

France: Caterpillar workers in revolt against the unions

Antoine Lerougetel
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Workers at Caterpillar and Continental plants in France fighting to defend their jobs revolted last week against sackings negotiated by the trade unions with the employers and the state.

Caterpillar workers, facing 733 planned job cuts at the transnational construction and agricultural machinery company's two plants in Grenoble, rejected their unions' compromise deal with management last week.

On April 1, their union leaders, who had been detaining four of their bosses in their offices for a day in an attempt to win better severance conditions, penned a "solemn appeal" to President Nicolas Sarkozy, to obtain EU funds for the company to enable it to maintain production at the Grenoble plants.

On April 19, union representatives and Caterpillar management duly met under the aegis of the Ministry of the Economy in Paris, where a draft end-of-dispute agreement was signed. It planned the loss of 600 jobs this spring. The remaining 2,000 workers were to face intensified exploitation through the abolishing of workweek limitations, which were to be replaced by annualised counting of work-time in October.

The next day the Caterpillar union representatives, mainly officials of the CGT (General Confederation of Labour, close to the Communist Party) were shouted down at a mass meeting of 300 strikers when they presented the deal for approval to a mass meeting of Caterpillar workers prior to a meeting at the Grenoble DDTE Labour and Employment Office, to finalise details.

The daily *Libération* reported that, unable to complete their presentation, the union delegates hurriedly left for the DDTE "in order to continue the negotiations ...However, some 200 militant workers decided to rush to the DDTE to prevent their representatives going in...When they arrived at the DDTE the union representatives had to retreat under a hail of eggs,

confronted by a group shouting: 'From now on, negotiations take place at the plant, and we the workers will be the ones who decide'. They then chanted "To arms! We are the workers! And we are going to win, Cater' will be made to give way.'" An angry worker exclaimed: "They went cap-in-hand to Paris, things were negotiated which shouldn't have been. They ought not to have signed, we will give nothing up."

A CGT claimed that "the draft agreement had no legal validity. We'll have a mass meeting with the workers and go on with the negotiations. We only signed for the form as a sign of good faith, but I can understand that workers don't see it that way." Caterpillar, however is suing the union committee for breach of the signed agreement.

Nicolas Benoît, CGT, part of the Paris union delegation, in an interview with *Le Monde*, said that "stuck there with management, several lawyers and a state representative, who all pressurised us to sign a draft agreement ending the dispute...We ended up accepting a compromise because we needed to bring back the director's signature." Seeking to justify the marginal concessions, patently designed to isolate more militant workers, Benoît claimed: "Otherwise, the discussion would have served for nothing."

He urged reliance on the state for a solution: "We want a tripartite meeting with the six representatives of the strike committee, the Caterpillar management and the state as well as local government officials." He then proposed another compromise: "a maximum of 450 job losses, instead of the 600 announced by management, as well as the elimination pure and simple of the planned annualisation of work time."

Benoît's admission—that the need to bring back the director's signature left the CGT no other choice than to sign away workers' livelihoods—goes to the heart of the political problems facing the working class. Acting on the union bureaucracy's corporatist perspective, Benoît's

response to the objective collision of class interests is to side with the employers. A defense of jobs, of industry, and of living standards now entails a militant and political struggle against not only the bosses, but against the trade unions and for independent worker control of industry.

On April 21, Continental workers from the German tyre company's plant at Clairoux in Picardy, on being informed of the failure of their legal appeal for the suspension of the closure of their factory with its 1,120 workers, ransacked the offices of the *sous-préfet*, the local representative of the central government.

On March 16, Continental workers had burst into a company board meeting in Reims and pelted their bosses with eggs and shoes. The company now holds its board meetings 1,000 kilometres away in a hotel in Nice, under strict security conditions.

Thursday, German Continental workers whose plant is also due for closure greeted their French colleagues as they arrived at Hanover station on a chartered train from Paris, for a joint demonstration through the streets of the city. They held a placard in French proclaiming the famous call from the *Communist Manifesto*: "Workers of the world, unite".

The rapid spread of class conflict marks a shift from a previous period, where strikes were confined to the public sector and private-sector workers stayed at work, largely out of fear of losing their jobs. Mass action over the period since the mass 1995 rail workers' strike has been largely limited to the relatively job-secure public sector workers, fighting to prevent the constant erosion of their working conditions, only to have their strikes repeatedly stifled, isolated and betrayed by the unions.

As a result of the crisis, however, French unemployment figures are growing by 3,000 per day. The latest IMF prediction, of an 11 percent contraction in world trade in 2009, suggests the situation will only worsen. February industrial production (excluding construction) in the 27 European Union countries sank by an average 18.4 percent, compared to last year. With workers now immediately threatened with unemployment and impoverishment, the true intensity of class tensions is coming to the fore.

Many workers in France attempting to resist short time and sackings are in plants belonging to transnational companies engaged in global downsizing and wage-cutting. Caterpillar has sacked 25,000 of its workers worldwide in recent months.

Continental, with the world collapse of car sales, is only beginning with its closures at Clairoux in France and

Hanover-Stöcken in Germany. Workers have recently staged a "bossnapping" at Molex's Villemur/Tarn plant due to close this June with its 300 jobs. With 40 sites in every continent except Africa, the company is shedding 8,250 jobs worldwide, 25 percent of its labour force.

These developments pose a major political threat to the government of conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy. Sarkozy has used public negotiations with the trade unions as a central tactic in blunting popular opposition to his domestic policy, pursuing social austerity disguised as class collaboration. The increasing tensions between the trade unions and the working class will intensify the crisis of Sarkozy's already unpopular administration.

The state is preparing for direct repression of workers' struggles. On April 17 Prime minister asked the *préfets*, in their more classical role as police chiefs rather than tripartite mediators, to be "vigilant" and to provide the necessary means for the maintenance of order in work places.

Workers must oppose their own class strategy to the plotting of the state and the trade unions, forming independent factory committees at their workplaces and launching a political offensive to rally broader support for their actions in the working class against the government.

Such workplace and neighborhood committees must work from the understanding that the global crisis of capitalism requires a global political response from the working class across industries and national borders. This requires the replacement of the capitalist governments of the EU by workers' governments in a Socialist United States of Europe.



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