

French workers occupy chemical plant

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One hundred fifty-two workers from the Callatex chemical factory in Givet, a city of 8,000 in the French Ardennes near the Belgium border, have been occupying the plant since July 5, when it was declared bankrupt by a judge. The judgment meant that workers would lose severance pay and special state compensation that they would have been entitled to had the plant simply closed down.

Since the beginning of the plant occupation, workers have threatened to use the 46 tons of carbonic sulfur stocked in the plant to explode the facility. The chemical is used in the production of textiles such as rayon and viscose.

On Monday, July 17, following a meeting with Jean-Claude Vacher, the new head of the Ardennes administrative department, angry workers released several hundreds liters of red-tinted sulfuric acid into a stream flowing into the Meuse River.

Workers are demanding that they be insured payments equivalent to their actual wages for the next 24 months, in addition to a 150,000 franc (\$30,000) severance payment. Vacher said they had already been offered more than what is required by law by proposing they receive 2,500 francs a month to supplement their income if they find lower-paying jobs and a 50,000 to 60,000 franc one-time severance payment. Vacher was expected to meet with workers' representatives again on Wednesday, July 19.

Workers are seeking to use popular concerns about the environment to pressure the French government and the Rhone-Poulenc company, owners of the plant until 1991, to increase their severance package.

The workers' situation is compounded by the devastating economic situation in the French Ardennes, which is suffering a 22 percent unemployment rate as a result of European industrial restructuring. Most of the Cellatex workers are unskilled and chances of finding another job are bleak.

The workers' actions were condemned across the political spectrum in France. Interior Minister Jean-Pierre Chevènement declared, "It is not acceptable, however difficult the situation may be, that wage earners could take the neighboring population as hostages, or the people living on the shores on the Meuse River, whether in France, in Belgium or in Holland, by pouring acid into it."

Robert Hue, head of the French Communist Party, declared that his party understood the Cellatex workers' plight, but called for them "not to separate themselves from public opinion."

Greens national spokesman Denis Baupin declared that "one has to be shocked by such an action" that "constitutes a worrying precedent for social conflicts."

Cellatex workers have been trying to negotiate the terms of the plant closing for more than a year now. CGT union leader Christian Larose is complaining that the government didn't heed his warning that "the situation was explosive in the plant." He added that now the conflict is "taking another twist because Belgium and the Netherlands are asking Paris some questions and pressing for a solution to the conflict."



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