

# Mossmorran ethylene plant closing in Scotland with 400 jobs lost

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ExxonMobil will start laying off workers from April 1 at its Mossmorran ethylene production plant near Cowdenbeath, Fife, Scotland. The plant's closure was announced last November. In total some 400 jobs, half of whom are contractors, are to go.

The job losses will impact heavily on the local area. The two towns closest to the plant, Cowdenbeath and Lochgelly, contain multiple areas of severe deprivation. Local residents have expressed fear at the closure's economic impact. Comments to local interest group My Cowdenbeath CIC included: "every aspect of life will be affected," "the local community will be hit hard," and "the area has needed help for a while." Cowdenbeath bakery worker Susan Marshall told the BBC the closure was "devastating," adding "a lot of shops have shut here and now the Mossmorran workers might have to move away from the area."

The plant closure is being facilitated by Scotland's main political parties. Fife Council is run by a Scottish Labour minority administration under leader David Ross. The Scottish National Party has the largest single group in the council, but do not have enough seats to govern alone. Labour has passed major legislation and budgets mainly through the informal backing of the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives.

The council has set up a Mossmorran "Taskforce", promising to "work with all partners to explore future opportunities for the site and... do everything within its power to support those affected and to secure a positive future for the area." A miserable £9 million has been allocated across three years for investment, with the council promising workers training and "employability support" via Fife College, an institution struggling under budget cuts.

Workers can have no faith in any such token gestures, coming from a council that is currently under close monitoring by the Scottish Housing Regulator for

"systemic failure" leading to the area's ongoing homelessness crisis. It is one of several Scottish councils who have chosen to remove reminders for late council tax payments, moving directly to summary warrants, threats of bailiffs, and fines.

The Mossmorran plant was set up in the late 1970s, with production starting in 1985, to process naturally occurring ethane from the North Sea into ethylene, a base component in the production of plastics. The plant's closure reflects a worldwide trend as petrochemical companies move production to cheaper, less regulated labour markets and consolidate their capital into more profitable oil and gas extraction, refining and related operations.

By closing the Mossmorran plant, ExxonMobil aims to pass on the costs of market shifts to workers while continuing the bonanza to shareholders. UK chairman Paul Greenwood told the Scottish government that the plant was "inefficient" and "would need £1 billion in spending to make it profitable." ExxonMobil is the third largest oil and gas company in the world and the £1 billion required to modernise Mossmorran is less than 3 percent of 2025's profits. Its reported profits fell by 14 percent in 2025 to \$28.8 billion, but the combined total of share buybacks and dividends increased from \$36 billion in 2024 to \$37.2 billion in 2025.

While vast sums were squandered, noise and pollutants from the Mossmorran operation have blighted neighbouring areas for years. Residents in Cowdenbeath and Lochgelly have been subjected to repeated disturbances from the flaring of surplus gas.

"We stayed in South Street [Cowdenbeath] for 24 years," one resident told *My Cowdenbeath CIC*, "As a lot of the older residents would confirm, it was a nightmare up there when Mossmorran was flaring; the houses were shaking and the sulphur coming in the vents was terrible." Residents reported sleep problems, anxiety, bad smells,

metallic tastes, asthma attacks, breathing difficulties and nausea. In April 2019, an unplanned flare created a sound “like a jet engine” that lasted almost a week.

In May 2020, the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency referred flaring violations to the Crown Office for possible prosecution. A pollution-mitigating ground flare, 38 years after production commenced, was installed in July 2023. In October last year, a month before it announced its plan to close the plant, ExxonMobil was fined a derisory £176,000 after pleading guilty in court to the flaring emission breaches 6 years prior.

Greenwood cited windfall and emissions taxes as factors in moving production elsewhere, which is to say that he believed the company should have been permitted to emit as many pollutants as its executives wished.

The trade unions are wholly complicit in the plant’s closure. Such statements that have been made have appealed to the ruling class to retain Mossmorran alongside the huge Grangemouth complex, some 30 miles away, on the other side of the Firth of Forth.

The oil refinery at Grangemouth ceased production last year while an adjacent ethylene plant will now be Britain’s only producer. In December, Grangemouth’s owners INEOS, owned by billionaire Jim Ratcliffe, pocketed a £150 million package from the Labour government in exchange for a promise to keep ethylene production running for another five years. The British government views the process, underpinning production of a range of goods including war related industries, as, in the words of Business Secretary Peter Kyle as “of strategic national importance.”

As the Grangemouth refinery was being closed, Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham warned of an “avalanche of redundancies taking place across Scotland’s oil and gas industry.” She complained that the “UK and Scottish governments are failing to protect thousands of jobs. Government policy is also accelerating these huge losses without any credible jobs plan in place.” When Mossmorran’s closure was first announced last year, Graham merely called for “meaningful negotiations with all key players to ensure the future of the plant and jobs.”

Unite’s restriction of opposition to appeals to government and employers ensured that production at both sites was maintained to the last. No united offensive was organised in these key installations to defend jobs and living standards.

Yet, all three facilities have seen repeated strikes over pay and conditions. In February 2020, around 170

Mossmorran workers staged a wildcat strike over site safety and working conditions. From November 2023 to February 2024, repair contractors went on strike for the industry-agreed cost-of-living payment; a paltry increase of 75 pence per hour. The Grangemouth refinery saw strikes which threatened petrol and jet fuel supplies across Scotland and Northern England.

Unite’s suppressing opposition enabled Exxonmobil to close Mossmorran ahead of schedule, while the Grangemouth refinery closed without any disruption.

Tens of thousands more job losses are threatened as North Sea production continues to dwindle. Nearly one in 30 of Scotland’s working population are employed within or support the offshore energy industry. Industry analysis conducted by Robert Gordon University has forecast a fall in Britain’s oil and gas workforce from 115,000 in 2024 to between 57,000 and 71,000 in less than a decade.

The closures at Mossmorran and Grangemouth underscore the fraudulent character of all claims from the authorities, the energy companies and the trade unions of a “just transition” to a “low carbon” economy. Communities affected by closures of sites such as Mossmorran cannot rely on governments, corporations, or the pacifying assurances of pro-company trade unions to effect a transition to a more just, ecological form of capitalism. The “just transition” to “net zero” much-promoted by unions and environmental groups suggests that there exists a national route to bypassing the profit motive.

But companies exist to maximise private profit and capitalist institutions are incapable of producing the rational, democratic, and globally organised changes necessary to plan a sustainable future. Today, the struggle over control of oil and gas extraction rights is a major factor in driving US and European imperialism to war against Iran.

Workers in the oil industry and those dependent on it can only defend jobs, living conditions, and democratic rights by organising rank-and-file committees independent of the trade union and company apparatus, seeking to unify with workers across industries and national borders. Contact the SEP today to discuss these questions further.



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