

UK: Harland and Wolff: bitter present, ugly past

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Belfast shipyard Harland and Wolff once employed 35,000 people writes Barney Cassidy. Its workforce was the aristocracy of the city's working class. They were heavily unionised and well paid by local standards. They were also enthusiastic participants in every major sectarian pogrom in 19th and 20th centuries, an aspect of the firm's history that is being ignored in favour of Titanic themed nostalgia in virtually all the coverage of the struggle to save the jobs. Yet precisely the same political allegiance to an industrial strategy determined by the needs of British imperialism is hobbling the workers' fightback.

The yard is now owned by Dolphin Drilling and is in the hands of administrators. This means that the 125 people still working there are almost certainly going to lose their jobs.

The union response has been abysmal. Unite issued [a statement](#) calling for the yard to be given work refitting aircraft carriers, building frigates and assembling submarines for the British navy's imperialist adventures. John McDonnell has [visited the workers](#) and has suggested that the yard diversifies into making new products.

Before we offer some pointers to a possible programme for defending the jobs, it is useful to make an honest account both of the company's history and the environmental impact of the shipping industry.

The past

Catholics were denied all access to the permanent unionised jobs for much of the 19th and 20th century and the workforce was frequently involved in large scale sectarian violence against unskilled, casual Catholic labourers who were allowed to work in the nearby docks.

In 1886 an estimated 1000 shipwrights attacked and drove away Catholic navvies. In 1920 Catholics and socialists were violently driven out of Harland and Wolff in a foretaste of the large-scale sectarian violence which was part of the creation of the six-county state. In the 1960s and 70s trade union members who were also, members of loyalist murder gangs organised strikes along with the most reactionary forces in Irish politics as part of what had the potential to be a fascist coup. The firm's management at the time turned a blind eye to the militant sectarianism and the workers were happy to blur the distinction between local union officials and sectarian gunmen.

If there is one thing to be learned from this history it is that unionised workers are not a progressive force if their power is directed at maintaining a reactionary status quo.

A possible future

The workers are calling for nationalisation which is the right demand but it needs to take account of

ecological realities as well. Shipping produces as much CO₂ as Germany or Japan. Much of the cargo that is transported across the planet is disposable plastic tat that ends up as landfill in a matter of weeks. It would better if it wasn't made or shipped at all.

Shipping is also responsible for noise pollution, discharging sewage and oil, the transport of invasive aquatic species. A future based on building more vessels to create more ecological damage is not sustainable.

The Irish coastline is a visible reminder of the potential of wave and wind energy. A crash programme of investment to retool Harland and Wolff, retrain the existing workforce and overcome some of the technology's current limitations is an obvious route for a nationalised company to take and fits in perfectly with Labour's priorities.

However, if the jobs are saved and the land isn't sold off for another luxury development, any plan for the future must also take in to account the firm's violent sectarian past and its workforce must never again be allowed to become the militant vanguard of a sectarian ideology.

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