Airbus workers in France, Germany strike against massive job cuts

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On Wednesday, the parent company of European Airbus, EADS, announced plans to slash 10,000 jobs at Airbus' European factories—nearly one-fifth of the company's current workforce. The announcement, made at a news conference in Paris by Airbus chief Louis Gallois, confirmed press reports published on Tuesday of an unprecedented assault on Airbus jobs.

A total of 4,300 jobs are to be cut in France, 3,700 in Germany, 1,600 in Britain and 400 in Spain. Airbus currently employs 23,000 workers in Germany, 19,000 in France, 10,000 in Great Britain and 3,000 in Spain.

Airbus workers in Germany and France responded immediately to the announcement by walking off the job. Workers at the three affected factories in Germany stopped work and went home, as did workers at France's Meaulte plant. Some 1,000 workers in Toulouse, where Airbus is headquartered and final assembly of the A380 jet airliner takes place, launched demonstrations against the downsizing.

Reuters news service quoted Joachim Gramberg at the Varel plant as saying of the announcement, "I couldn't believe the news. I just couldn't believe it. We used to build 200 planes a year when we were doing great and now we are even making 438 a year and it's still the end."

Airbus, which is financed by a consortium of European governments, is one of the biggest European-wide industrial projects It has long been touted as a model of collaboration in asserting European industrial might against American domination of the commercial airline industry. The huge workforce cuts announced Wednesday are the culmination of a growing crisis for Airbus that has fuelled bitter wrangling between the main partners involved in the project—the governments of France and Germany.

The restructuring plan was to be announced ten days ago, but conflicts between France and Germany over which country would take the biggest hit in terms of job losses led to the intervention of French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. The outlines of the final deal were thrashed out by the two leaders at a meeting held last Friday in Berlin.

The plan, known as Power 8, also calls for the selling off six of the sixteen Airbus plants in Europe. German television reported that of the sixteen Airbus sites in Europe, at least five are to be opened up to private investors, including German plants in Varel (1,300 workers) and Nordenham (2,300 workers), as well as French facilities in Saint-Nazaire in Britanny and Meaulte in the Somme. These factories are to be taken over by investors who will continue to supply Airbus, but they will have to compete with non-Airbus plants in such countries as Russia, China, and India.

Additional attacks on jobs and working conditions will inevitably result from the decision announced by Airbus management to close down or sell other sites, including Laupheim in Germany.

According to the German magazine *Focus*, Airbus is also seeking to increase the work week from 35 to 40 hours with no increase in employees' earnings. French Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin urged Airbus chief Gallois to ensure that there would be no "forced redundancies," but the scale of the job cuts makes dismissals inevitable.

Production of the super-jumbo A380 airliner is one of the biggest industrial projects to be undertaken in recent years by the alliance of European countries led by France and Germany. The new plane was designed to challenge the Boeing 787 Dreamliner for supremacy in the jumbo jetliner market.

However, as production problems and delivery delays for the A380 mounted, disputes intensified between the main powers involved in the project, particularly Germany and France.

As a result of the globalisation of heavy industry, including aircraft production, non-European countries like China with large pools of cheap labour—countries that are also potential customers for the new jumbo jet—have come to be seen by European capital as an increasingly attractive alternative site for production facilities.

A centrepiece of the Airbus restructuring plan is the closure of European plants and outsourcing of production to China and other low-wage havens. This process has intensified tensions between the national governments involved in the Airbus project.

In a February 22 commentary entitled "Franco-German Dogfights," the *Financial Times* remarked on the deterioration of relations between Paris and Berlin as a result of the Airbus conflict. The newspaper wrote, "If anything, relations between the two countries—for all the so-called Franco-German relationship—have never been so bad. Worse, the Germans are, understandably perhaps, showing every intention of adopting the same protectionist approach as the French. After all, if the French have long indulged in economic nationalism, especially in their relations with the Germans, it would be clearly stupid if the Germans did not do the same."

As plans for factory closures were aired by Airbus, German Economics Minister Michael Glos went so far as to threaten to

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cancel the extension of German defence contracts with EADS if Germany were adversely hit by the restructuring plan.

On February 20, Bernard Valette, head of the aerospace branch of the French Managers' Confederation, acknowledged that "a little nationalistic war" had broken out. He blamed the deadlock on the German authorities, who want to retain key manufacturing and design work. "The union will not accept it if the political interests of the German government are placed ahead of the industrial interests of Airbus," he said. "If that happens, it will be up to the French government to raise its voice."

It was against this background that the leaders of France and Germany met in Berlin to thrash out a solution last Friday. After her discussions with Chirac, Merkel sought to play down the differences between the two countries, but the according to the British *Times* newspaper on February 24, "there was no mistaking the tension between the leaders. The outgoing President Chirac was on his last official trip to Germany and the chancellor wanted to send a signal to his successor. She is not only fighting for German jobs, but also has a strategic aim that could change the balance within Europe's most powerful political axis. Germany, she is letting it be known, will no longer be pushed around."

The tensions between Paris and Berlin are echoed in the nationalist position adopted by the trade unions on both side of the German-French border. Major Airbus unions, such as the IG Metall in Germany and Force Ouvriere in France, have played a crucial and pernicious role in demobilising and dividing the Airbus workforce.

In recent weeks, the unions on both sides of the Rhine have held protests and demonstrations against the planned job cuts, but the demonstrations have been aimed at defending specific factories and locations in the respective countries. No-cross border actions have been called and no effort to forge solidarity among all Airbus workers has been mounted.

The major German unions immediately struck a thoroughly nationalist tone when news of the restructuring plan was announced. The chairman of the German Airbus factory council, Rüdiger Lütjen, declared that the new plan was an attempt to undermine the German contract system He said it was "a gauntlet thrown down by France." He continued, "The French want to impose redundancies on Germany . . . The French have thrown restraint to the wind."

For French union leaders, the source of the Airbus crisis was clear: German workers were to blame. Prior to Wednesday's announcement, Jean-Francois Knepper, leader of the Force Ouvriere union at Toulouse and co-head of the European workers' committee at Airbus, declared his conviction that "The Germans wanted to save German jobs." The brunt of the restructuring should be borne in Germany, Knepper stated, and continued, "If Airbus is a tree, France has the thriving branches. If there are dead branches to be cut, they're not in France."

For its part, the German IG Metall union had already indicated it would go along with the restructuring plan, while pressing for a bigger share of the job cuts to be imposed on workers in the other Airbus countries. Horst Niehus, head of the works council for Airbus Hamburg, said, "We see the necessity of restructuring, but we are afraid that a large amount of work could be moved out of Germany."

Following the announcement of the Power 8 plan, union leaders in both countries stepped up their chauvinist demagogy. Julien Talavan, delegate for Force Ouvriere at the striking Méaulte factory, complained that the French government was not doing enough to protect its industries, and expressed regret that jobs would be lost at Toulouse instead of at the German factory in Hamburg.

Talavan's call for intervention by the French state has been taken up by French Communist Party presidential candidate Marie-George Buffet, who issued her own chauvinist statement calling for France to regain complete control over its aerospace industry.

Not to be left out, British union official Bernie Hamilton, the lead officer for aerospace in the Amicus union, declared last year, "The UK has to be the centre of excellence for wings. The investment and new technology have to come to the UK. Rumour has it that they might decide on Germany."

With such eruptions of national chauvinism, the unions are betraying the interests of Airbus workers in all of the countries involved. They are closing ranks with their own governments and ruling elites, aiding and abetting their efforts to block any unified struggle of the workers and working to pit the workers in the various countries against one another.

Underlying the crisis at Airbus and the unprecedented attack on its workers is the failure of capitalist profit system in Europe and internationally, and the impossibility of organizing economic life in a democratic and socially progressive manner on the basis of the nation-state system to which capitalism is wedded.

Airbus workers must rebel against the corporatist and nationalist policies of the trade union bodies and establish independent committees to link up with their fellow workers in other countries The first demand must be the defence of all jobs of all workers. Such a campaign must be organised on the basis of an international socialist perspective that defends jobs, wages and working conditions by fighting to place major enterprises such as Airbus under genuine social ownership and democratic control.

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