

# France: Thousands of Airbus workers strike and demonstrate in defence of jobs

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20,000 French Airbus workers staged a half-day strike on Tuesday March 6 to protest the “Power 8” austerity plan, which demands the destruction of 10,000 jobs—11.5 percent of the total workforce—in the company’s European plants. The protesters took part in morning demonstrations in the main production centres in France, and were supported by the local communities, which depend on these factories for their livelihoods. Between 85 and 90 percent of the workforce was on strike.

A total of 4,300 jobs are faced with elimination 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.

Power 8 is just one of a series of schemes involving major job cuts as part of a fundamental restructuring of the French economy. Other major concerns affected by job cuts and rationalisation are Alcatel-Lucent, Michelin, Renault and PSA Peugeot-Citroën.

In Toulouse, the main Airbus production centre, some 15,000 people, many brought in by 120 coaches from the surrounding region, braved a driving rain to make their protest. Three thousand were on the streets in Saint-Nazaire and 500 in Nantes, where the biggest plants in France are situated outside Toulouse. They were supported by government workers and workers from Alcatel-Lucent (the Franco-American telecommunications giant is cutting its world workforce by 12,500, including 1,800 in France) and from Walor, an automobile subcontractor.

A column of demonstrators marched from the Méaulte plant in rural Picardy, which employs 1,300 workers, to the nearby town of Albert. The march was headed by two tractors and supported by agricultural workers and farmers, as well as workers from

subcontracting firms, engineering workers from the area and several mayors wearing their sashes.

Placards on the Toulouse march read, “Defend the aircraft industry,” “Jobs for Airbus and its subcontractors,” “Is there a pilot on the plane” and, in reference to the possible production of the A320 in Hamburg in Germany, “Airbus A320 in Toulouse”

This last slogan reflects the efforts of the trade unions to divert the resistance to the Power 8 plan throughout the company into a nationalist squabble over an “equitable” share-out of job cuts and restructuring measures.

Jean-François Knepper, the FO (Force Ouvrière—Workers Power union with Socialist Party connections) representative on the Airbus European Committee, commented on the mobilisation and set the nationalist tone for the trade unions: “This big demonstration is organised to say no to the transfer of the A320 to Germany, no to the closure of Méaulte. We don’t want to be the inferior part of Airbus but to acquire new activities.”

The national secretary of FO, Jean-Claude Mailly, marching at the head of the Toulouse demonstration behind the joint union banner, alongside the leaders of France’s main trade union confederations, sought to avoid any politicisation of the movement and called for state intervention. He told the press, “There’s going to have to be a new injection of capital . . . The state, with 15 percent of the capital, must take a particular responsibility” He added, “Besides, I have the feeling the government is shifting.”

He was referring to Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin’s proposal to put 100 million euros into the company, and also the changed stance of the ruling UMP’s presidential candidate and current minister of the interior, Nicolas Sarkozy. A pronounced economic

liberal, Sarkozy first called for Airbus to be left alone to make its own business decisions, but then, for obvious electoral purposes, switched to “economic nationalism” and said that the state could well intervene as he had done as finance minister in the case of the ailing engineering firm Alstom in 2004 “I have decided not to let Airbus fail,” declared Sarkozy. “If we need to boost the state’s stake in Airbus, why shouldn’t we?” He also calls for the management structure to be placed under a single command, as opposed to the current dual chairmanship representing the French and the German sides of the group.

Neither Villepin nor Sarkozy have made the slightest pledge to save jobs. Interviewed on TV on Monday, Sarkozy flatly denied that there would be any sackings, implying that job cuts could be achieved through inducements to leave, early retirement and such schemes. However, such promises are completely unrealistic, bearing in mind that at least six production sites are to be closed in Europe. The plan envisages disposing of two plants in France, one of which is Méaulte.

Ségolène Royal, Sarkozy’s Socialist Party presidential opponent, has similar proposals but also wants to involve the regional councils in injecting fresh capital. Most of these regional councils are run by the Socialist Party and its allies, who have set up a “Save the Aircraft Industry” organisation with representatives from the regions and the trade unions.

WSWS reporters covered the 2,000-strong demonstration at the Méaulte site on Tuesday morning, which included a rally in front of Albert town hall. Demonstrators stood in the rain to listen to the dismal address of Claude Cliquet, the plant’s main union official of FO, speaking on behalf of all the other unions—notably the CGT (General Confederation of Labour - traditionally linked to the Communist Party) and the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour).

Tacitly accepting the restructuring deal, Cliquet called for equitable treatment of French and German parts of the company, while twice accusing German and Daimler shareholders of “bulimia” He called on shareholders to increase their investments and chauvinistically attacked the European Central Bank, whose president Jean-Claude Trichet, “a Frenchman,” was doing nothing to offset the rise of the euro against

the dollar. He implicitly urged the use of competitive devaluation to enhance Airbus’ profitability.

Cliquet made no mention of the March 16 demonstration in Brussels against Power 8, or of any plans to continue or broaden the struggle. His remarks were followed by desultory applause. More than half of the people gathered in the square kept their hands in their pockets

Bernard Déas, an Airbus worker approaching retirement told the press, “We are against the closure. If it [the Méaulte plant] appears saved for the moment, what’ll be the situation in three or five years? The survival of Airbus is important in providing work for young people, the shopkeepers, the subcontractors . . . We are worried for the young people.”

Christophe, an apprentice, told the WSWS, “My future is at stake. I’m being trained at Airbus as an operator on a high speed digital machine used in making basis tubing for kerosene. I’m not sure of having a job so I’m here to support everyone. There are 30 apprentices like me at Méaulte. There are also other people undergoing training and temporary workers.”

Asked whether the struggle should involve all the workers of the four countries where Airbus has plants, Christophe replied, “It’s much better to unite and act together rather than lots of little demonstrations.” He thought that France was paying a greater price than Germany and that the German side of the company had been to blame for the hold-ups in production, but he recognised that the workers were not to blame for the Airbus crisis. “If Airbus goes the entire local economy will collapse—workers’ jobs as well as the small shops and businesses,” he said.



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