

Northern Ireland: Harland and Wolff shipyard workers continue occupation

By Steve James
6 September 2019

Harland and Wolff Heavy Industries Ltd in Belfast, Northern Ireland, has been under occupation by its 122-strong workforce since July 29. The workers are fighting to defend their jobs following the collapse of parent company Norwegian-owned Dolphin Drilling.

Workers have held protests and rallies and have voted repeatedly to maintain their 24-hour presence in the company's yard to prevent any equipment being moved. The occupation has won sympathy from workers across Belfast, across both sides of the Northern Ireland border and internationally.

Harland and Wolff is one of the most famous shipbuilders in the world. The yard built the ill-fated RMS Titanic and its sister ships, numerous warships—particularly during World War II—and the P&O's liner SS Canberra, launched in 1961. At its peak, some 35,000 workers were employed there, but, as with the entire British shipbuilding industry with which it has been closely integrated, it has been in decline for decades.

The company was nationalised by the British Labour government in 1975—in the midst of the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland—when 15,000 workers were employed. It was sold off again in 1989 to Fred Olsen Energy, later renamed Dolphin Drilling.

The last vessel was launched in 2003. Since then, production by the vastly reduced workforce has focused on wind and wave power turbines, pylons and other forms of marine engineering.

In the 20th century, there were repeated powerful and militant struggles by workers at the yard in defence of jobs and living standards against brutal employers. These were opposed by sustained efforts by the Protestant and unionist hierarchy in Northern Ireland, backed by loyalist gangs, to drive and maintain sectarian divisions within the working class. As recently as the 1970s, Catholic workers were forced out of the yard.

Today, the much-reduced workforce, like neighbouring

Bombardier, formerly the Shorts aircraft factory, is more integrated and has for decades included both Protestant and Catholic workers. Bombardier's Northern Ireland plants, which employ around 3,600 workers, are also up for sale due to rapid consolidation in the aircraft production industry, adding to the pressures on broad sections of the working class who fear for their livelihoods.

Harland and Wolff workers face redundancy as the result of the deepening crisis of capitalism. Parent company Dolphin Drilling filed for bankruptcy in June. The company, operating oil and gas rigs primarily in the North Sea, will continue to operate, but its remaining rigs have been transferred to creditors, and 90 percent of its equity is now in the hands of Washington D.C.-based vulture fund SVP Global. The company owes US\$730 million, a debt built up following the collapse in world oil prices after 2014. Its Harland and Wolff subsidiary was put up for sale last year, and finally put into administration last month.

The trade unions at Harland and Wolff are opposed to any struggle to defend jobs based on the mobilisation of the working class. Instead, they have allied themselves with efforts by Harland and Wolff management and Belfast City Council to find a new owner, some of whom are reported to be circling.

Despite presenting the struggle as an occupation, the action is more of a “work-in.” The workers continue to work and forego pay, while there is a search for a new buyer—as pioneered in Glasgow in 1971 at the then-Upper Clyde Shipbuilders. That struggle was betrayed by the Stalinist Communist Party of Great Britain, with one of its leading figures, union convenor Jimmy Reid, playing a pivotal role.

In line with this, Unite regional coordinator Susan Fitzgerald celebrated the fact that the company's administrators, BDO NI, had, as of late August, received

a number of bids to buy the company. According to Fitzgerald, there was now “competition between commercial bidders to buy this shipyard.”

To facilitate offers, BDO NI confirmed that workers who had been laid off temporarily early in August, rather than made redundant, would have their layoff contracts extended until September 30.

The unions have appealed to the British government of Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson to award warship contracts to the yard.

The Royal Navy is currently in the process of placing orders for Type 26 and Type 31e frigates. Both warships, as well as being crucial for British imperialism’s rearmament programme, are intended for global sales. The Type 26 design has already been taken up by the Canadian and Australian governments. Type 31e orders, or orders for naval support vessels, Harland and Wolff management and unions argued, could be directed towards Belfast.

Harland and Wolff appears to have been part of rival design bids for the Type 31e contract—one led by German-owned ThyssenKrupp Marine Systems, the other led by Babcock International.

But the first batch of Type 26 orders have already been placed with BAE in Glasgow, Scotland. The same unions that are working with management at Harland and Wolff, Unite and the GMB, recently celebrated the likely placing of Type 31e orders to Babcock International in Rosyth, Scotland, although work will also go to Devonport, England. The Unite and the GMB have not made the slightest effort to mobilise workers in Glasgow or Rosyth in defence of their class brothers and sisters in Belfast.

Nor have they made any effort to mobilise support across Ireland. The assistant general secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, Owen Reidy, said in August that the yard “should be returned to the people” and that “the entire trade union movement across these islands stands as one with the workers at the shipyard.”

But not a single action to back up this worthless statement has been made.

The unions’ policy was endorsed by Labour Party Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, who visited the yard. McDonnell called on Boris Johnson to intervene “to preserve our shipbuilding capacity.”

McDonnell was explicit that this meant the yard winning new arms contracts. “With the right intervention—including the option of the yard being taken into public ownership—we know Harland and Wolff would be in a position to win available contracts, both

naval and commercial, and diversify into new products that would give the shipyard a long term, stable and profitable future.”

The unions have also cited the example of the Scottish government’s recent decision to nationalise the bankrupt Ferguson Marine, a small shipyard at Port Glasgow, Scotland.

The example is instructive. Ferguson Marine, owned by billionaire Jim McColl, was bankrupted due to a wrangle with the Scottish National Party (SNP) government over cost overruns on two ferries being constructed for Calmac, the state-owned ferry operator.

The Scottish government is taking over the Port Glasgow yard temporarily, only to ensure the ferries are completed, and intends to hand control back to a private operator as soon as possible. The arrangement offers little security to Ferguson Marine’s 350 workers beyond the completion date of the ferries.

Ferguson Marine, however, was also part of the same ThyssenKrupp Marine Systems and Babcock International alliances to build the Type 31e. This makes clear that the nationalisation was authorised with potentially vastly lucrative future arms contracts in mind, in line with long-standing aspirations to develop Clyde-based shipbuilding into a “frigate factory” for imperialist warfare worldwide.

Rather than awaiting any leftovers from the British navy’s weapons contracts, Harland and Wolff workers must adopt a new strategy to defend their jobs and conditions. What is posed is the establishing of a rank-and-file committee, independent of the trade unions. Workers must turn to the working class on both sides of the border in Ireland and unite their struggles, based on a socialist programme, with workers throughout Britain and internationally who face the same attacks on their jobs and living standards.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>