicious offensive, threatening legal action and carrying out mass intimidation. In early June, workers were summoned to a meeting by management at the Port Talbot plant and forced to sign forms regarding whether they would be taking part in the strike.

Tata also gave notice it would speed up its implementation of mass redundancies, claiming it could no longer assure the supply of sufficient resources to the blast furnaces needed for safe and stable operations. It announced steps to close both furnaces in early July, having originally planned to close one by the end of June and the second by late September. They will be replaced with electric arc furnaces, with the help of a £500 million subsidy agreed by the Tory government, with far lower labour requirements.

After being handed a "historic vote", as Graham described the strike mandate, the militant posturing of the Unite Secretary has once again proved a fraud. Asked about the imminent closures on June 30, Graham told BBC Wales: "They suspend closure, we suspend action". The very next day, not only was the planned strike cancelled, but the overtime ban too.

Announcing "new talks" with the company, Graham

told the press it was essential they "progress swiftly and in good faith with the focus on fresh investment and ensuring the long-term continuation of steel making in south Wales." This was a smokescreen for Tata, who confirmed on July 2 they had begun the process of winding down one of the two furnaces in Port Talbot.

It has since come to light that Unite called off the strike at the prompting of Labour's Jonathan Reynolds, then shadow business secretary, who spoke with the union officials on June 27, according to the *Financial Times*. Talks between Reynolds, the Welsh government and the unions Unite, the GMB and Community were aimed at smothering steelworkers' resistance to the jobs massacre with the promise of a more favourable settlement under a Labour government.

A central role was played by Socialist Party member and Unite national lead officer Onay Kasab, quoted by the *FT*. "We have asked that Tata does not make any irreversible changes before the election," he said.

The leaders of the Community and GMB unions had already fallen into line, having sat on strike mandates from their own members, insisting no action be taken before the elections, preventing what would have been the first strike in the UK steel industry for 40 years. Far from representing a militant alternative, Unite under Graham has followed suit.

Reynolds, now the Labour government's business secretary, has said nothing more than that there is a "better deal available" at Tata, based on the additional £2.5 billion subsidy it has offered the company. Deflecting questions about job guarantees, he added this would only be part of a deal, while warning, "Blast furnaces employ more people than some newer

technologies available.” In other words, workers must accept the loss of their livelihoods as a fait accompli while the company receives further state hand-outs.

At best, this means a more attritional approach to the job losses and a delay of the closure of the second blast furnace, allowing the job cuts to proceed behind the fig leaf of voluntary redundancy while the union bureaucracy divides and stifles workers’ action. The company has announced a process for voluntary redundancy applications up to August 7.

The only job security will be for the union bureaucrats and their high-salary posts. This is an example of the tripartite framework promised by Labour Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer between the government, unions and corporations.

The Unite general secretary is positioning herself for a seat at the top table. Graham described her “high level” meeting with Reynolds on Wednesday as “extremely positive,” adding, “The commitment given to achieving a sustainable, profitable UK steel industry is very welcome...”

“In recent months, Unite has been fighting to save jobs at Tata and to revitalise the UK steel industry for the future of communities and for our national security. We are at a critical first stage, but the extra investment now secured and the change of attitude from this new Labour government could be game changers in making this happen.”

For all of Graham’s finger-wagging at Starmer not to back “Austerity Mark II” and empty threats to withhold union funding if Labour does not “stand up for workers”, she and every section of the union bureaucracy agree with the Labour government on the need to maintain corporate profitability and competitiveness and British militarism.

Graham has achieved notoriety among the rank-and-file for providing a cover for Starmer’s support for the genocide in Gaza. She has not only proscribed any industrial boycotts of UK arms production and supply to Israel but also blocked Unite participation in the national demonstrations against its genocide. This is in stark contrast to her full support for the NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, alongside the Trades Union Congress, which backs a major nuclear rearmament programme.

This support for war abroad is now coming home to roost with a war on the working class at home. By

sabotaging any resistance against job losses at Tata Steel the unions are setting the template for their collaboration with the Labour government in a wider restructuring agenda demanded by the corporations. This includes Labour’s support for the take-over of Royal Mail by equity firm EP Group and for further privatisation of the National Health Service.

It is Graham and the unions’ nationalist, pro-capitalist agenda which is suffocating the fight at Tata Steel UK. Parent company Tata Steel Limited is a transnational operating in over 100 countries and six continents with a 660,000-strong global workforce from which it derives its enormous profits, paying out £1.4 billion in dividends to its shareholders between 2019 and 2023. Defeating the company means mobilizing this massive international workforce against its owners.

The installation of more energy efficient and less polluting electric arc furnaces is, from a scientific and environmental perspective, progressive. But from the social perspective of the working class the shift to a “greener” form of steel production is coming at their direct expense, paying in massive job losses and social devastation.

Under capitalism, such technological advancements are used to increase workers’ exploitation and the private profits of the corporations. Every advance in production should instead bring about a reduction in the burden on workers and secure a future for working-class communities. This poses the need for workers’ control and social ownership of production.

In opposition to the “national interests” invoked by the Labour government and the union bureaucracy to describe their line up with Tata Steel UK, the perspective which needs to be championed by steelworkers is that of a global counter-offensive across national borders as outlined in by the WSWS in the programme of demands put forward by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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