

France: Caterpillar workers detain bosses

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Workers at Caterpillar's two plants in Grenoble, France, detained five of their management team in their offices on Tuesday morning and held them until 1 a.m. the next day. The workers have been on strike since Monday.

On Monday, and again on Tuesday morning, management boycotted works council meetings called by the unions to discuss a plan involving 733 redundancies out of the workforce of 2,800 at its Grenoble and Echirolles sites. Earlier this year, US-based Caterpillar, the world's largest maker of construction equipment, announced it would lay off 22,000 workers globally.

The French workers took the 5 management personnel hostage in order to force the company to negotiate.

The Caterpillar workers' actions reflect deepening opposition among workers in France to the attack on jobs and wages. Some 80,000 jobs were lost nationally in February on top of 90,000 in January. The latest estimate for the number of jobs that will be eliminated this year is 400,000, though this figure is constantly rising. Two to three million workers and youth participated in national demonstrations and strikes in January and March to oppose the attack on jobs and social programs.

The Caterpillar "bossnapping" is one of a series of similar actions throughout France.

In February 2008 the workers at BRS in Devecey held their boss captive because he had attempted to relocate all the machines in his factory to Slovakia without informing them.

The following month, workers at the Kléber factory in Toul detained two managers in order to obtain better redundancy terms.

In March of this year, the boss of Sony France was forcibly detained at its plant at Pontons-sur-Adour. Two weeks later it was the turn of the industrial manager of the 3M factory at Pithiviers near Orléans. Both actions were attempts to obtain concessions from management over redundancy terms.

On Tuesday François-Henri Pinault, the billionaire chief executive of the retail and luxury group PPR, had to be

rescued by riot police after shop workers blocked his taxi for over an hour as he left a meeting. They were protesting against the announced 1,200 job cuts at his stores.

The German Continental tyre company is closing two plants in France and another in Germany. Workers from the Clairoix plant near Paris, incensed that the company had reneged on its promise to maintain jobs until 2012 after workers had made considerable concessions in 2006, burst into a board meeting in Reims March 16 and pelted their bosses with eggs and shoes. The company was obliged to hold its Tuesday central committee meeting 1,000 kilometres away in a hotel in Nice, under strict security conditions.

On Monday, union delegates negotiating planned redundancies and closures at the FCI Microconnections plant in Mantes-la-Jolie near Paris held 2 of its directors in the meeting room for 4 hours until the police intervened. The delegates were supported by 40 of the 150 workers who have been on a "preventive" strike and 24-hour picket for 6 weeks, in order to oblige the company to disclose its plans.

The FCI directors had refused to give any guarantee of employment beyond 2010. One of the workers said, "Life can't be reduced to 2009-2010. We have whole lives to live".

These actions reflect a developing class anger, fuelled by the multi-million euro golden handshakes, bonuses and retirement deals for France's top bosses.

The dispute at Caterpillar exposes the strategy of big business as global capitalism plunges the world into depression.

The company makes large construction machinery in France and also provides armoured vehicles for the British army and several other countries. It produces the D9 armoured bulldozers that have been used by the Israeli army to raze Palestinian housing.

Caterpillar's CEO James Owens was George W. Bush's nominee to an advisory board for trade negotiations and is known for his ruthless pursuit of profit through attacks on

jobs and conditions. He was 181st in the Forbes CEO incomes league for 2008, raking in \$17 million. He supported Barack Obama's Republican opponent John McCain in the race for the White House. This has not prevented Obama from appointing him to the Economic Recovery Advisory Board, tasked with restoring profitability to big business through the destruction of the social gains and living standards of the working class.

In January, in response to worsening economic prospects, Caterpillar, which reported a profit of \$3.5 billion last year, announced immediate job cuts of 5,000, including 733 in France, and the ultimate elimination of 22,000 positions worldwide. It predicts a 55 percent drop in orders between 2008 and 2009.

Nicolas Polutnik, the general director of Caterpillar France, has repeatedly asserted that the French plants can only be saved by the sackings. He told the press, "It is absolutely necessary for us to maintain the interests of the company under the threat of having to deal with not just 733 job losses but all of them".

On Wednesday, management agreed to resume negotiations and offered to pay the wages for the three days of strike action if the unions called off the strike. Management is offering as severance 60 percent of a month's wages per year worked, with a ceiling of €10,000.

The dispute also demonstrates the complete failure of the trade union response to the mounting catastrophe facing the working class.

The delegates of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT), which is close to the Communist Party, said they were maintaining their demand for a €30,000 severance payment lump sum for all workers made redundant, whatever their seniority, plus three months wages for each year worked, and the pledge to keep the factory open.

As is clear from the concentration by the unions on the negotiation of severance terms, they have no perspective for fighting the job losses. Their bankruptcy is manifested by the "solemn appeal" to Sarkozy made by the joint union committee at Grenoble on Wednesday morning. It calls on the French president to request funds from the €500 million European Fund for Adjustment to Globalisation for the victims of sackings to "support the possibility of a rapid revival of our company and of our subcontractors".

The appeal, read out to the press, requested that Sarkozy should get the rules of the distribution of the fund changed so that they may be used to finance a contract made with Caterpillar "in the form of a loan". Currently

the rules limit the use of the fund to subsidizing the retraining of sacked workers.

The document goes on to state, "Without an effort by the American group and the European Union no solution can be found for reducing redundancies and letting those who wish to do so leave with dignity".

Sarkozy was quick to respond to the appeal of the Caterpillar joint union committee, promising on Radio Europe 1, "I'm going to save the plant. I will meet with the joint union committee since they appealed to me for help. We will not let them down".

Workers at Caterpillar France should remember the promises made by Sarkozy on February 4 last year to the steel workers at the Arcelor Mittal foundry at Gadrage, where 575 were due to be sacked. These same workers have now lost their jobs, and on Tuesday they demonstrated, denouncing the "imposture and the treachery" of Sarkozy and Arcelor's President Lakshmi Mittal.

Sarkozy declared, "Anyway, it's not my fault...if, as there's less growth, there is less demand for iron."

Steeped in a culture of "defending" the interests of workers by defending those of the employers and the political representatives of capital, the unions advance the perspective that the way to oppose unemployment is to help the capitalist class be profitable.

Only a struggle by workers at Caterpillar to break from the unions' connivance with the government and the employers can result in a successful outcome. Rejecting any deals based on accepting job losses, workers must build independent organisations of class struggle in their factories and workplaces, linking up with other workers across national frontiers.

Such organisations must be armed with a programme for the socialist reorganisation of the economy and the social ownership of plants like Caterpillar to be run as public utilities under the democratic control of workers.



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