

Workers at Luton Stellantis Vauxhall plant must mobilise in rank-and-file struggle to prevent plant closure

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Stellantis Vauxhall workers in Luton, England face the immediate threat of the van plant closure as a consultation period comes to an end.

Stellantis announced the closure November 26, threatening 1,100 jobs. The Luton plant is to be scaled down to a single shift this year, with production ceasing from the second quarter and future production based on electric vans concentrated at Ellesmere Port in the north west of England. The Luton plant which was to switch EV production this year will have the production of its petrol and diesel vans transferred to France.

The knock-on effect on jobs for the region's supply chain could be up to 5,000 jobs.

When Stellantis announced the closure, workers were given an HR1 redundancy notice period. It began a 45-day consultation period between the Unite union, Stellantis and Sir Keir Starmer's Labour government, due to end on January 10. Unite entered this fraudulent process to prevent industrial action, enabling management to begin the closure process. Workers report that the night shift has already been cut, going from three shifts to two. Also reported is the fact that workers returning to work after the Christmas shutdown had to contact management first.

The potential for a powerful fightback to defend workers' jobs against the profit dictates of billionaire shareholders was shown in a mass meeting at the plant on December 16. Up to 500 workers refused to accept closure as a fait accompli in a challenge to Unite's and the Labour government's corporatist collaboration with Stellantis's global restructuring plans.

In response to growing opposition from the rank and file, Unite saw the need to make a show of opposition and sanctioned an official protest on December 17-18 outside the Luton factory. This was designed to have no impact on production whatsoever, taking place during the Christmas shutdown. Unite mobilised between 50 to 100 protesters, bolstered by Unite officials, members of the Labour Party, Green Party, Socialist Workers Party (SWP), SWP offshoot Counterfire, the Socialist Party (SP) and the National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN—founded by the Rail, Maritime Transport Workers union and backed by the SP.)

The few workers who did attend sought to block lorries entering the plant to take away newly manufactured vans, fearing this was part of the plant closure strategy. The protest was stifled by a constant loud music system punctuated with short speeches from

Unite officials making bankrupt appeals to the Labour government to rescue the plant. Unite senior representative Paul Geary said, "The government have to step up... We need to all work together and closing plants isn't the way."

The Labour government have stepped up: accepting the job losses at Luton and thanking Stellantis for keeping any EV van production in Britain, at Ellesmere Port. The Department for Business and Trade issued a statement trumpeting their corporatist partnership on the announcement of the Luton closure, stating, "We have a longstanding partnership with Stellantis and we will continue to work closely with them, as well as trade unions and local partners on the next steps of their proposals."

Local Labour MP Rachel Hopkins attended the 48-hour protest to plug her meetings with Labour Party ministers. Hopkins has since published a letter sent by Business Secretary Jonathan Reynolds to Stellantis asking for a "pause" in the closure process. This showed that "our government" supports "our town", she claimed. It did nothing of the sort. Reynolds actually said, "should Stellantis proceed with a closure" his department would assist those facing "redundancy" and work with Luton Borough Council on "developing options for the land".

Days before the announced closure, Ford in the UK also announced 800 job cuts, 15 percent of its 5,300 UK workforce. This follows the announcement of 1,300 job cuts at Ford's Dunton, Essex research plant in March 2023. Labour is pledged to assist Ford management in its plans, with a government spokesperson telling the BBC that had "asked the company to urgently share its full plans so we can help mitigate the impact in the UK."

Seeking to drown out rank-and-file opposition to Unite's collaboration with tens of thousands of job cuts across the industry, the union bureaucracy is on a propaganda blitz. General Secretary Sharon Graham has spent the weeks since the closure announcement bragging about her claimed achievements as union leader, declaring, "Collective bargaining with employers reaps rewards for working people, day in, day out." Graham often includes the hashtag #JobsPayConditions on her X postings and had the gall to post an animated gif on November 27—the day after the announcement—reading "Fighting for Jobs". The fact is that Unite has *prevented a fight* against job losses at Luton, with no industrial action called either there or at the Ellesmere plant.

Graham's gripe is that the closure "makes no sense" as the factory is "profitable" for the company and has "just been made ready to produce electric vehicles from 2025." Her only demand is for Stellantis "to withdraw the deadline for redundancies that was imposed under [previous CEO] Carlos Tavares's regime and allow for proper negotiations between workers, management and government over the future of the plant."

For Unite, the content of such talks would be on how to ensure costs were kept down in order to maintain profitability. As Unite rep Geary said during the protest on the critical role played by the union in shoring up Stellantis' profits at workers' expense: "It's a plant that makes a lot of money for the organisation. It's made some significant changes over the last 12 to 18 months. I mean at one point we were 1,600 euros a vehicle, now we've cut that by 600 euros. So the membership out there have been working hard, working with Stellantis management to secure a future only for them to pull the rug from under our members feet."

Graham's strategy has been provided a political cover by the United Left—an amalgam of various pseudo-left forces. Their slogan is to "Keep Unite Left," while rubber-stamping one sellout after another carried out by the union. On the 48-hour protest, United Left echoed Unite's and Graham's opposition to industrial action, calling on Stellantis to "withdraw the deadline for redundancies" to "allow for proper negotiations" between "Unite, Stellantis and government."

Unite's political allies in the SP, SWP and Counterfire are also providing a political cover for Unite bureaucracy on the pages of their own papers and websites.

The SP reported Unite's 48-hour protest entirely uncritically. A December 18 article in *The Socialist* reported that "Socialist Party national trade union organiser Rob Williams" had poured demoralisation on the protest, telling them "about his experience of being a Unite convenor when, despite a massive battle, his plant closed 14 years ago." Williams advocated the same bankrupt demand of Unite: "The demand should be put on Starmer's government to take the plant into public ownership to save jobs and communities."

The SWP advise the Unite bureaucracy in a December 18 piece to organise a ballot for industrial action, with the helpful caveat for Graham and her local officials that "the trade union laws put up a plethora of hoops for workers to jump through before they can strike." At no point do they expose Unite's delaying tactics as direct collaboration with Stellantis. Instead they urge Vauxhall workers to follow the example of the 2009 struggle of Ford parts suppliers Visteon, again without any exposure of Unite's treacherous role. The SWP wrote, "In 2009, for example, Visteon factory occupations forced improved redundancy packages from multinational giant Ford which had tried to sack workers on the spot."

In that year, all 610 UK Visteon workers were sacked at a moment's notice. In response, workers occupied the factories in London, Essex and Belfast in defiance of Unite officials. The conflict between union members and Unite officials was so sharp that workers set up their own pickets separate from pickets dominated by union officials. Their powerful action was isolated and betrayed by the Unite bureaucracy. While workers were able

to secure better redundancy arrangements, Unite officials played a critical role in shutting all the Visteon plants and all jobs were lost. Workers ended up in a rearguard legal fight to rescue their pensions.

Counterfire are acting as loyal advisors to Unite. Opposed to the creation of rank-and-file committees of workers taking democratic control of the fight against closure, their December 19 report of Unite's protest was a warning to the union's officials that their treachery could lead to a rebellion against the union leadership. It advised "The union needs to up its game," and that "Unite should call mass demonstrations" and "arrange for protests".

World Socialist Web Site reporters have discussed with veteran assembly workers at Luton what happened the last time Unite conducted a struggle similar to the one advocated by Counterfire, back in 2002. That year General Motors announced the closure of its car manufacturing plant at the Luton site with the loss of 1,900 jobs. Unite held a few token protests while keeping their focus on ensuring a trouble-free shutdown for the company, and the plant closed against the demands of union members.

Left in the hands of Unite and their pseudo-left apologists, the Luton plant will close according to Stellantis's timetable. Unite's refusal to initiate any industrial action and its silence for weeks since the December protests only assists the closure, which is part of a brutal global restructuring by Stellantis. The WSWS and International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) opposes Unite's peddling of illusions that the Starmer Labour government will come to the rescue at Luton.

There is a powerful sentiment amongst Stellantis workers at Luton and internationally for a fight against job cuts and speed ups. They must launch an urgent fightback to stop the plant closure. The IWA-RFC urges union members to take control of the struggle from the union bureaucracy and build action committees tasked with initiating a joint struggle with workers at Ellesmere Port as part of a new international strategy, anathema to the nationalist Unite bureaucracy.



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