

BMW autoworkers strike in Britain against decimation of pensions

By Robert Stevens
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Thousands of workers at BMW-owned auto plants in the UK are striking today for 24 hours in opposition to the planned closure of the company's final salary pension schemes.

The strikes were called by the Unite union, which says that the plans to close the company's current pension scheme could see the retirement benefits of workers being slashed by up to £160,000.

The strike is the first by BMW's British workforce. In a ballot result announced last month, workers across the company's four manufacturing plants voted by 93 percent in favour of strikes on a turnout of 72 percent.

BMW's Mini model is manufactured at the Cowley plant in Oxfordshire and the Swindon site, Rolls-Royce cars at Goodwood, West Sussex, and engines at the Hams Hall facility near Birmingham.

BMW plans to end its two defined-benefit pension schemes this June and move all workers over to an inferior defined-contribution pension scheme. This has been in the pipeline since at least 2014, when new starters at the company were hired on the basis of accepting the inferior scheme. The same attacks were imposed on new starters at BMW's German plants.

This attempt to slash pension benefits is being carried out by a giant transnational firm, which recorded revenues of €94 billion (£100 billion) in 2016 and made more than €9 billion (£7.8 billion) in pre-tax profits in 2015.

Unite did everything possible to prevent any strikes. On February 20, General Secretary Len McCluskey met four senior BMW managers from its European and British operations at the Cowley plant in what Unite described as "a bid to avert industrial action by the workforce." McCluskey declared, "[T]here is a viable alternative proposal on the table [from Unite] which would resolve this dispute and avert a damaging

strike."

On March 29, just prior to its strike ballot closing, Unite staged a stunt in front of BMW's headquarters in Munich, Germany, handing in a petition to the company. Unite's main complaint was that the company would not "negotiate seriously," and talk about the "affordable options," which Unite was offering to "keep the scheme open."

Throughout the so-called negotiations, BMW refused to back down, determined to bring in the changes without modification. It is intent on robbing its workforce of billions of pounds of pension benefits in order to compete against its rivals and protect its rising profits.

Despite this intransigence, McCluskey continued to sow illusions that a settlement to the benefit of its members was still possible. "I urge BMW to step back from its May deadline for the pension scheme's closure and negotiate seriously to find a settlement which is good for the business and good for the workforce," he said.

BMW was emboldened to launch its latest attack because of Unite's previous collaboration in ensuring that new starters were forced onto the inferior scheme in 2014. At the time, Unite was fully aware of the company's objective, saying, "In our experience moves to close pension schemes to new entrants always end with an attack on existing employees' pensions. Workers fear that this move by BMW is just the thin end of the wedge."

Unite made a token threat of strike action, declaring it would "not stand idly by" if the company carried out its plans. Despite this posturing, the union did nothing and the firm successfully imposed its scheme in 2014.

In this latest dispute, BMW workers are not being called out in an all-out strike by Unite, but for eight

separate 24-hour stoppages. Different plants will be striking on different days. Even the days Unite has chosen for strike action during April and May are designed to cause the least disruption to BMW's operations.

At the Mini plant in Cowley, five days of strike action are scheduled, yet two of these will take place on Sundays. The assembly line at Mini only operates from Monday to Friday. Saturdays and Sundays are used for other work, including maintenance.

Since 2001, when BMW took over the Mini brand, Unite has formed a pro-business partnership with the company, under which workers have been fired at will and backbreaking productivity imposed.

In 2009, there was a major rebellion at the plant in Cowley when hundreds of workers denounced union officials over their collaboration in the sacking, with no notice, of 850 mainly agency staff. This followed a BMW edict cutting production from three shifts over seven days to two shifts over five days.

At a meeting videoed by a number of workers on their phones, employees angrily denounced Unite officials and threw food at them. One worker stood up to denounce Unite and demand it return the union dues the sacked workers had paid in.

In 2011, a further 80 job losses as part of more-flexible shift patterns were imposed. A union representative justified the cuts on the basis that "BMW...are in a volatile market and it is a supply and demand issue."

The attack on pensions has been taking place throughout private industry, with companies pilfering billions of pounds, which workers have paid into their pension pots. BMW's move follows that by Royal Mail, which was privatised in 2013, and which announced recently that its pension scheme was no longer "affordable." Over the last year, announcements ending defined-benefit pension schemes in Britain were made by Tata Steel UK, by high street retailer Marks and Spencer and by the US multinational Honeywell.

If any worker remains unconvinced about Unite's role as a facilitator of BMW's pension diktats—despite its occasional bouts of hot air—one need only look at its record at Tata Steel.

In January, Unite and the two other unions in the steel industry, Community and GMB, agreed on a sellout deal for the steel conglomerate to close their

defined-benefit pension scheme to new accruals. Workers were asked to accept it with a gun held to their head—on the basis that if they didn't, their already threatened jobs would be lost. Faced with this ultimatum, they reluctantly voted for the defined-contribution scheme.

No guarantee was made that the existing £15 billion British Steel Pension Scheme would be supported and not end up in the state-run Pension Protection Fund. If this happens, Tata steel workers enrolled in it face losing fully 10 percent of their retirement savings.

In return, the company made a worthless "guarantee" that it would keep open blast furnaces at its Port Talbot plant in Wales and invest just £1 billion over a 10-year period and "seek to avoid compulsory redundancies for five years." This in no way rules out forced job losses because Tata is able to cite worsening trade conditions further down the line to lay off workers. It also allows the trade unions to collaborate with Tata on their favoured means of imposing jobs losses—via "voluntary" redundancies.

In order to prosecute a successful struggle, workers at BMW must fight for the closest unity with auto workers at other plants in Britain—including those employed at Vauxhall and Nissan—and with those in BMW plants in Europe and internationally who face the same attacks. Forging this unity is inseparable from workers taking the struggle out of the hands of the trade unions, which have repeatedly demonstrated their role as a loyal arm of management.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>