

Wabtec target 300 engineering job losses in Doncaster, UK

Simon Whelan

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Three hundred jobs are at risk in Doncaster, South Yorkshire, after the UK based Wabtec Rail Limited unveiled plans to close the Plant Works site and withdraw from the UK rolling stock maintenance market.

Wabtec Rail Limited overhaul and repair railway rolling stock and components, including the conversion of various types of trains to sliding doors. Wabtec Rail Limited is part of the Fortune 500 Wabtec Corporation (Westinghouse Air Brake Technologies Corporation), headquartered in Pittsburgh. The corporation employs around 27,000 people across 50 countries supplying components and services to the rail industry, with an annual \$8 billion turnover.

Wabtec expanded into the UK in 2011, buying rail refurbishment works in Doncaster and another in Birkenhead, Merseyside. Over the following decade Wabtec bought up a series of regionally based rail companies in Derby, Loughborough, Northampton, Kilmarnock and Barton-under-Needwood and incorporated them into their global operations.

The US-owned corporation announced the cuts on February 7, saying "following a comprehensive review of the product lines and cost challenges at the Doncaster plant, our proposal is to complete our current projects, then withdraw from the vehicle maintenance market in the UK and close the site." The redundancies would represent a tenth of the 3,000 workers employed by Wabtec, located across 10 sites in Britain.

The Plant Works opened in 1853 and is located on the west side of Doncaster railway station. Its heritage was recognised with the building being granted Grade II listed status in 2015. The world famous Flying Scotsman and Mallard trains were conceived, designed and built there, establishing Doncaster's reputation for railway engineering.

If a firm makes 20 redundancies, it is required to hold a collective consultation. Meetings between the employers

and employee trade union representatives were held March 2-4. A communication, Collective consultation: Joint Communication (between the unions and management) begins. "The Company and employee representatives met to continue the collective consultation in relation to the company's proposals to close the Doncaster site in 2026." The meeting reviewed the rationale for Wabtec to exit the rail refurbishment market and close the Doncaster site.

Other sites within the Doncaster region are apparently being considered by the company as part of the phased transfer of work away from the Plant Works where production will continue until "mid 2026". No final decision on the whereabouts of Wabtec's relocation will be made until April.

The document refers to nine potential relocation options being considered within the Doncaster region, or whether to repurpose an existing Wabtec facility at Barton-under-Needwood. The east Staffordshire site is commutable from Doncaster by car only, with a daily round trip approaching two and a half hours door-to-door. The journey to and from home by today's dilapidated public transport infrastructure would last as long as the workplace shift. On March 5, union representatives made a site visit to the Wabtec facilities at Barton-under-Needwood.

At no point are the job losses discussed, until the document concludes that they will meet again on March 11: "which will involve starting to look at the principles of how we manage employees when the business exits from the vehicles market".

A further document contains over 50 questions from the workforce directed to the company concerning their future livelihoods, job losses, potential relocation, wages, training and the fate of apprentices amongst other concerns. But a large number of the questions are left unanswered in any definitive manner and many are

responded to by Wabtec with a pro-forma, “This will form part of the collective consultation process and more information will be provided in due course”.

The company is smoothly proceeding with its brutal plans because there is no fight being taken up by the unions involved to save a single job. Unite the union and the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) have facilitated many job losses previously.

Doncaster Central Labour Party MP Sally Jameson, a former prison officer who entered Parliament in last year’s election, declared on February 7 of the proposed closure, “This is a continuation of sad news at the site following voluntary redundancies in 2020.” She added, “I am in contact with Unite the Union and will offer my full support to constituents affected.” Representing an avowed big business party, Jameson will do nothing to oppose the closure.

Unite and the RMT have not yet issued a word about the job losses, with their silence revealing the union bureaucrats’ contempt for members whose dues pay their fat salaries. Contacted by phone by this author, senior press officers for both unions claimed ignorance about the plans to shed 300 engineering workers jobs! Ryan Fletcher, the senior press officer at Unite said he knew nothing, as did the RMT’s press officer John Millington. They both asked the author to email them, but neither responded.

Wabtec has already decimated its UK workforce by around two thirds over the past five years. In July 2020 the company used the pandemic as an opportunity to massively cut staff numbers and alter contracts to the detriment of the workforce. Wabtec initially announced plans for 450 redundancies but actually made 760 posts redundant, including all 682 manual graded staff. This involved cutting 450 jobs and firing the remainder of the workforce and forcing them to take new, inferior contracts—“fire and rehire”.

While Wabtec was drastically reducing the workforce at Doncaster, in June 2020 they closed their facilities at Kilmarnock, Scotland with the loss of 100 jobs. Ironically the Scottish press reported in April of that year that the 100 jobs in Scotland were threatened because Wabtec planned to focus operations in Doncaster.

In 2022, a further 80 job losses were announced by Wabtec, Doncaster and the same number of job losses again at their Birkenhead, Merseyside facility. The unions involved held two four day stoppages. After this Wabtec were given a free hand. Strike action occurred only after the company boasted about how far down the road it was

with its agenda. A spokesman for the company stated, “We have spoken to employees directly, which has resulted in more than 70 percent of the workforce voluntarily agreeing to the new working practices and the pay increase.”

Job losses at Wabtec have continued across the UK over recent years, culminating now with the complete closure plan of the Doncaster operations and their exit from the rail refurbishment market.

The refusal to lift a finger to oppose redundancies follows Unite’s betrayal at Princes Food, after corporate management threatened to shift beverage production abroad should further strikes go ahead in February, and the workforce demand more than 3 percent wage increase. Even the limited strike action called by Unite was called off in response to the threat.

The RMT ensured it kept the earlier disputes at Wabtec sealed off from the wider struggle of rail workers during the 2022-23 strike wave. This was part of the extinguishing of strikes throughout the public and private sector by the union bureaucracy to pave the way for Starmer’s Labour government. With Starmer in power, and having adopted the predecessor Conservative government’s Great British Railways agenda, the main concern of the Labour government and the RMT is to push through this pro-capitalist rescue plan premised on a further evisceration of rail workers jobs, wages and conditions.

For workers to fight back against the assault launched by the employers, they must take the struggle into their own hands through the formation of rank-and-file committees operating independently of the union bureaucracy. This requires the adoption of class struggle tactics to unify with workers at Wabtec’s international operations and other rail and transport workers in the UK.



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