

Build rank-and-file factory committees to fight Honda job losses!

By Steve James
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The following article is being distributed at the demonstration today by Honda workers in Swindon, England, who are fighting in opposition to plans to close their plant, resulting in thousands of job losses.

Honda's decision to close its Swindon plant in 2021 at the expense of 3,500 jobs could cost as many as 12,000 additional jobs in component supply. Thousands will be forced into low-paid jobs or unemployment and the increasingly brutal benefit system. Families will face debt, stress, mortgage foreclosure and eviction, while more pressure will be piled onto Wiltshire's decimated social services.

Today's demonstration shows workers are ready to fight. There is widespread support for such a struggle, including in the car industry in the rest of the UK and internationally.

But no viable struggle to defend Honda jobs in Swindon is possible through the Unite trade union. As with all the unions, it operates as a de facto labour management organisation, working with Honda and other corporations to increase productivity and profitability at workers' expense.

Honda is the biggest employer in Swindon and the job cuts will devastate the town, as did the loss of 14,000 jobs through the closure of the rail works in 1986, just after the defeat of the yearlong miners' strike.

Beginning in the 1980s production in the auto industry and other key sectors began to be reorganised across national borders, leading to today's integrated world economy. Under these conditions, the unions, confined to the nation state, have long abandoned any effort to secure wage rises and other concessions for their members.

In order to maintain production and win investment at this or that plant the unions have joined with

management in enforcing wage cuts, productivity hikes and job losses in the name of maintaining global competitiveness. This pits workers against one another plant by plant, company by company, nation by nation, setting each against all.

When the South Marston Honda plant began production in 1989, the company opposed any trade unions. But in 2001, following legislation by the then Labour government, 75 percent of Honda workers voted in favour of recognition of the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU) as their bargaining agent. AEEU General Secretary [Sir] Ken Jackson said, "We look forward to working in partnership with Honda and its employees to keep this company stable, secure and successful."

The AEEU's successors, Amicus and Unite, have worked ever since to impose the demands of the company.

In the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crash, Unite ensured that a 3 percent pay cut at Honda went through. Unite regional officer and former Labour MP, Jim D'Avila, proclaimed the pay cut "a measure of the calibre of industrial relations at the plant" and a reflection of "true solidarity in difficult times to protect hundreds of jobs." Just four years later, Honda announced 800 job losses.

Unite's response to the current closure is to restrict workers to futile appeals to Honda president and CEO Takahiro Hachigo. A petition pleads, "Dear Mr Hachigo, please do not turn your back on a world-class, loyal workforce, determined to bring you continued success."

Unite has joined a Swindon Taskforce, including Conservative Business Secretary Greg Clark, business leaders, trade unions and dignitaries, to "make the case to Honda that investment in vehicles of the future is

best done in Swindon.”

No strikes or any industrial action is being organised, with Unite calling on workers to get their MP to sign an Early Day Motion in Parliament as another appeal to defend the competitiveness of British capitalism, not the interest of car industry workers. It “urges the Government to take urgent action in developing a clear plan to transition the UK automotive sector towards a green and clean future beyond the combustion engine, keep Honda in Swindon and its supply chain secure, while preserving the UK’s status as a global lead in the automotive industry.”

No viable struggle can be expected from such an organisation nor from its apologists such as the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party, who are seeking to blind workers to vital issues that must be faced.

Worldwide, car and component manufacturers are slashing hundreds of thousands of jobs, closing factories and imposing ever-greater productivity demands under conditions of international crisis, trade war and deep capitalist instability.

Giving expression to this cut-throat competition, Swindon would mark the first time that Honda has ever closed a vehicle factory since its incorporation in 1948.

A central factor in Honda’s decision is that Swindon’s engine plant manufactures diesel engines, with the company seeking to relocate more of its global production back to Japan where its newer hybrid and electrical vehicle capabilities are based.

Honda and the UK government have been at pains to stress that the Swindon closure is not related to Brexit. But a new free-trade deal between Japan and the European Union means that Honda has no financial incentive to produce cars in Europe, as cars made in Japan no longer attract EU tariffs.

Thousands more jobs are at risk in the UK. Jaguar Land Rover, which employs 44,000 car workers, announced in December that up to 5,000 workers could be laid off as sales fall and the company’s Chinese market collapses. Ford has announced that 400 will go by 2021 at the company’s Bridgend plant in South Wales, with around 1,000 jobs threatened, as part of its “One Ford” integrated production plan.

The future of Nissan’s Sunderland plant has been called into question because of the loss of the X-Trail SUV model to Japan.

In all, 169,000 British workers are employed in the car industry with another 640,000 in the industry’s supply, distribution and retail networks. None of these jobs are safe. Last year, Michelin in Dundee announced the closure of its only UK plant with the loss of 845 jobs as part of a global restructuring.

Similar and greater shakeouts are taking place across Europe, Asia and the United States. In no case have the unions organized a fight to defend jobs.

Last November, hundreds of Vauxhall workers at Ellesmere Port—where its Opel Astra models are produced—walked out in a rebellion against Unite after being informed by its shop stewards that 241 jobs were to be lost at the plant by the end of next year. The redundancies were to be imposed after 60 percent of the jobs at the plant had been lost in just the last two years with the collaboration of Unite.

To confront this immense assault from globally organised employers, car workers in every factory must create new independent, fighting organisations to take up the struggle the unions have long ago abandoned.

Rank-and-file factory committees must be established, controlled by the workers themselves. They must take as their point of departure the global nature of the working class and the need to organise production in the interests of the working population, not the profitability of a handful of corporate billionaires.

Last December, at a meeting organised by the US Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, autoworkers in Detroit voted to set up a steering committee, independent of the United Autoworkers union (UAW). This was established to oppose the threatened closure of five General Motors plants in the US and Canada, which the UAW has done nothing to oppose. The committee held its first demonstration last month.

We urge workers to follow this example and take a similar initiative in plants across Britain and Europe. Contact the SEP to discuss this further.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>