Oppose threat to close UK Vauxhall plants: for a unified fight against job losses worldwide

Tony Robson
1 November 2024

Vauxhall workers at the company's two sites in Ellesmere Port and Luton are facing a direct threat to their jobs and possible closure of both plants by parent company Stellantis, with chief executive Carlos Tavares stating on October 14: "We are now reaching a point where we have to make a decision, and that will happen in the next few weeks."

Tavares added the company would make a "correction" to its UK business, claiming the government's zero-emissions vehicle policy was damaging profitability.

In describing the potential shuttering of its UK operations as merely a "correction" Stellantis is parading its corporate contempt for 2,500 livelihoods that would be wiped out directly. Thousands more jobs in Vauxhall's supply chain would also be lost, with social devastation wrought in towns historically linked to the auto industry.

Stellantis is renewing threats over the future of its UK production sites first made prior to the UK general election held July 5. The company demanded a loosening of electric vehicle (EV) production targets and further subsidies to stimulate market growth.

Maria Grazia Davino, the company's top UK executive, had stated: "If this market becomes hostile for us, then we will enter an evaluation of producing elsewhere."

Stellantis doubled down on these demands following discussions with UK government officials over "several months" on how the government could "help to stimulate demand", according to *Bloomberg* news. The transnational auto producer, formed through a merger between Groupe PSA and Fiat Chrysler in 2021, employs a global workforce of hundreds of thousands across 30 countries. It is exerting its massive economic leverage with the Labour government to extract concessions.

Significantly, Tavares raised the sword of Damocles over the heads of Vauxhall workers again on October 14, just as the Labour government hosted its inaugural International Investment Summit with the heads of global corporations, banks and equity firms. Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer promised the gathering a piling up of wealth through a "shock and awe" of investment, pledging to tear up regulations.

Vauxhall's plants have both recently been overhauled for EV production. The Ellesmere Port site started electric-only production in 2023, producing a range of electric passenger vehicles including the Vauxhall Combo Life Electric, Peugeot e-Rifter and Citroen e-Berlingo muti-purpose vehicles. The Luton plant makes larger diesel and petrol vans and is scheduled for production of medium sized electric vans from the first half of 2025 alongside ICE [internal combustion engine] vans.

In the face of Stellantis's economic blackmail, and with Vauxhall workers' jobs and conditions used as bargaining chips in talks with the most "pro-business" Labour government in history, the Unite trade union has maintained a guilty silence.

Unite General secretary Sharon Graham is not normally one to shun the media spotlight. In recent years her token criticisms of Labour were stock-in-trade, combined with her appeal that Labour should "act as the party of the working class". But she electioneered for Starmer and has defended Unite's funnelling of members' dues into Labour's coffers. At Tata Steel, Unite has assisted the Labour government

© World Socialist Web Site

with the closure of the Port Talbot blast furnaces and their transition to an electric arc furnace with the loss of 2,800 jobs, vetoing along with Community and the GMB union their members' overwhelming vote to strike.

In June, Unite national officer Des Quinn responded to threats by Stellantis to end production in Britain by calling on the government to relax Zero Emission Vehicle targets on companies investing in the UK. He stated: "There's got to be a balance… I would give a bit to take something back in terms of automotive sector and industrial strategy."

What Unite means by "giving something back" is bending over for Stellantis to support the company's predatory drive for profit. Unite officials are encouraging a line-up with the company so that job losses across its global operations fall on workers outside of Britain. The flip side of this economic nationalism will be Unite's deepening partnership with the company, demanding the sacrifice of terms and conditions and increased productivity on the pretext of "preventing the threat of closure" and stopping the transfer of production abroad.

Unite presided over the orderly closure of the Honda plant in Swindon in 2021 on this same basis, with the direct loss of 3,500 jobs. In the years prior, Unite officials enforced pay cuts and mass redundancies, claiming these would secure the future of car workers at the site. This divisive nationalist approach, arguing only that plant closures take place in another country, must be rejected in favour of a unified fight across national borders with auto workers who are facing the same corporate enemy.

In August, workers at the Luton plant responded positively to a statement produced by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committee (IWA-RFC) to establish an internationally co-ordinated fight by Stellantis workers in Britain, across Europe and the US against its global jobs massacre. They explained that union officials had provided no response to the threat of plant closures, had kept them in the dark about attacks on Stellantis workers worldwide and were in the back pocket of management.

A Vauxhall worker at Luton explained that setting workers in car plants in one country against another country "does not work. Factories just close."

No section of auto workers is being spared in the company's race-to-the-bottom being policed by the trade union bureaucracy. Volkswagen in Germany has confirmed the closure of at least three plants at the expense of tens of thousands of jobs. In Belgium, Audi plans to slash 3,000 jobs, while in Italy Ford and Stellantis are threatening to eliminate 12,000 jobs and a further 13,000 in the supply chain. A major downsizing operation is being rolled out in the US with 2,450 jobs cut at Stellantis Warren Truck Assembly Plant on top of thousands of "supplemental" workers being made redundant. GM is laying off a further 1,700 workers at its Fairfax, Missouri site.

Any concessions wrung by Stellantis from the Labour government over EV quotas and subsidies would only constitute a stay of execution. The transnational auto makers are responding to an unprecedented crisis of global capitalism, dominated by cut-throat competition and rising protectionism, with a global war for markets and profits. Automation and the transition to electric vehicles creates the basis to eliminate back-breaking work and provide secure and well-paid employment, while reducing environmental destruction. But the corporate oligarchy uses improved technology to maximise their profits, decimating jobs and lowering labour costs in a brutal restructuring of the global auto industry that is without precedent.

The only viable strategy to take forward the interests of auto workers is one based on the common interests of the international working class, challenging the domination of capitalist exploitation and its destructive grip over every aspect of society. Rank-and-file committees must be built to take power back into the hands of workers on the shop floor against the unaccountable pro-company union apparatus and to prepare the ground for a genuine fight.

We encourage Vauxhall workers to read and share the latest statement by the IWA-RFC on the wave of job losses in the auto industry and to get in touch to discuss the steps which can be taken to develop a powerful class movement on a worldwide basis against this dictates of Stellantis and the corporate oligarchy.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site