

Stellantis Luton closure confirmed with 1,200 job losses: Workers must adopt a new strategy

Michael Barnes
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Stellantis will begin the full closure of its van manufacturing facility at Vauxhall in Luton this April, including the transfer of machinery to the Ellesmere Port plant in Merseyside, England.

The announcement bringing an end to 120 years of vehicle production at the site is part of a new stage in the global war against car workers' jobs. Plant closures are planned across the UK and the world.

Stellantis, owner of Fiat, Peugeot and Citroen, is determined to make workers pay for the transition to electrical vehicles so that the company can maintain its profits. Up to 5,000 jobs will be lost in the Bedfordshire region supply chains for the Vauxhall plant, devastating an area already suffering long-term economic decline.

The Unite trade union bureaucracy continues to block any form of industrial action to stop this disaster, as they have done since last August. Instead, the union, led by General Secretary Sharon Graham, has held behind-the-scenes talks with management, ensuring a smooth transfer of production to Ellesmere Port.

Unite fostered the illusion that pressuring Sir Keir Starmer's Labour government could at least secure a delay in the closure. This was always a sham. The talks were held to prevent workers launching industrial action that would hit profits and serve as a catalyst for a broader fightback, including at Ellesmere Port.

Graham responded to the confirmation of closure by describing Stellantis's decision as a "betrayal". The real betrayal is Unite's blocking strike action against the closure.

It continues to do so even as a new struggle develops among its members at BMW in Birmingham. Around 600 engine plant workers began striking this month over a 2024 pay claim, after a massive vote for action. Five days of strikes are scheduled for March and six for April.

Rather than organise coordinated strikes by members in the same industry in the same union, Unite tried to persuade

Stellantis against the closure by offering productivity increases.

Graham's response to the failure of these efforts was to double down on economic nationalist appeals to the Starmer government: "We urgently need an industrial strategy that puts the national interest at the heart of decision making in manufacturing, as they do in other countries."

But the Labour government is a tool of big business and the banks. It pretended to negotiate a delay with Stellantis while agreeing the closure behind workers' backs, preserving what the Department for Business and Trade called its "longstanding partnership" with the company. Business Secretary Jonathon Reynolds sent a letter politely offering his services, "should Stellantis proceed with a closure", in facilitating redundancy plans.

After Stellantis's announcement, leader of Luton's Labour-run council Hazel Simmons revealed that their main concern was now a land grab! "The council is currently in discussions with Stellantis to explore possibilities to buy the site so we can ensure future development will be of economic benefit to the town."

Labour's actions prove there is no "national interest", as appealed to by Graham. The only interests national governments care for are those of the corporations and the super-rich.

It was the same story at Tata Steel in Port Talbot, South Wales, where Unite shut down steelworkers' fight to save their jobs last year. Rather than mobilise a fight, Graham pointed to steel workers in Germany and appealed, "If the German government can protect German workers—why can't our government protect us?"

There are only two outcomes possible from such a strategy. Either the jobs are "saved" based on massively reduced wages, terms and conditions which make the business more profitable, or the company shuts up shop as planned.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) noted, it was

mythmaking by Graham to claim that the jobs of German steelworkers were being saved by government. Unite's nationalist strategy pits workers in the UK against their class brothers and sisters internationally in a downward spiral of factory closures, wage cuts and backbreaking productivity drives.

The WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party have waged a campaign since last August urging a rank-and-file rebellion against the leadership of Graham and Unite.

On November 27, 2024, hundreds of copies of "Oppose Vauxhall Luton plant closure! Defeat Unite's alliance with Stellantis and the Labour government! For a global fightback!" were distributed to workers.

Exposing Graham's rhetoric at the time, the statement pointed out that "Unite's threats have been exposed as worthless. The union's collusion with Stellantis confirms the warning made by WSWS that Graham's statements were aimed solely at pre-empting demands for action by Vauxhall workers."

The WSWS also warned of the role of the "lefts" within the Unite union hierarchy, including the United Left faction that controls key positions. Whatever rhetoric they spouted about defending jobs, they refused to launch a challenge against Graham's betrayal of the struggle at Luton.

Pseudo-left forces played a key role. The Socialist Party uncritically backed Unite's phony protest campaign. The Socialist Workers Party called for a repeat of the 2009 Visteon/Ford debacle where workers occupied plants only to be isolated by the Unite bureaucracy which then negotiated their closure. Counterfire called on the union leadership to "up its game." They all intervened to maintain the grip of the Unite bureaucracy on union members.

The WSWS statement concluded, "Rank-and-file committees should be established at Luton and Ellesmere Port to draw up a statement opposing the closure, defending all jobs, and formulating demands to address the ongoing attacks on pay, terms and conditions."

This is the way forward. Workers face a struggle on two fronts, against a ruthless global corporation and the Unite bureaucracy which is facilitating the job cuts. The union is tied up with the company, in some cases replacing its lower-level management—as workers have told the WSWS.

Above all, workers must reject Graham's nationalist campaign, wedded to the Labour government, which cuts across the struggle to unify all car workers worldwide—the only basis on which the transnational car companies and their financial backers can be fought.

Confirming the global character of the threat faced by workers, Nissan recently announced plans to cut 6,500 jobs by closing three factories in Europe, after the collapse of merger talks with Honda with the aim of saving £2 billion.

The Nissan plant in Sunderland, North East England—the largest car plant in Britain—is not exempt from possible cuts. Unite represents roughly half the 6,000-strong workforce.

Proactive action must be taken. As the Stellantis closure deadline approaches, there are clear signs of a major slump in vehicle sales worldwide and a fightback by car workers. Workers at Luton can appeal to this sentiment and reach out to allies across the world, but to do so they must reject Unite's pro-company agenda.

Even at this late stage in the closure programme, rank-and-file workers can intervene and alter the course of events. They should establish their own committees at the Luton and Ellesmere plants and contact Stellantis's workers internationally, as well as BMW, Nissan and Ford workers also facing plant closures and cuts to jobs and wages. Then they can begin to plan a counteroffensive.

The demands proposed by the WSWS in November still stand:

- Oppose the closure of Vauxhall Luton! No sacrifice of jobs, pay or conditions to maintain production in the UK. Unite car workers worldwide!
- No two-tier workforce! All temporary workers must be provided a permanent contract on equal pay, terms and conditions.
- EV technology for workers not billionaire shareholders! The reduced labour time expended on EVs must be used to shorten the working day and to increase pay, compensating for decades of declining wages.
- Place Vauxhall-Stellantis under public ownership! The car and van companies must be nationalised under workers' democratic control. Profits must be used to provide secure and well-paid employment, research and development.
- Vehicle design and production determined by car workers and scientists not hedge fund managers and bankers. Production for social need not private profit!

Contact the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees today on the form below for help with this work.



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