

“They’re stuffing money into the pockets of the shareholders”

British autoworkers strike BMW to defend pensions

By our reporters
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Thousands of workers at BMW auto plants in the United Kingdom took part in a 24-hour strike yesterday to oppose plans to end employer-paid pensions. The strike is the first by BMW’s British workforce, which voted by 93 percent to authorize the action.

The changes could cost workers up to £160,000 (US \$202,416) over the course of their lives. The transnational automaker is following the footsteps of many companies across the UK, which see the continuation of such schemes as a drain on their profits in a world of cut-throat competition. BMW intends to move all its workers over to an inferior defined-contribution pension in June, confident that the Unite union will agree to it as it did for new starters in 2014.

BMW has four main manufacturing sites in the UK—Cowley in Oxford, Swindon, Birmingham and Goodwood.

Yesterday, hundreds of BMW employees protested at the company’s gates at Cowley—in defiance of laws prohibiting pickets of more than six workers. Throughout the day there was a constant display of support from motorists who sounded their car horns. Passers-by came up to the picket lines to offer their support, saying it was about time something was done to stop the constant attacks on working conditions and social services.

A leaflet published on the *World Socialist Web Site* about the BMW dispute and a statement in defence of the framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers in India were enthusiastically taken by pickets and discussed.

Frank, who has worked at the Cowley plant since 1975, said that when BMW introduced the inferior pension scheme for new starters, the unions sold it to

older workers on the basis that it would protect the existing scheme. He said the company would protect their pensions “unless certain parameters relating to future service costs were breached and that if they were breached they would discuss this with the unions.”

Frank explained that BMW is claiming the parameters have been breached, although no one seems to “be aware of the reasons.” The company said it cannot maintain the pension scheme because costs in the future will rise, he said.

Unite had “bent over backwards” to reach a compromise with the company and had suggested other pension schemes such as a career average one, which would have benefitted the company. “But they weren’t interested. They just announced the scheme would end without any discussion.”

John said, “People commit their whole lives to working here. I know some people who left in the past on what seemed as good redundancy packages. But today they can’t manage, so how are we expected to?”

“This pension is my future. I’ve paid into it. That is what everyone forgets. The papers talk as if the pension scheme is a gift from the company. But it’s us who have paid into it. This is what we are fighting for today.”

David said of BMW’s attacks on pension rights, “It’s all about stuffing money into the pockets of the shareholders rather than for us and other ordinary people who have spent their lives working and exhausting themselves. The company has made billions out of its workforce across the world. It’s still extremely profitable but all its wants is more profit.”

“So many people fell for the idea, when BMW took over bankrupt Rover cars and ever since, that they

would protect pensions. But now we know it was a pack of lies. I think the whole idea that if you work hard for the company, you would get your reward is something no one believes in anymore.”

Sue said, “Some of the people here have been saying how conditions in the factory are good—decent meal breaks, holidays, nice toilets and so on—and the pensions issue should be separate. I don’t agree. They forget it wasn’t a gift from above. It was only because working people in the past decided to fight for these things that they are here today. And now everything is being taken away.”

She added, “The problem is that there has been a divide caused. New starters are on worse conditions and it’s obvious the company felt they could try and extend that to everyone.”

“I agree with you that it is the fault of the unions. The more I think about it, the more it seems they are working with the bosses. Whenever there is bad news, the unions are there to sell it. When you look at what has happened in other companies, I don’t think there is a single example of people being able to stop their pension schemes being smashed up. Something has to happen but I don’t know what or how to do it.”

After reading the Maruti Suzuki leaflet, another worker, Kim, came back to say how much she agreed with it and that she would sign the petition and get her friend to do so:

“I hadn’t heard about what happened in India at Suzuki until I saw your leaflet. It’s terrible what happened to them. It really needs to be publicised.

“It’s difficult to know if they can be released, or if we will be able to stop BMW reducing our pensions. But it’s obvious that around the world car workers are being set upon. Robots are taking their place and it seems to me you could have a world where so much could be produced for everyone so they could have a good life. But instead we are being driven into the ground and those at the top are getting more and more.”

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