

France: Caterpillar withdraws offer to reduce redundancies

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At a works council meeting with unions at the Grenoble préfecture government offices Monday, Caterpillar France officials refused unions' request that, prior to negotiations on redundancies, charges against 19 workers for "hindering work" be withdrawn. As a result, workers' delegates walked out.

"Hindering work" refers to actions over the last three months by workers in defence of their jobs and working conditions: they had occupied their workplaces, detained their managers and blocked plant entrances.

According to the labour code, an unjustified walkout by the trade union delegates from the works council, a body that must validate redundancy plans for them to be legal, would have enabled management to take its decisions unopposed.

Explaining that they were subject to "threats" from angry Caterpillar workers, the trade unionists invoked their "right to withdraw" under the labour code, due to "a serious and imminent danger to their health."

The company immediately announced that it was withdrawing its offer to reduce planned redundancies from 733 to 600—which had been agreed to in return for the intensification of the exploitation of the remaining 2,000 workers, through the annualisation of working hours. This offer had been agreed to on April 19 at a tripartite meeting in Paris of unions, management and state officials. When the union delegates returned the following day with the deal, it was rejected by striking workers and then voted down in a ballot of the entire workforce May 6.

Caterpillar's withdrawal of its offer was the dénouement of a long charade played out by management since February when the company, hit by a sharp fall in orders due to the world recession, decided to slash 733 jobs in Grenoble. The joint union

committee met Caterpillar's decision with a counter-proposal of a maximum of 450 job cuts.

CGT (General Confederation of Labour, close to the Communist Party) delegate Patrick Cohen told the media as he left Monday's meeting : "Management maintains what it put forward right from the start. It never wanted to negotiate from the start, but to railroad it through."

On May 11, Reuters reported: "The unions seemed helpless in the face of this announcement of their management. CGT delegate Nicolas Benoit, who had signed the tripartite agreement in Paris April 19, said he feared that 'this decision is firm and definitive. Management alone is responsible for this plan to sack 733 workers. In three months they haven't budged, no progress has been made.' "

Patrick Cohen, another CGT delegate said he was "sickened" by management's railroading and suggested that the joint union committee was going to reflect on a possible legal action.

The failed strategy of the unions, relying on the state as a mediator in its negotiations with management, is epitomised by the fact that negotiations with their American employers take place in government institutions under the auspices of government officials.

On April 1, Caterpillar union leaders, who had been detaining four of the 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.

The unions, on their own admission, never fought for the defence of all jobs at Caterpillar. The unions in general have become integral parts of the state and management and only conceive of "defending" jobs and conditions on the basis of defending their own

firms and national bourgeoisie.

As reports flood in of plant closures, shutdowns, sackings, and short-time working all over France and Europe (ArcelorMittal, Continental, Johnson Controls, Continentaltech), it becomes clear that the defence of jobs, of industry, and of living standards now entails a militant and political struggle not only against the bosses, but against the trade unions and for control of industry by workers at home and across national boundaries.



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