

Ineos mothballs Hull chemical plants threatening thousands of jobs across UK's Humber region

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Chemical group Ineos, headed by billionaire Jim Ratcliffe, announced on September 22 that it is mothballing its three plants at the Saltend Chemicals Park in Hull “until further notice.” Two had already stopped production, with the third to follow within days. No restart date has been given.

Ineos directly employs around 245 workers at the site, with the plants indirectly supporting almost 4,000 jobs across the Humber region. The fate of thousands of workers is being left in limbo, with an Ineos spokesman telling the Press Association that all employees would remain at work, because of the operational demands of the site, while the plants are idled”. The firm claims that no redundancies are planned.

The plants have annual capacity of 500,000 tonnes of acetic acid, 150,000 tonnes of acetic anhydride and 200,000 tonnes of ethyl acetate. According to Ineos, they are the last world-scale acetyls units in Europe—supplying raw materials for food, pharmaceuticals and military explosives.

Ratcliffe blamed the price of gas. In the company’s statement, he said: “I’m sure people will find it hard to believe that we are being forced to mothball some of the most efficient plants in Europe, but with gas prices now 12 times the level in the US and 8 times that of China, we just cannot compete.” He called on “European regulators” to act on carbon taxes, claiming that current policies “encourage coal-based production in China and the wholesale export of jobs to both China and the USA.”

Ratcliffe founded Ineos, now one of the world’s largest chemical companies, in 1998. He has lived in tax-free Monaco since 2020. He is a ruthless enemy of the working class, but who depends above all on the aid provided by the union bureaucracy.

Since taking control of Manchester United’s football

operations with a minority stake in February 2024, he has cut the club’s workforce from 1,127 to 805, almost 30 percent.

On February 11 this year, the Brexit supporter told Sky News: “You can’t have an economy with nine million people on benefits and huge levels of immigrants coming in... The UK has been colonised by immigrants, really, hasn’t it?” Due to a backlash against him, driven by Manchester United supporters he apologised but only for his “choice of language.”

In Grangemouth, Scotland, the oil refinery run by Petroineos, Ineos’s joint venture with PetroChina, closed last year with the loss of around 400 jobs.

In 2008, 1,200 Grangemouth workers struck, with 98 percent support—in the first strike to shut a British refinery in over 70 years—against Ineos’s attack on the final-salary pension scheme it inherited when it bought the plant from BP in 2005. The Unite union limited the action to two days, giving the company ample time to minimise disruption, yet the strike still shut the Forties pipeline and helped push oil prices to a record high. Faced with panic buying at fuel pumps and public support for the workers, Ineos backed off.

In 2013, following an 81 percent strike vote in defence of union convenor Stephen Deans, Ineos threatened a “cold shutdown” to wreck the plant. Deans, also the local Labour Party branch secretary, was being victimised by Ineos despite having been cleared by the Labour Party and police over accusations arising out of the Labour Party’s selection of a replacement for disgraced local MP Eric Joyce.

It took Unite officials just 24 hours to capitulate, allowing the plant to reopen on Ineos’s terms—a pay freeze, the end of the final-salary scheme and a three-year strike ban. Then-Unite leader Len McCluskey declared

the survival plan “something we are prepared to embrace and go along with,” and was backed by Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond and the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in Westminster.

Ineos’s main aim was to build a new £300 million terminal at Grangemouth to import fracked ethane gas from the United States for its ethylene cracker, then running at around half capacity. It had applied for a £150 million government infrastructure loan, and told workers that the terminal, and their jobs, depended on accepting the loss of their conditions.

Eleven years of trade union alliance with Ineos management ended with the refinery facing closure. As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in September 2024, Unite “have not called a strike vote, nor even a time-wasting consultative vote for fear of revealing an overwhelming willingness to fight.” Unite, the GMB and the Scottish Trades Union Congress joined the Grangemouth Future Industry Board—alongside the Scottish and UK governments, Ineos and Petroineos—whose purpose was to cover the closure with justifications about a “just transition” to “net zero.”

The same pattern is repeating at Hull. The GMB, the union at the plant, responded with a statement of fewer than 70 words. National Secretary Charlotte Brumpton-Childs blamed “sky-high energy costs,” echoing the company’s case, declaring workers “will look on in horror as yet more vital jobs are ripped from the communities that need them”. There was not a single word about organising resistance.

In October last year Ineos cut around 60 skilled jobs at Hull, a fifth of the workforce, while urging the government and the European Commission to impose anti-dumping tariffs on Chinese and US imports.

A Labour government spokesperson called the closure “a commercial decision from Ineos,” adding that it would be “a concerning time for workers.” The spokesperson pointed to £350 million for “strategically important” chemicals producers, available only on a co-investment basis, meaning companies must put up money alongside the state; to trade measures on foreign chemical imports; and to schemes cutting industry’s electricity costs.

With hundreds of jobs at stake, Prime Minister Andy Burnham declared that Britain is “open for business” and invited Ratcliffe to “work with me in Yorkshire,” as in Greater Manchester where he was previously mayor.

The government is prepared to underwrite a billionaire to keep producing the materials of war, but not to guarantee a single job. In December, Ineos secured a £150

million package to keep ethylene production at its adjacent plant running for at least five years, including a £50 million government grant and a £75 million government-backed loan guarantee. Business Secretary Peter Kyle called the site “of strategic national importance,” citing supply chains that include defence.

The restructuring at Ineos is part of a global rationalisation of the industry. On September 11, GlaxoSmithKline announced it would close its Dresden vaccine plant in Germany, shutting it by summer 2028, with the loss of 641 jobs. Last November, the Chemical Industries Association said UK capacity utilisation had been “hovering around 70 percent or less for far too long.” Whether the pretext is “energy costs” and “carbon taxes” at Ineos or falling demand at GSK, this is a Europe-wide offensive by the chemical and pharmaceutical monopolies to shed jobs and shift production wherever returns are highest.

The job losses would devastate Hull, already ranked the sixth most deprived of England’s 153 upper-tier local authorities in the government’s 2025 Index of Multiple Deprivation.

The workers at Saltend possess enormous social power. As the 2008 Grangemouth strike demonstrated, even a small group of strategically placed workers can bring vast sections of the economy to a halt.

The Hull workers must not repeat the Grangemouth experience. They must take the defence of their jobs out of the hands of the GMB and local politicians and establish an independent rank-and-file committee to organise a fight for the reopening of the plants. Such a committee must mobilise the workforce, local community, and link up with chemical and pharmaceutical workers across Europe and internationally.



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