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Harland & Wolff: why the UK needs to keep historic Belfast shipyard – and heavy industry – afloat

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Shipyard workers in Belfast are fighting to keep crisis-hit Harland & Wolff in business. They have called on new prime minister Boris Johnson to re-nationalise the H&W yard and allow the company to compete for further work. But administrators are circling, there's no buyer in place and the firm's Norwegian parent company has serious cash flow issues.

Urgent political intervention is needed to secure H&W – and other strategic UK industrial assets – before key skills and capacity are irretrievably lost.

The yard's history is almost as troubled as Northern Ireland's itself. During the conflict in Northern Ireland (from 1968 to 1998), the company was largely insulated from the drastic cost-cutting policies applied to other nationalised industries. Subsidising H&W rested on the assumption that inflicting unemployment on working-class Protestants (who monopolised shipyard jobs) would aggravate an already unstable political situation.

H&W assumed symbolic importance as a sign of Westminster's commitment to the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Other points in the company's history, most recently in 2000-01, have been punctuated by painful mass redundancies and serious closure threats. Yet H&W has battled on, seemingly against the odds, and has maintained a significant economic presence in Belfast.

Although shipbuilding at H&W ended in 2003, the yard remained active as a structural engineering firm catering to the offshore energy sector. Fred Olsen, the Norwegian businessman who bought H&W in 1989, listed the business for sale in December 2018, sparking renewed fears about its future and a plunder of industrial land by property developers.



H&W cranes, Goliath and Samson, are an iconic feature of the Belfast landscape. Steven Hylands from Pexels, CC BY

The yard's ability to build an entire new ship is doubtful. But H&W could play an important role in building sections of new ships, with final assembly taking place elsewhere. This technique was used in the construction of the Royal Navy's new aircraft carriers, HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Prince of Wales, and H&W had expected a share in future construction work.

The cost of these aircraft carriers, however, has led to the Ministry of Defence postponing its decision to order any more warships. This delay has already caused the closure of Devon's Appledore shipyard in March 2019 and further prevarication means Britain's ability to build for its own navy is at risk.

Competing visions for UK industry

Recent protests at H&W have garnered much-needed attention. A BBC reporter put it to one worker that the protest, the first industrial action at H&W for decades, could make potential investors think: "That's quite a restless workforce – do I really want to get involved with that?"

This commentary epitomises the way that heavy industries – and those dependent on it for their income – are often regarded in the UK. At best, they are cast as retrograde, obsolete and a barrier to economic rejuvenation. At worst, industrial workers fighting for their livelihoods have been caricatured as “the enemy within”. Two competing visions for the UK industry are evident – one seeking to “praise and bury” industrial work, to “move on” (though to what, exactly, is seldom explained); and the other seeking to preserve vital community economic assets.

Meanwhile, Belfast’s Titanic connection is heavily used as a mechanism to market post-conflict Northern Ireland. The Titanic Belfast visitor centre, which opened in 2012, is the glamorous centrepiece of a regenerated heritage zone. Over 840,000 people visited it in 2018.

Despite its evident success, there’s a clear disconnect between Titanic Quarter – the expansive brownfield site formerly occupied by H&W in which Titanic Belfast is situated – and the former shipyard community of Ballymacarrett, today one of the most economically deprived wards in Northern Ireland.

The Titanic Belfast visitor centre on the H&W site. Titanic Belfast, CC BY

Historian Steven High has described the process of deindustrialisation and urban regeneration as a “one-two punch”. The first punch being job losses, the second being a combination of socioeconomic cleansing and cultural erasure as brownfield sites are gentrified.

There is widespread anger that skilled working-class jobs stripped away by the reduction of H&W’s capacity over the years have not been replaced. Industrial heritage rarely compensates for actual lost jobs. One retired shipyard worker, I interviewed in 2017, summed things up:

The ones that own [H&W], I think, are more interested in getting rent off flats, and science park[s], things like that there ... they’re going to turn it just into a residential area, and turn the [building] dock into a yacht marina. Where does that give jobs? ... If you do hear of one job, it’s a call centre. And the call centre is here for a couple of months or a couple of years, and they take it to India or somewhere else. So our people are left unemployed again.

Not just a ‘commercial issue’

We sometimes think of deindustrialisation as something that happened decades ago, with the closure of the coal mines and other industrial giants. But it’s still happening. High-skill, high-pay industrial jobs continue to disappear as businesses scour the globe for cheaper labour, suppliers, and places to squirrel away profits. And it’s communities that suffer as a result.

Since the 1980s, structural economic cracks have been papered over. Instead of overhauling a system characterised by low-wage employment, underemployment and in-work poverty, austerity policies during the past decade have compounded these long-term difficulties.

Read more: How entrepreneurship offers a route out of industrial decline

Boris Johnson refused to meet with H&W workers on his visit to Northern Ireland. His government's press release on the matter blithely stated that it had "every sympathy for the workers" but H&W's difficulties are "ultimately a commercial issue". But the survival of this shipyard should be high up the political agenda. Sympathy does not pay mortgages, keep the local economy oiled, or protect decent living standards. And, strategically, the UK cannot afford to lose any more of what remains of its heavy industrial base.

Rather than outsourcing blame for economic conditions that, in part, the British government has helped to create, Boris Johnson's government should provide H&W with a cash injection until a buyer can be found. It should also belatedly recognise the value, past and future, of heavy industry and its workers.