

How France's petty-bourgeois 'left' betrays workers

The experience of Goodyear and Continental

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Growing working-class struggles against layoffs and plant closures in France are exposing the political chasm between the workers and the middle-class protest groups, such as *Lutte Ouvrière* (LO) and the *Nouveau Parti Anti-capitaliste* (NPA), that claim to represent the "far left" of political life in France.

As the growth of such struggles poses ever more sharply the need for coordination and an independent political perspective for the workers, these groups are emerging as the main obstacle to such a development. Oriented to the trade-union bureaucracy and establishment parties such as the Socialist Party (PS) and the French Communist Party (PCF), they are enthusiastic proponents of redundancy packages and layoffs organised by the trade unions. As employers and state authorities move to implement mass job cuts amid a deepening economic crisis, this response is a fundamental betrayal of the interests of the working class.

After a record jump in France of 1.1 percent in the first quarter of this year, unemployment is expected to rise to 9.8 percent of the working population by the end of 2009 and 10.7 percent at the end of 2010.

The tyre manufacturing industry, entirely dependent on the hard-hit motor industry, is emblematic of these developments. On June 17, Michelin announced the axing of 1,096 jobs in France. This is on top of the closure of Continental's Clairoux plant with its 1,120 workers and the sacking of 820 workers out of 1,400 at Goodyear in Amiens.

In 2007, under pressure from the unions, workers at Continental Clairoux accepted an extension of their workweek from 35 hours to 40 hours, with no compensation, in return for the promise of keeping their jobs until 2012. However, management announced March 11 this year that it would eliminate 1,900 jobs by closing its passenger tyre plant in Clairoux and the commercial vehicle tyre plant in Hanover.

Clairoux workers undertook a series of militant actions in the months after the closure of their factory was announced. These were led by Xavier Mathieu, a representative of the Stalinist-led CGT (General Confederation of Labour) and a sympathiser of LO. On April 23, they participated in a joint demonstration

in Hanover with German colleagues, whose plant is also due to close, and also carried out a brief occupation May 6 of the Sarreguemines site in eastern France, where the French Continental headquarters are located.

Dismissing any principled struggle to save the plant and its 1,120 jobs, the Clairoux unions signed a deal with management and the state on a redundancy package on June 5. Workers at Clairoux will receive a €50,000 bonus over and above the legally required salary redundancy compensation of three-fifths of a month's salary for every year worked at the company. Workers will stay on the payroll until December 2011. Those workers reaching 52 years of age by December 2009 will be paid 80 percent of their salary until their retirement.

The deal also contains a clause obliging the Clairoux unions to desist from solidarity action with workers from other Continental sites. The *Courrier Picard* explains that the agreement signifies that "Continental promises to abandon legal proceedings against those responsible for the material destruction of the factory entrance on April 21 in exchange for a joint trade union commitment not to destroy or block any Continental sites in France or abroad."

The agreement, which must be ratified by the government, leaves workers in factories supplying the plant high and dry and devastates the employment prospects for youth in the already economically hard hit area.

Xavier Mathieu told the press, "We are very proud of these negotiations." He added, "People are delighted. They would have preferred that the factory didn't close, but they are really satisfied with this agreement."

There is no doubt that the Continental deal was worked out with the support and collaboration of the French group *Lutte Ouvrière* (Workers' Struggle) and that it had a major role in involving the state in the settlement. Mathieu works closely with Roland Szpirco, an LO leader and municipal councillor in the region. Szpirco was on the LO list for the North West France constituency in the European elections.

L'Express of May 27 reports, "Xavier Mathieu himself does not deny the influence exerted by this ultra-orthodox LO member on the 'Conti' action committee. 'He's my

counsellor,' he says calmly.... Right from the start, Roland has insisted that we should drag in the state by the collar so as to engage in tripartite negotiations,' stressed Mathieu."

LO's weekly magazine on June 5 hailed the agreement in an article entitled "Continental-Clairoix: Struggle wins new, perhaps decisive, concessions." It declared that the workers' struggle "had finally paid off." Despite the promise of its title, the article admits that "even though everyone was aware that nothing could compensate for the social disaster represented by the closure, the mass meeting overwhelmingly approved, with four votes against and more than 700 in favour, this basis for compromise." It is unlikely that most workers at the Clairoix site will be able to find another job in the foreseeable future.

The Continental unions and LO immediately took on the role of enforcers of the deal they had contracted with their bosses and the state. The *Courrier Picard* of June 7 reports, "The Conti workers strictly supervised the visit by some 500 Goodyear workers to the Clairoix factory. That very morning the joint union committee's watchword was very clear: 'OK guys, we are going to visit the factory, but no damage. Nothing is to leave this factory. It would be a pity that the government refuses [the deal] because we have been stupid. We don't wish to lose everything today.'"

On May 26, Goodyear had announced its intention to shed 820 jobs out of 1,400 at its tyre plant in Amiens. The announcement was made as union representatives at the Continental tyre plant in nearby Clairoix were finalising the redundancy deal.

The unions at the Amiens Goodyear plant are treating the sell-out at Clairoix as an example to be followed. CGT leader at the plant, Mickaël Wamen, paid tribute to the "very honourable" agreement "won in struggle by the Conti workers." Wamen said the aim was to get the job cuts withdrawn, but failing that, "€50,000 will be the minimum.... There's money at Goodyear. The group must open its purse, otherwise there'll be trouble."

Wamen is being supported whole-heartedly by the NPA. An article on its Web site June 1 declares as exemplary "the redundancy conditions wrung from the bosses by the Continental unions."

The NPA openly opposed strike action and thus any serious struggle against redundancies, backing the unions at Goodyear. It wrote, "Now are posed the questions of perspectives. Some among the workers legitimately want to fight right now. Very quickly the trade union officials pointed out that, as the sackings were due to come into effect in 2010, it was going to be a long struggle. An immediate strike would, they said, bring everyone to their knees after one or two weeks, with no guarantee of success. Moreover, it seems necessary to set the demands in the best way: fight for the maintenance of the site or to leave under the best possible conditions."

The CGT leadership at Goodyear made clear its chauvinist and class-collaborationist approach in a statement on redundancies June 16 last year: "We continue to ask for round

table discussions. The State must intervene in this case where an American company tramples on the rights of hundreds of French workers.... We are always open to dialogue...but there is no one who wants to work with us in the common interest."

The collaboration of the trade unions in planning and implementing social cuts is not new. It reached a new level, however, with the election of conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy, who has worked out his policies in conjunction with the trade unions since his election in 2007.

In the spring of 2008, the two main French trade union confederations, the CGT and CFDT, signed the "Common Position" with Sarkozy and the Medef employers' federation. In exchange for enhancing the legal and financial position of these two unions, the state obtained the passage of an extremely regressive law, deregulating worktime protections, slashing pensions, and ending the 35-hour workweek. The role of "far left" parties such as LO and the NPA was to promote fundamentally fraudulent "national days of action" protests by public sector workers, organized by the same trade unions that were formulating the social cuts.

The outbreak of the global economic crisis has spread strikes and militant actions into broader layers of the working class—with strikes, factory occupations, and "bossnappings," particularly concentrated in the motor and steel industries. This directly poses the need for an independent political party of the working class to fight for political power and the socialist reorganization of the economy to guarantee employment and secure living standards to all working people.



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