

Strikes against job cuts in Belgium, Spain, Russia

International resistance grows to auto industry downsizing

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Union officials representing General Motors facilities in Europe have called for a one-day strike May 3 to protest job cuts at the GM Opel plant in Antwerp, Belgium. The strike call comes amid signs of growing resistance by European workers to the attempt of US and German-based automakers to carry out restructuring at the expense of jobs and living standards in the major industrial countries.

On April 26, workers at the Antwerp Opel plant began a one-week strike to protest the company's plans to lay off more than 1,400 workers as part of a restructuring program. Management says it will carry out the layoffs sometime this spring because of declining sales of the Astra.

GM announced earlier this month that it plans to phase out production of the Astra model in Antwerp and shift production to plants in Germany, Sweden, Poland and Britain by 2010. In its place, the company says it will build Chevrolet model cars and possibly another unspecified line. However, GM is only planning to produce 80,000 Chevrolets compared to its current annual output of 220,000, meaning a drastic downsizing of the workforce will be required.

GM's European labor representative called management's offer to build one new car line at the facility "insufficient." He called on GM to build another model as well, something the company has already indicated it may do. Even so, it is unlikely that the introduction of an additional model will end the threat of layoffs.

Under Belgium law, GM must go through a "consultation period" before implementing mass layoffs. The union representing the 4,500 GM Antwerp workers is scheduled to meet May 3 with GM's European management.

Over the past several weeks, there have been a series of strikes and protests by auto workers across Europe.

Last week, a strike by workers at several Ford subcontractors in Belgium shut down production at the main Ford plant at Genk, east of Antwerp. Workers at parts suppliers SLM and Lear refused to vote on an agreement presented by unions, which they denounced as inadequate. The strike began as a wildcat in opposition to increased production rates.

In Puerto Real, Spain, workers at the Delphi factory have conducted a series of protest strikes over plans to shut the facility, which is being moved to Poland to take advantage of lower labor costs. US-based Delphi, which is currently in bankruptcy

proceedings in the US only, is a parts supplier for GM. A march last week in support of the 1,600 Delphi workers was attended by some 80,000 people. It was followed by a one-day general strike involving hundreds of thousands of workers in the southern coastal region around Cadiz.

The closure of the facility threatens another 4,000 jobs at businesses dependent on the facility.

In Germany, the IG Metall metalworkers' union is threatening protest strikes in advance of a contract deadline with employers, including carmakers DaimlerChrysler, Porsche and auto parts supplier Robert Bosch. The current talks cover some 1.5 million workers in the states of North Rhine-Westphalia and Baden-Wuerttemberg.

Meanwhile, in the Czech Republic, Skoda autoworkers are back on the job after conducting walkouts at the Mlada Boleslav and Kvasiny factories last week. The action halted production two-and-a-half hours for each of two shifts at both factories. The strike was in response to an inadequate wage offer by Skoda, which is owned by Volkswagen. The action is significant in a country where strikes have been almost non-existent and union membership has been falling steadily. The Czech Republic is considered one of the higher wage areas in eastern Europe, but is valued by manufacturers for its supply of skilled labor.

There are also indications of renewed militancy in Russia, where workers at the Ford Focus plant near Petersburg conducted a one-day strike in February.

The ongoing attack by General Motors, Ford, Delphi and other major auto corporations against the jobs and living standards of workers across Europe comes in the midst of a massive job-cutting operation by US-based car makers in North America. General Motors has wiped out 34,000 jobs in the United States in the past year alone. The other US-based auto giant, Ford, recorded a record loss last year and is in the process of eliminating 38,000 jobs and closing 16 American auto factories.

DaimlerChrysler is eliminating 13,000 jobs in the US and Canada and has announced plans to spin off its money-losing Chrysler Group. As for Delphi, it is planning the closure or sale of 21 US plants and has forced some 20,000 American employees to take job buyouts.

The layoffs have been accompanied by demands for cuts in pay, attacks on working condition and reductions in healthcare benefits.

The US trade union bureaucracy has remained utterly prostrate before these attacks, refusing to sanction a single strike or protest against the massive slashing of auto jobs that is devastating whole communities and regions. Instead, the United Auto Workers (UAW) bureaucracy has functioned as the policeman of management in order to carry out the orderly destruction of tens of thousands of jobs. In the last year alone, automobile and auto supply companies eliminated 150,000 jobs.

Earlier this month, workers at the Freightliner plant in Cleveland, North Carolina, carried out a wildcat strike on the eve of planned mass layoffs at the facility. The company, a division of DaimlerChrysler, has laid off more than 1,100 workers at the plant as part of a nationwide restructuring that involves shifting production to Mexico. UAW officials quickly brought the walkout to an end. Despite this sabotage, workers voted to reject a new contract recommended by the UAW last week.

In March, workers at a parts supplier in Guelph, in Ontario, Canada, walked out in sympathy with 200 laid-off autoworkers occupying an auto parts supplier owned by Collins and Aikman in Toronto. The sacked workers had been demanding severance pay. The action shut down production at a DaimlerChrysler facility in Brampton. The walkout was quickly brought to an end through the intervention of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union.

The latest attacks on jobs reflect a continuing trend by auto manufacturers to shift production away from western Europe and North America.

In an April 18 article entitled “GM Retrenches in Europe, Shifts Gaze East,” the *Wall Street Journal* noted in relation to the layoffs announced by GM in Belgium, “The cuts highlight the broader trend at GM and other Western auto makers of slashing jobs in high-wage countries while adding them in lower cost areas.”

GM’s announcement that it is cutting 1,400 jobs at its Antwerp facility came the same day that it reported plans for growth in India. The slashing of jobs in western Europe and North America is part of the giant automakers’ effort to shift production and marketing to lower-cost areas including, China, India and eastern Europe.

An article, entitled “Eastern Europe Becomes Center for Outsourcing,” published in the April 19 edition of the *New York Times*, notes the attractiveness of the former Soviet bloc countries for outsourcing and investment. “Employees in Hungary and the Czech Republic earn a quarter of what employees in Western Europe make; Slovakia’s pay runs only a fifth as much, the statistical agency Eurostat says.

“If that does not make the region attractive enough, governments also offer incentives like simplified tax structures and subsidies for office construction.”

However, as wages rise in areas of eastern Europe, production is being shifted even further to the east. According to a report in the Associated Press, “Experts say the shift is subtle - in some places barely perceptible—but warn that the rapidly prospering nations of Central and Eastern Europe could become victims of their own success by pricing themselves out of the market.”

It cites as an example the case of Delphi, which recently shifted some production from the Czech Republic to Ukraine, citing rising labor costs. The average hourly wage in the Czech Republic is

US\$6.00 compared to US\$1.60 in Ukraine.

The globally integrated character of auto production points to the critical need for an international strategy by the working class to defend jobs and living standards. The existing trade unions are incapable of providing such a strategy, since they are deeply embedded in the corporate-government structure in “their own” countries. They act as agents of the auto corporations in imposing the restructuring required by the capitalist market.

The trade unions in both Europe and North America have proven incapable and unwilling to mount any resistance to the continued undermining of jobs and working conditions. In Europe, where the unions have been forced in some cases to sanction resistance to mass layoffs, such as the strike and occupation at the Brussels Volkswagen plant late last year, they have sought to limit the actions to protests, that do not challenge private ownership of the auto monopolies. Further, they have divided workers along national lines, pitting workers at different facilities against one another, undermining and sabotaging any effective struggle. For example, the IG Metall agreed to concessions in order to induce Volkswagen to transfer jobs from its Brussels facility to plants in Germany (See Sellout at Brussels Volkswagen plant: Trade unions organize destruction of 3,200 jobs), and there are indications that a similar deal is being prepared to undercut the GM workers in Antwerp.

A common struggle by workers in every country in defense of jobs requires the political independence of the working class from the parties of big business, whether they be social democratic, liberal, conservative or Green, or the Democrats and Republicans in the US, and the building of genuine mass socialist parties of the working class.



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