

French Whirlpool workers facing layoffs speak to WSWs

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A WSWs reporting team spoke to workers outside the gates of the Whirlpool factory in Amiens, 140 kilometers north of Paris, on June 12. In April, Whirlpool Europe announced plans to lay off 360 of the 860 workers at the plant. The company intends to transfer the production of washing machines to its facility in Propad, Slovakia, leaving only production of dryers in Amiens. The facility employed 1,049 in 1999.

The proposed job losses would be a further blow to the Amiens economy, where, according to local union statistics, there are already 15,000 unemployed, some 14 percent of the workforce. A local official of the CGT, the trade union dominated by the French Communist Party (PCF), charged that Whirlpool had received 63 million euros in government subsidies.

The company, based in Benton Harbor, Michigan, is one of the world's leading manufacturers of major domestic appliances, with 1999 sales of \$10.5 billion. It is number one in the North American market and number three in Europe, having first entered the latter market in 1989. In the last quarter of 2000, Whirlpool experienced a sharp drop in profits, a 41 percent decline over the previous year's final quarter, and announced 6,000 job losses, many of them in Europe. The job cuts have continued.

The response of the five unions to Whirlpool's April announcement has been a demagogic campaign, calling on employees to "reject all layoffs at the site," without offering any strategy for uniting workers at the company's facilities in Europe and internationally. The unions are reduced to suggesting means by which management can operate its facilities profitably. A leaflet from the CFDT, for example, distributed the afternoon WSWs reporters were outside the factory, proposed a plan for reducing the plant's manufacture of washing machines "to augment an increase of activity in dryers. The transfer could be made progressively over a period of 18 months to two years and limit the elimination of jobs."

Management appears deaf to the unions' pleas, and the workers are generally uncertain and pessimistic about their fate. A number of people indicated to us they felt the plant would be shut down entirely in the near future.

In addition to the CFDT members distributing their leaflet, the local deputy, Maxime Gremetz of the Stalinist PCF, was campaigning for reelection outside the facility. (He won his second round runoff June 16.) An interview with Gremetz will be posted separately.

We spoke to a number of workers, including a complacent supporter of the PCF, a woman worker fearful for her job and a 29-year veteran of the plant who had voted for ultra-rightist Jean-Marie Le Pen and the National Front in the recent elections. The latter denounced the unions and the PCF for doing nothing, but his own outlook was nationalist and selfish. He had no interest in the workers in any other country employed by Whirlpool, and chose to believe that Le Pen would defend "French jobs." Not a hardened "fascist," he could be seen a few minutes later discussing strategy with the PCF's Gremetz.

The political confusion expressed is principally the product of the abandonment of French workers by their traditional organizations. The

Socialist Party has become one of the leading bourgeois political formations, which vies for the right to administer French capitalism. The PCF, saturated with nationalism and chauvinism, has been thrown into a fatal crisis by the collapse of the Soviet Union, on the one hand, and the emergence of globally integrated capitalism, on the other. The unions, although they shout occasionally at the tops of their voices, are tied to the nation-state and the national economy. They represent, in any case, only a fraction of the workforce. The Whirlpool discussion highlights the need for an uncompromising struggle for internationalism within the French working class.

Stéphane, a worker on the clothes-dryer production line

WSWS: What do you think of the results of the first round of the legislative elections?

Stéphane: For the legislative elections, you can't say that the going is too good this time, but it's not any worse. It's not the same shock as the presidential elections, you can say that.

WSWS: What do you think of the Jospin government?

Stéphane: You know, I'm not too political. It's not my party anyway. I wouldn't be able to say nothing but good things about it even if they did some things that were good, I have to say.

WSWS: And the 35-hour week?

Stéphane: There's good and bad in it. You have to weigh up the pros and the cons.

WSWS: And the situation here with the layoffs?

Stéphane: Management imposed—proposed a restructuring plan, a redundancy plan which involves sending the washing machine production line to Slovakia and getting rid of 360 jobs. They want a single product site.

WSWS: Who is threatened?

Stéphane: The first, the second and the third washing machine/dryer production teams together. It's everyone, all the plant's workers are threatened by this plan.

WSWS: How can workers fight this plan of the bosses and globalization?

Stéphane: I just call these stock market sackings. It's not that we aren't making a profit, it's just that we aren't making enough for these gentlemen. So they're off to central Europe to make higher profits. The workforce is much lower paid there, they have much reduced obligations, so of course they want to go over there to get more money. Economically, the factory has been recognized to be viable from all points of view, so if the factory is viable, I can't see why they're upping and relocating it and losing 360 jobs.

WSWS: Do you think it's necessary to unite the Slovak workers, the ones from here and all the other countries?

Stéphane: Let's start here in Amiens to try to get something going, and after at a European level, why not.

WSWS: What party do you support?

Stéphane: I'm in the Communist Party.

WSWS: Why did they lose so many votes in the elections?

Stéphane: There I can't say exactly. I'm not very involved. If they lose votes it's got to be because they didn't get satisfaction as far as their demands are concerned.

WSWS: Are there people here who voted Le Pen?

Stéphane: Certainly, I think.

WSWS: Why?

Stéphane: I don't know, everyone has their opinions. I can't say why someone has voted Le Pen or anyone else .

WSWS: What do you think of the unions at the moment?

Stéphane: I think that the action of the trade unions—we've got a joint committee here—is working quite OK. We are united. We are hand in hand as long as nobody goes off on their own and tries and get a bit more cash for themselves. No, I think the unions are functioning perfectly well and I think there will be a very positive outcome to the struggle we're carrying out.

WSWS: What's the majority union here?

Stéphane: The CGT.

WSWS: Are you a CGT member?

Stéphane: I'm a CGT shop steward.

WSWS: How long have you worked here?

Stéphane: I've been working at Whirlpool for six years.

WSWS: And how did you react when there was the redundancy plan at Michelin and [former Socialist Prime Minister Lionel] Jospin said he couldn't do anything about it?

Stéphane: He couldn't be bothered with it, I think. It's terrible. It was a bad reaction by the government. You can always do something, it's obvious, there's always something you can do, even if it's in vain. You can always try something.

WSWS: The fact of being a Communist Party member and that Jospin, speaking for the whole Plural Left government, was capable of saying that must have sickened you?

Stéphane: Yes, of course, you can't be glad about that.

Jean-Marie, 29 years at Whirlpool, and Pascale, 10 years

WSWS: What's happening politically in France?

Jean-Marie: Politically it's not going so well in France. They're closing all the factories down, sending the work abroad and us, *nyet!* There's nothing left for us.

WSWS: What's happening here right now?

Jean-Marie: The washing machine is being sent abroad, but after three or four years it'll be the dryer, and after that it'll be yet another factory closing down in Amiens.

WSWS: How many people work here now?

Jean-Marie: Here now there's about 800 of us and there'll be about 360 sacked.

WSWS: That's 40 percent. What do you think of the political situation of the elections?

Jean-Marie: The elections will change nothing. There'll still be 360 people sacked. The left, the right, they're all the same. We're no good with the left or the right. They're sitting pretty. It's the same as with those gentlemen over there [he points out the Communist deputy Maxime Gremetz and his supporters who are distributing election leaflets]: as soon as they've got in we won't see them again at the factory gate. They'll be nice and warm in their offices and that's it.

WSWS: What do you think of the Jospin government?

Jean-Marie: I'm not involved in politics. They are all a bunch of clowns as far as I'm concerned. They're all as bad as each other. They just want a position, it's not to defend us. You can see what's happening in France: unemployment on the rise. If everything were OK we wouldn't have all this.

WSWS: Did anyone vote Le Pen here?

Jean-Marie: Certainly, there are loads who are totally fed up. A lot of people vote for Le Pen. Me for a start.

WSWS: Why?

Jean-Marie: Because there's got to be a change. We are fed up to the back teeth with staying the same. They're always making promises and we never get anything. We should try Le Pen and see. After we'll see, we won't be worse off than now. We've never tried them, we can't say. The people in power, what are they doing? They're doing nothing.

WSWS: I agree with that, but I don't agree with Le Pen.

Jean-Marie: What Le Pen says is right: work for the French first of all. If there's any left the others can have that.

WSWS: He defends the bosses against the working class. We say you have to unite the working class all over the world, in Slovakia, in France, in Italy ... the problem is the same for the working class. In the United States it's the same story. I was at the Whirlpool factory in Arkansas...

Jean-Marie: Oh, I don't think the American factories come over here to France.

WSWS: Yes, from time to time. The bosses put their factories where it's most profitable and the last thing they're bothered about is you and me.

Jean-Marie: Of course, if it was profitable they'd keep there factory here. With the Americans, it's cash, you bring in the money and it's OK, if you don't, or only a bit...

WSWS: Are the French bosses any different?

Jean-Marie: No the French ones are the same. But the Americans are worse. Big mouths, plenty of money and they couldn't give a damn.

WSWS: How long have you worked here?

Jean-Marie: 29 years. I'm going to be 49. Tomorrow on the pavement at 49.

WSWS: Have they selected the people they're sacking?

Jean-Marie: Not yet.

WSWS: On what basis are they going to decide?

Jean-Marie: I don't know; we don't know anything.

WSWS: What are the unions saying?

Jean-Marie: Nothing, they're that way between them. They can't agree between them.

Pascale: They would have to come to an agreement before they can help us, because we are realizing we're all going to get done.

Jean-Marie: So who can you believe? Management? FO? The CGT or whoever?

Pascale: We're in a situation where we don't believe anyone any more any way. Personally, I say the factory will be shut within a year, completely shut down.

WSWS: What is the alternative for the workers, what should they do?

Pascale: The worst thing for me is I've got nothing. I've got no qualifications, so I don't know for the moment. I'll have to look for work somewhere else, so I'll have to leave Amiens. Already in Amiens if you look around all the factories are shutting. In other places too, but you notice that in Amiens they're shutting all over the place.

WSWS: How long have you worked here?

Pascale: Me, only 10 years.



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