A visit to the Airbus factory in Méaulte, France

Workers reject nationalism of the trade unions

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Crucial lessons emerge when one studies the events surrounding the planned reorganization of the Airbus company: the more the integration of the process of production progresses beyond the borders of the national state, the more urgent the task of building of an international movement of the working class to defend wages and living standards. And all the more desperately does the trade union bureaucracy cling onto its thoroughly narrow-minded and antiquated defence of the national state.

The Airbus company operates on the basis of production processes divided among four European countries—not including a host of ancillary industries. The workers at these factories are bound together in one and the same production process. At the same time, management's "Power 8" restructuring scheme clearly represents an attack on the entire international workforce.

A visit to the Airbus plant at Méaulte in northern France gave reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* an opportunity to listen first-hand to the opinions of the workforce on such issues as their response to the attacks being launched by company management, as well as the response of the trade unions.

The workers we spoke to indicated they lacked any information about the current state of affairs—regarding either the content of the negotiations currently taking place, or the activities planned by the trade unions.

Crôchet, a worker in his mid-40s, stated, "We have received everything we know from the media. And they all say the Germans are to blame." He had little time for the trade unions, who, he said, were just concerned "with fighting one another." He was also not prepared to support the statement made by the secretary of the Force ouvrière—FO (Workers Power) trade union, Claude Cliquet, who told demonstrating workers in Méaulte one week ago that German shareholders were responsible for the crisis at Airbus.

The main objection raised by FO to the "Power 8" plan is the distribution of the burden—it aims at a more favourable deal for the French side when it comes to implementing cuts. In particular, the trade union is opposed to the transfer of production of the A320 model from Toulouse to Hamburg.

At a protest demonstration in Toulouse on March 6, the FO representative spoke on behalf of all the trade unions: "We must defend our company against the all-consuming hunger of the German shareholders. The new A320 will be completely under German control. The French state must take its role as shareholder seriously and act as a counterweight to the enormous appetite of Daimler [the main German shareholder]."

The FO has repeatedly raised this demand for more commitment from the French state—including in its talks with government representatives.

All of the discussions we held in Méaulte made clear that this sort of nationalist orientation and a concentration on the defence of one's own factory was not shared by the workers, despite media reports to the contrary. None of those we spoke to shared the perspective put forward by the trade unions. Instead, they reacted with sympathy to the fact that we had travelled all the way from Germany. The stance of the workers stood in glaring contradiction to the efforts of the trade union bureaucrats to direct workers' anger into a nationalist dead end.

Guillaume and three young colleagues thought along similar lines when it came to the issue of the trade unions, and in particular the biggest union in Méaulte—the Force ouvrière. "All they do is fight one another," he said, adding that he had once been a member but had resigned seeing no sense in staying in the union.

As already mentioned, the lack of any information received by the workers at Méaulte was striking. They merely knew that the strike planned for this Friday was to last two hours.

Guillaume and his co-workers reacted positively to the proposal to organize resistance to "Power 8" across national

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boundaries. A joint demonstration with fellow workers from Germany, Spain and England, he said, would provide a good opportunity to make contacts and develop joint action.

Originally there had been plans for a joint demonstration and rally of all European Airbus workers on March 16 in Brussels. But on March 13, the European industrial trade union federation issued a press statement in which it declared that, contrary to "false press statements," there would be no joint rally and demonstration.

Instead the unions plan a so-called "Europe-wide" but separate "day of action" at individual plants. At these local meetings the trade unions are providing a platform for the most right-wing nationalist forces.

Thus the German industrial union IG Metall has invited Christian Wulff, state prime minister of Lower Saxony, to speak at a demonstration in Hamburg, where 20,000 are expected to attend. Other speakers include IG-Metall Chairman Jürgen Peters, the head of the Airbus factory council Rüdiger Lütjen, Günther Öttinger, prime minister of the state of Baden Württemberg, and the mayor of Hamburg, Ole von Beust. The last three speakers are all members of the Christian Democratic Union of German Chancellor Angela Merkel and are well-known for their hostile attitude towards workers.

Similar nationalist manoeuvres are being undertaken by the French trade unions, in particular Force ouvrière.

An email to the WSWS from one Airbus worker from Nantes reported on his futile attempts to organize joint action by all workers: "On the basis of the actions of the trade unions, it is not likely that management will change its plans. This applies particularly to the CGC [Christian trade union] and the FO, who continually undermine militancy with nationalism and by encouraging division."

In Nantes different shifts of workers were called upon to take part in separate protests at different times, and with exception of the CGT all of the trade unions refused to organize a mass meeting of all the workers. "They are in favour of negotiations, not struggle," the Airbus worker wrote. Encouraged by the conduct of the trade unions, the company proceeded to push ahead with "Power 8" without making any concessions. On Wednesday, Airbus boss Louis Gallois met in Toulouse with all the European trade unions represented in the company to make clear that there would be no backing down in the implementation of the reorganization plan.

After the meeting, the French joint works council chairman Jean Jean-François Knepper (FO) declared: "We have made no progress. The executive committee is ready to speak with us but it has given us no room for manoeuvre."

Nevertheless the trade unions are still abiding by their plans for decentralized activities. In Spain, around 9,000 workers from EADS and ancillary industries will undertake a limited strike, and in Paris French Airbus workers will demonstrate in front of the company's headquarters in the capital.

On the one hand, the aim of these isolated protests is to provide the trade unions with a cover to demonstrate that they are not completely inactive. On the other, the actions are designed to prevent workers uniting across borders to conduct an effective struggle against the restructuring scheme. In the name of defending individual "locations," one workforce is being played off against the others.

Most workers reject such a stance. Our last discussions in Méaulte were with two young part-time workers from nearby Amiens. Both of them have partially completed training as production engineers and have limited employment for 18 months at the Airbus factory. They had no idea what would happen when their contract was fulfilled, but they were both willing to stay with the company.

They reported that there were a total of 150 employees at Méaulte with limited contracts, but that formerly this figure had been far higher.

The two of them also expressed their complete lack of trust in the trade unions, who were in retreat from the very start and could by no means be trusted. They just look after themselves, they said. After all, they all "have their fingers in the honey pot."

There had to be an end to the pitting of French workers against their German colleagues, one said. Bearing in mind that the region is home to the battlefields of the First World War, where tens of thousands of German, French and English soldiers met their deaths, his comments were entirely appropriate.

The visit to the Airbus factory at Méaulte made two things clear: firstly, the role of the trade unions, which have denied the workforce even the most elementary information and seek to divide them; and secondly, the extent to which the workers have distanced themselves from these organizations.

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