

# France: Workers facing mass layoffs threaten to blow up plants

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French workers at several plants slated for closure have threatened to detonate explosive devices at their factories.

At the New Fabris auto supply plant in Châtellerault, an industrial town of 36,000 south of Tours, workers have wired gas canisters to an electrical cable. They are demanding €30,000 in severance payments from auto manufacturers Renault and PSA Peugeot-Citroën, New Fabris' two main clients. They are threatening to detonate the gas if they do not receive payment by July 31.

Plant manager Pierre Réau said that PSA and Renault had provoked the New Fabris shutdown by "cutting their orders brutally and without warning." After having made orders that represented 90 percent of New Fabris' business, they cut back their orders suddenly this spring by 80 and 30 percent, respectively.

The commercial court in Lyon placed New Fabris in liquidation on June 16. All 366 workers at the plant are to lose their jobs.

The decision epitomizes the arrogance of the auto manufacturers. Renault and Peugeot together took €6 billion in state bailout funds in January in exchange for promises to preserve jobs and industrial activity. Châtellerault is expected to lose 2,400 jobs in the coming year.

A General Confederation of Labor (CGT) local reported that on July 7, 150 New Fabris workers came by bus to protest outside Peugeot headquarters at Poissy, in the west Paris suburbs, and to speak to Peugeot workers at the Porte-de-Poissy plant. However, a large detachment of CRS riot police blockaded the plant and large sections of Poissy, preventing discussion between New Fabris and Peugeot workers.

Asked about the decision to wire the plant to explode, one New Fabris worker explained: "The machinery and the stockpile of finished goods are our only bargaining chip." Workers estimate the value of the plants' contents

at €3 million to €4 million.

The regional newspaper *La Nouvelle République* reported on July 17 that New Fabris workers and trade union delegates had visited Renault's Billancourt headquarters. However, Renault proposed only a €3,300 severance package, and Industry Minister Christian Estrosi refused to meet with New Fabris workers.

Workers at communications firm Nortel's Châteaufort plant, near Paris, threatened to blow up the plant with gas canisters on July 14. The plant was placed in liquidation on May 28 under the responsibility of financial services firm Ernst & Young, whose personnel refused to meet with the Châteaufort workers. *Le Monde* reported that gas canisters had been wired to blow by workers, and not trade union delegates.

*Le Monde* interviewed the plant's CFTC trade union delegate, Christian Berenbach, who said: "We are not terrorists. We are trying to get out of the crisis." Berenbach stated that Nortel had provoked the plant closure by transferring €14 million to the company's central accounts in Canada.

Workers removed the gas canisters on July 15, when Estrosi declared that he would meet with Ernst & Young representatives and with Nortel workers. Estrosi added that he did not want to "weaken" Nortel's Châteaufort operations, since he thought they "have all the necessary ingredients to last through the crisis."

At vehicle parts manufacturer JLG in Faullet, near Bordeaux, 163 workers are on a solidarity strike for 53 recently laid-off co-workers. They are threatening to detonate plant inventory with gas canisters if the laid-off workers do not receive severance packages. On July 15, JLG management agreed to give a severance package of €16,000, but striking workers refused the offer, insisting on payments of €30,000.

Reports emerged yesterday that JLG management had agreed to the €30,000 severance package.

These developments testify to the explosive political situation that is developing, as corporations use the economic crisis and the bailouts to line their pockets at the expense of the working class.

The series of threats to detonate factories follows a wave of “boss-nappings” this spring, where workers threatened with layoffs held management hostage. Such measures enjoyed broad public support. The Ifop agency found that 63 percent of those polled understood why workers detained their bosses, and 30 percent supported such actions outright.

The government is extremely unpopular. The latest Ifop poll found 59 percent of respondents disapproving of conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy’s policies.

Industry Minister Estrosi’s criticism of workers’ threats to detonate factories as “undignified conduct” deserves nothing but contempt. The truly undignified actions are those of a government that shovels countless billions into the pockets of major banks and corporations, while allowing plants to be shuttered all across the country.

If workers are not fighting to defend their jobs and their factories, but are instead reduced to the desperate extremity of bargaining for severance payments by threatening to blow up their plants, it is because they have been politically isolated.

None of the official parties—right or “left”—advances the perspective that the entire working class should respond to the economic crisis on a politically-independent program—taking power and using social resources, currently being placed at the disposal of the banks through massive state bailouts, to rebuild industry and jobs.

The French bourgeois “left,” principally the Socialist and Communist Parties, have played crucial roles in the destruction of industry over the last 30 years, both in and out of government. Their reaction to the current economic crisis has been to propose minor modifications to the bank bailout proposed by Sarkozy. Their proposals, put forth in joint appeals timed before one-day trade union demonstrations this spring, were co-signed by France’s “far-left” parties, such as the *Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste* (New Anti-Capitalist Party—NPA).

The trade unions, while participating in the bourgeois left’s plans, have deliberately isolated workers at targeted plants.

The crisis striking the French automobile industry is a classic example. The trade unions have concentrated in recent years on organizing toothless, one-day strikes by government workers—closely coordinated with the state, and designed to dissipate opposition to the government’s

social cuts. However, there has been no broader strike action to halt the crisis and decay of the automobile industry.

Over the last several years, well before the outbreak of the economic crisis, automobile production in France was falling rapidly. This year’s production figures are projected to fall 40 percent from last year’s already depressed output of 2.57 million automobiles.

Despite the profusion of self-declared “socialists” in France’s political establishment, there is no working class party in France today.

In particular, the “far left” parties have maintained their support for the trade unions and have refused to call for a political struggle against Sarkozy’s policies, which would require a political break with the Socialist and Communist Parties.

The NPA, which is currently negotiating a possible electoral alliance with the Communist Party in the 2010 regional elections, disclosed something of its class orientation in a June 17 statement, “Layoffs: The urgent coordination.” Despite the article’s confusingly activist-sounding title, it mainly explained why the NPA was not taking the initiative to provide political leadership for working class struggles.

Noting the isolation of struggles in different workplaces, the NPA wrote: “It would be an occasion for workers themselves to debate concrete perspectives to put forward today. But such a meeting cannot simply be decreed.”

Referring to a number of workplaces hit by strikes, it added: “The NPA could gather representatives of 15 or more enterprises in France that today are hit by layoff plans and take out of a hat an ‘NPA appeal.’ But this is not how it operates.”

The most urgent task is creating a political party to lead workers’ struggles in France and Europe on the basis of a socialist perspective.

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