

Vauxhall workers in Luton speak on threatened plant closures by Stellantis and fightback in global auto industry

Our reporters

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A WSWS reporting team leafleted the closure threatened Vauxhall plant in Luton, England this week with the statement issued by the International Workers Alliance for Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC): “After plant closures announced at VW: For a global rank- and-file campaign against job cuts in the auto industry!”

It states, “The massive attacks by transnational corporations, aided and abetted by the trade union bureaucracy, must be answered by mobilizing the power of the international working class.”

The leaflet was taken up by 225 workers as they streamed off shift, with many stopping to discuss the direct threat of closure by parent company Stellantis of their plant and its other UK site in Ellesmere Port in north-west England. This would wipe out around 2,500 jobs of those directly employed.

The Luton plant 30 miles north of London produces larger petrol and diesel vans and has been geared up to produce electrical vehicle (EV) starting from 2025. Ellesmere Port has been dedicated to the production of EV vans since 2023, following a major overhaul.

The WSWS has covered the Luton plant regularly. One worker taking the leaflet said, “Let’s hear what the socialists have to say.” Another seeing the headline demand for a global fight of auto workers against job losses said, “We are with you brother.”

Workers condemned the non-response of Unite the union to the announcement by Stellantis chief executive Carlos Tavares on October 14, as he reissued the threat to close both UK plants stating that a decision over the fate of the plants “will happen in the next few weeks”. Tavares described the potential shuttering of the sites as a mere “correction” as Stellantis leveraged the threat of

closures with the incoming Labour government to demand a relaxing of the existing UK zero-emissions vehicle policy and tax concessions on the grounds it was damaging profitability.

All that workers have been told is there will be a meeting at the plant on November 26 to announce the decision over its fate! ‘We get told nothing from the union or management, nothing. They never come out of that office of theirs. They always do this. They are negotiating, why not tell us.’

Two of the workers told the WSWS, ‘We found out about the closure from the newspapers not the union. That is how bad they are here.’

One of many temporary workers explained, ‘The atmosphere is crap, no one’s telling anyone anything. I know there are three Volkswagen plants being shut down in Germany. I didn’t know about job losses in Italy. Rank and file action is a good idea. I will read your pamphlet.’

One full-time worker said that the last production line worker given a contract was at least four years ago, explaining that temporary workers did not receive the sick pay incentive scheme and had the skills but did not receive equal pay, “How unfair the system is when Tavares can accumulate huge profits and we have to fight for a few crumbs.’

Economic blackmail by Tavares to wring concessions over EV quotas is only one page from the Stellantis play book. Vauxhall workers are in the crosshairs of the scorched earth strategy pursued globally by Stellantis. The giant auto producer like all its major competitors has seized on the transition to EV production to cut jobs and labour costs at the expense of its global workforce, including slashing thousands of

jobs in the US and Italy. The same cost cutting drive lies behind the unprecedented announcement last month by VW to close at least three plants in Germany. The company has now demanded wage cuts of 20 percent of its 120,000 workforce.

The auto companies aim to make workers absorb all the losses from their application of technology to exclusively boost corporate profitability. This is under conditions of cut-throat trade war and protectionism between US and European producers and their rivals in China over domination of the EV market.

Another worker said he recognised the threat of the Vauxhall plant closures was real and referred to what Stellantis has done worldwide. He drew attention to role of union officials in the plant colluding with jobs cuts. 'I've been working here for over 30 years' and it's been threatened with closure all the time but I believe there is substance to it this time. Ever since Carlos Tavares has arrived. Stellantis are shutting down operations, that's what he does.'

When asked by a member of the WSWS team about the response of the union he replied, "What unions? They never come out of their office no matter what's happening on the shop floor. I'll give you an example, they cut heads from an area of the production line. Then you and everyone else left has to pick up the slack and if you can't then you get blamed. In the past the union would have been involved in assessing and risk assessment of its impact. Now they do it and the union stays in their office.

"They play one plant against another. They say either reach your production targets or you'll close and the work will go to the other plant.'

The IWA-RFC statement addresses the need to break the control of the union bureaucracy in every country, whether the UAW in America or IG Metall in Germany, enforcing job cuts. The race to the bottom is led by the union bureaucracy, rooted in economic nationalism and total acceptance of the diktats of private ownership and production for profit.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham has been built up in the media as a militant leader supporting strike action, particularly among the lowest waged in different sectors of the economy. But any officially sanctioned action has been based on strikes deliberately isolated to an individual employer. The marginally improved pay offers have been in exchange for the pre-

empting of industry wide action by the second largest union in the country in return for a seat at the table for the union apparatus.

The type of corporatist set-up beloved by Graham is being exposed by IG Metall, which sits on the company supervisory board of VW and helps manage the plants through the "works councils". Its response to the announced job cuts was to pledge they will be managed in a "socially acceptable way", i.e., by stifling workers resistance.

We encourage Vauxhall workers in Luton and in Ellesmere Port to write in to the WSWS, begin to establish lines of communication with their brothers and sisters at Stellantis worldwide and other auto workers confronted with the same fight. This can lay the foundation for a network of rank-and-file committees to wrest control from union bureaucracies accountable only to the corporations.

The IWA-RFC's guiding principle is for a co-ordinated strategy by auto workers internationally: "The working class must mobilize on a world scale against the profit system, which is incompatible with equality. The fight against layoffs must be connected to a fight for workers' control over new technologies to improve the quality of life and meet human needs."



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