

# Vestas Occupation Isle of Wight

The Vestas occupation ended on Saturday 8th of August when workers left the building after an eight day protest.

Back on Monday 20th July workers at the Vestas factory on the Isle of Wight, which manufactures wind turbines for the production of renewable energy occupied the plant in protest at threatened job losses. About 25 workers entered the administration block of the Vestas Wind Systems factory at around 7.30pm and vowed to remain there until the government discussed their proposal to save it from closure.

In April this year, Vestas, a Danish company which is the largest manufacturer of wind-turbines in the world, announced that it planned to axe 1900 jobs internationally, despite a profit increase of €23mil between the first-quarters of 2008 and 2009. The same week that the job axes were reported, Vestas reported issuing 18.5 million shares, which apparently generated €800 million for the company.

The company claimed the job-cuts were necessary due to the recession, because demand for wind turbines is lower. It was announced initially that around 600 of the job cuts would be in the UK, mainly at the Isle of Wight plants in Newport and Cowes, which employ around 500 people, while the rest would mostly be in Denmark. Vestas stated that it would close the Isle of Wight plants completely by the end of July while 100 workers in Southampton will also suffer. While this has clear echoes of the Visteon dispute, one major difference seems to be the attitude and tactics employed by the police to attempt to bring an end to the occupation. In the case of Visteon the police took a seemingly 'hands-off' approach, their response to the Vestas occupation was much more direct. A statement issued by the workers said:

*"Acting without an injunction, on private property, the police have repeatedly tried to break into the office where the protesting workers have barricaded themselves, and have threatened the workers with arrest for*

*aggravated trespass, despite the fact that no damage has been done to the property where the protest is taking place. Police have also forcibly removed people from private property, another action that is of very questionable legality in the absence of a formal injunction".*

The police also moved swiftly to heroically stop in his tracks one dangerous individual who was attempting to smuggle a package of foodstuffs to the occupiers. Ben Leamy, 38, was held for several hours but released without charge (22nd July).

His custody sheet accused him of being "armed with supplies of food". The arresting officer wrote: "Believed that the DP [detained person] was going to supply the food. In doing so, fear that that the protest would be prolonged and therefore possibility of breach of the peace. Arrested to prevent same."

Mr Leamy said: "I made it all the way to the rope with a huge bag of sausage rolls, scotch eggs and fruit and in another three seconds it would have been on its way up. Then they just piled on and grabbed me."

The workers occupying the plant unsurprisingly accused the police and employers of trying to starve them out. Later, a mass walk-in by protesters on the outside succeeded in getting supplies through, but the employer's response was the building of a fence around the site and the deployment of private security guards, along with the arrests of two more protesters. Vestas was understood to be applying for a court injunction, having already threatened the protestors with automatic sacking, a week shy of when they were scheduled to be axed anyway.

The workers have pointed out how the closure of the factory makes a mockery of government pledges on environmental issues:

*"We find this hard to stomach as the government are getting away with claiming they are investing heavily in these types of industry. Only last week they said they would create 400,000 green jobs. How can the process start with 600 of us losing our jobs?"*

An RMT press release on July 24th stated that:  
*"RMT and other trade unionists today managed to get some supplies of food and drink into the occupation. RMT have been working on contingency plans to drop food in by helicopter if necessary to ensure that the Vestas workers are not starved into submission and have called upon the wider trade union movement to ensure that supplies are maintained. ..."*

Over time, more sophisticated methods of getting things in and out of the plant were devised, such as a memory stick inside a tennis ball, which occupiers were able to use to send out footage from inside the factory.

Gallingly, on 27th July the BBC reported:

*"More than £6m is to be awarded to a wind turbine firm's research centre on the Isle of Wight, despite its plans to cut 625 jobs and shut its factory. The government grant allocated to Vestas Technology UK Ltd comes as 25 workers continue a sit-in at its plant.*

*Vestas Windsystems is making the redundancies at its Newport site at the end of July despite rising profits".*

On July 28th, Vestas delivered letters of dismissal to 11 employees it had identified as being inside the plant, along with their evening pizza.

On 29th, Vestas failed to have the occupiers removed by a court after a judge ruled that removal papers had not been served in accordance with legal rules. The case was adjourned until August 4th.

Again, as in other occupations the role of trade unions was a double edged sword. One report from the occupation:

*"The RMT offered to support all workers regardless of their membership status and have offered practical support. Whatever their limitations, the RMT have played an important role in this dispute, not least by giving confidence to the workers. This has definitely paid off for them with more workers joining the union every day...There is a stewards committee which is co-ordinating the support of the occupiers and demos etc, this is small but dynamic and dedicated group of workers but seem to showing signs of being overwhelmed with demands being*

*placed on them, unsurprisingly they in turn are turning to the RMT fulltimers and the activists for support and direction, but as yet are not really delegating much power to the other workers, which ultimately be the only way of dealing with this. The workforce is comprised of mainly young 20-mid 30s and predominately male, at present a small but significant section of the workforce is active in support of the occupation, but this does seem to be growing. The workers have mass meetings of those present (when I was there usually about sixty) which only open to workers and the RMT officials, whilst this prevents activists having too much direct influence it also excludes the main supporters the families and partners from participation and completely devalues that this is their lives too".*

The situation escalated overnight 3rd /4th August when workers climbed on to the roof of a second factory owned by the company at Cowes

As the occupiers left the plant on Saturday 8th they were met by cheers from hundreds of supporters.

.More info and updates at: <http://libcom.org/tags/vestas-occupation>

A support website for the workers has been set up at <http://savevestas.wordpress.com/> and messages of support can be sent to [savevestas@googlemail.com](mailto:savevestas@googlemail.com)

This has been far from the only occupation that has occurred since the last issue of *The Leveller*. French workers won massively improved redundancy payments after first occupying, then threatening to blow up, their workplace. Workers at Thomas Cook in Dublin were forcibly removed by police after occupying the branch in response to an announcement of its imminent closure. And in Ssangyong, South Korea, at the time of writing, factory occupiers are engaged in hand to hand combat with 2500 riot police and 3 helicopters. How this will have ended by the time this article appears is unclear, but up to date information should be available at <http://libcom.org/tags/ssangyong-occupation>