

Protesting Continental workers occupy Sarreguemines factory

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Workers from German tyre maker Continental's plant in Clairoux, France, which is slated for closure, occupied the Continental factory in Sarreguemines on May 6. They left that evening, after the government promised to move up the date of its planned meeting with Continental management and the French trade unions from May 27 to May 12.

At the start of this week, the jobless workers of Clairoux decided to step up their campaign to regain their jobs by crossing the French-German border and appealing for solidarity with their German colleagues in the Continental factory in Aachen. More than 300 workers from Clairoux set off on Wednesday morning in 60 cars, to meet up with colleagues at the Continental factory in Aachen.

They were prevented from doing so by the trade union bureaucracy. According to the May 5 *Aachener Zeitung*, Continental European works council chairman Bruno Hickert "urgently warned his colleagues to act prudently. 'Any riots would only hurt us!' He had attempted to persuade the French not to hold a demonstration and made them aware of the German way of doing things."

Alerted by the planned arrival of the French delegation, a large contingent of German police arrived to block off the factory. The parking area in front of the factory was completely occupied by police, who arrived in 20 cars. Mounted police were sent from Düsseldorf and dog teams were also at hand, and special police observers controlled the streets leading to the Aachen factory in Phillipsstrasse.

Libération on May 6 reports that, on learning of the police presence in Aachen the convoy of Clairoux

workers "changed course and made for [Continental's] Sarreguemines" site on the French side of the Franco-German border.

The Sarreguemines factory houses the head office of Continental's French operation. Management at the Sarreguemines factory had evidently been alerted to the arrival of the Clairoux workers and had locked the workers inside the factory. Police and CRS riot police units were also called to repel the Clairoux workers, who managed to force their way into the plant but were unable to enter the production areas at the site. Police and CRS units also guarded the Sarreguemines courthouse and the government buildings.

Le Nouvel Observateur gives this account of the arrival of the Clairoux workers at the Sarreguemines plant: "With cries of 'We're at home here' and 'Continental solidarity,' the 'Contis' opened the bolts at the entry gate of the Mosel department site and went into the site. They failed however to make their way into the production buildings whose doors were bolted or obstructed by steel pallets. The factory doors finally opened to let a hundred workers out while their Clairoux comrades shouted, "Let our comrades out" and "It's the bosses who should be locked up."

According to Sarreguemines workers who spoke to WSWS reporters on Thursday, scuffles broke out between some trade unionists from the Sarreguemines factory who managed to climb through windows and confront the workers from Clairoux. News magazine *Le Point* quotes the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour) spokesman Jean-Luc Niedlander: "Nobody discussed it with us. You came without letting us know."

Upon finding out when he arrived in Sarreguemines that the factory had been occupied, Hickert once again made clear his hostility to the struggle of the Clairoux

workers and refused to talk with the protesters. The news agency AZ quotes Hickert with the comment: "We are not used to such a way of doing things."

The declared purpose of the Clairoix workers' action at Sarreguemines is to bring forward from May 27 a scheduled tripartite meeting between French trade unions, the German owners and the French government. CGT Clairoix representative for the plant Xavier Mathieu, addressing the workers occupying the Sarreguemines plant, stated: "We are here and here we'll stay until we have a nearer date."

The Clairoix workers left the Sarreguemines factory on Wednesday evening, after the announcement that the meetings would be brought forward from May 27 to May 12.

For its part, the CGT also refuses to conduct any struggle to regain the jobs of the French workers and made clear that the only goal of the union is to obtain redundancy payments for the sacked workers. Bruno Levert, CGT representative at Clairoix, told *Le Monde* on May 6 that he no longer believed that the French government would find a buyer for Continental and declared: "Continental is not going to lose market share with a buyer. If they close Clairoix, it's just to win market share elsewhere in Europe. All we want is for Continental to give us what it owes us, that is our redundancy package."

Since the beginning of the year, Continental has axed the jobs of 7,000 of its total worldwide workforce of 133,000. The factory in Clairoix has already been closed and further job cuts and plant closures are being prepared.

The Clairoix closure means the loss of 1,120 jobs. When workers heard that the appeal to keep their factory open had been lost, they ransacked the government offices in Compiègne in anger. Court hearings are now pending for workers accused of damaging property at the site of the factory. Venomous remarks have been made by members of the government calling for a crack down on "active minorities."

On April 23, Clairoix workers travelled to Hanover in Germany, where the Continental factory is also threatened with closure. As they arrived in Hanover, the French delegation was given a warm welcome by their German colleagues who had gathered at Hanover's

main rail station early that morning to greet them on arrival in their chartered train. The French and German workers then carried out a joint demonstration through the city.

The assembled German workers carried placards in German and French declaring: "Dear colleagues from Clairoix, welcome to Hanover," as well as: "Proletarians of all countries, unite!" When the French contingent finally arrived, German workers took up their slogan: "Tous ensemble, Continental—solidarité" (All together, Continental—Solidarity).



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