

# Sector focus

## MANUFACTURING

BY ALAN JONES

The motor industry has helped steer the economy out of recession – and Unite aims to shift it into an ever higher gear

Unions rarely receive recognition for their role in boosting workers' skills or company profits, but Unite has been in the front seat of the car sector through good and bad times.

Former Unite joint general secretary **Tony Woodley** lobbied the last Labour government tirelessly to take action to prevent the industry stalling because of the recession.

His promptings, alongside pleas from the industry itself, led to the launch of the scrappage scheme, offering a £2,000 discount on new vehicles if an older model was traded in, which gave a huge boost to sales.

The industry has gone from strength to strength since the end of the recession, with roaring sales, new models being unveiled and new jobs created, including a recently announced 1,700 at Jaguar Land Rover (JLR).

In his current role as Unite's executive officer, Tony Woodley is still campaigning on behalf of the car industry, and especially the workers.

He was involved in helping secure a deal at JLR to turn almost 1,000 agency jobs into permanent positions from next year, a trend he wants to continue. And he's joining other Unite officers in pressing for the return to the UK of jobs in component firms, which have been lost to Asia, Eastern Europe and other countries.

His hard work and expertise was recognised when he was asked to join the influential Automotive Council, which is jointly chaired by business secretary Vince Cable, and former Ford executive, Richard Parry Jones.

"It's wonderful to see that at long last the government is taking manufacturing seriously. These are exciting times for car manufacturers, and it's great the government is bringing together a multitude of business leaders – and Unite – to look strategically at the industry in general, and specifically how components can be built again in this country," he told *uniteWORKS*.

"We had a race to the bottom, with work going to Korea, Eastern Europe, in fact anywhere but Britain, so that a lot of expertise was lost. But the industry is booming, helping to keep the economy afloat, and Unite is heavily involved."

Indeed, Unite believes building up the industry is vital work. "This is at the heart of what Unite's about," added Tony. "General secretary Len McCluskey sees it as a Unite priority. Just recently he met with Cyrus Mistry the chair of Tata Group, and Stephen Girsky, vice-chairman of General Motors to further our members' futures in JLR and Vauxhall."

The increase in agency workers has changed the face of British industry, and motor manufacturers have been among the firms taking on more and more

indirectly employed staff.

A recent dispute at JLR over agency workers was resolved, and weeks later the company announced the new jobs, and £1.5bn of investment. The company has also unveiled details of its future plans for advanced research and development work in the UK, focused on a new cutting edge innovation and education centre in Warwick.

Woodley believes that converting agency jobs to permanent roles is good for the industry, "exceptionally good" for the workers who will find it easier to get a mortgage or bank loan – and a boost for Unite through increased membership.

The success of the motor industry was mentioned at this autumn's political party conferences, but without any credit for the role of Unite.

And during a typically robust speech at Labour's conference, assistant general secretary, **Tony Burke**, put the record straight. He fervently believes factories have been saved because of the dedication of workers – and sometimes their sacrifices.

A huge photograph of a British-built Vauxhall Vivaro van adorns his office at Unite's London headquarters, giving him a constant reminder of the importance of vehicle manufacturing to the UK – and how much more could be done.

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Win all round – JLR gains 1,700 new jobs and the UK economy gains too

He argues that public bodies such as local authorities and the police should automatically buy UK-built cars and vans, as happens in other European countries, especially France and Germany.

Jobs lost in recent years at firms such as Ford and Honda have been offset by the expansion of foreign-owned firms which have now put down roots in this country, including JLR, Nissan and BMW, whose Mini plant at Cowley near Oxford has been a maximum success story.

“We have never had the credit we deserve for helping the industry survive. We lobbied hard for the scrappage scheme, workers have made sacrifices, and we have pushed the skills agenda,” he said.

The success of the motor industry – and

aerospace too – is in contrast to other parts of manufacturing, once regarded as the backbone of the economy, but which has reduced in size amid the growth in services, especially finance.

Unite will soon publish a new manufacturing strategy to put forward ideas on how the sector can be supported, which it hopes Labour will take on board in the run up to the next general election.

Events planned for the new year include the promotion of engineering as a profession for young women, to counter its “dirty, oily” image.

“Some good companies went out of business. They needed help from the government but didn’t get it, which is a great tragedy,” said Tony Burke.

Rebalancing the economy so that more goods are made in Britain isn’t a new idea, but the success of the motor industry is providing a bright spark for the economy, and showing how investment in jobs, training, apprenticeships, research and development can pay off.

The UK automotive industry has transformed itself over the past decade and is now recognised as a centre of excellence for the research and design of electric cars and the manufacture of engines and batteries.

The sector employs over 700,000 workers, with a turnover of tens of billions of pounds and boasts some of the most productive car factories in the world – proof that manufacturing really does matter.

# SUCCESS