

France: Opportunist “lefts” unite with CGT to derail fight for jobs

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A demonstration of motor industry workers fighting plant closures and mass sackings provides an object lesson in how the trade unions, aided and abetted by the middle class opportunists of *Lutte Ouvrière* (LO) and the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA), are leading the workers into an impasse.

The demonstration held in Paris on September 17 was attended by three thousand workers from all over France. Most of them have been engaged in tenacious and in some cases desperate struggles in defence of their jobs. As a rule, these struggles have been betrayed by the trade union federations, who isolated them plant by plant and traded off the jobs for a meagre redundancy payment.

The initial appeal for the demonstration came from the CGT union branch at Goodyear tyres in Amiens, where 817 workers are threatened with sacking. The CGT (General Confederation of Labour), one of the major French trade union federations, is close to the Communist Party (PCF).

The call received immediate support from the sacked Continental tyre workers at Clairoux. Six of their number had been given suspended prison sentences of three to five months plus fines for protesting against the closure of their factory by wrecking government offices. They are now appealing the sentence.

Other delegations of workers on the march came from car makers Peugeot and Renault, General Motors in Strasbourg, Ford at Blanquefort, Delphi, Wagon and Michelin tyres (Montceau-les-Mines), Freescale (Toulouse), New Fabris and Molex.

The New Fabris workers threatened to blow up their factory some weeks ago and have now accepted a redundancy plan. The Molex workers, after eleven months of struggle, reluctantly voted to accept a package negotiated by the CGT and other unions only two days before the march. The deal includes the sacking of 283 workers and a severance package of one month's pay for each year worked at the company. Christian Estrosi, minister of industry, who has been involved in the Molex negotiations, described this as “a positive outcome.”

Great bitterness is developing amongst auto workers against the abandonment by the unions of their struggles to defend jobs and workplaces. The end of the protest in Paris saw frustrated elements breaking into the stock exchange building and covering the walls in anti-capitalist graffiti. Meanwhile the organisers of the march provided a platform to those who have sabotaged the struggles.

At the invitation of Continental Clairoux and Goodyear Amiens, leaders of the CGT federations in the motor industry were on the Paris demonstration as well as various personalities from mainstream bourgeois “left” parties. They included Cécile Duflot (Green Party), Pierre Laurent (PCF), Jean-Luc Mélenchon (the Socialist Party ex-government minister and founder of the Left Party), and Arnaud Montebourg, a right wing social democrat.

Arlette Laguiller of *Lutte Ouvrière* (Workers' Fight) and Olivier Besancenot of the NPA were prominent on the march and their organisations had a strong presence. They undertook the task of restraining the pent-up anger of the workers and subordinating them to the union leaders.

Animosity has developed in particular against Bernard Thibault, the leader of the CGT, who openly collaborates, virtually on a daily basis, with right wing president Nicolas Sarkozy's programme of making the working class pay for the economic crisis. He has opposed any move to extend the struggle of plants under attack to the rest of the working class.

Thibault, who has been characterised as “scum” (*racaille*) by Clairoux CGT leader Xavier Mathieu, was conspicuous by his absence on the demonstration, having told a *Médiapart* interviewer that he had other things to do. He added: “Our task is all the more difficult because people [CGT members] perhaps expect too much from trade unionism.”

The motor and motor accessory industries are among the hardest hit by the recession. The CGT puts job losses in the industry since the beginning of the crisis at 150,000. The CGT metal and chemical federations' leaderships, at a national and a local level, under pressure from below,

attempt to distance themselves from the confederal leadership. However, in line with the confederal leadership, none called their members out on strike in support of the September 17 protest.

The newspaper of the Stalinist PCF, *l'Humanité*, gave the reason behind the CGT federations' leadership's presence on the September 17 protest. It was to serve as "a springboard before two days of joint trade union action on 7 and 22 October." October 7 is the international trade union day for "decent work." October 22 is the "needs of industry" day, which is in preparation for discussions between the government, the employers and the unions to be held at a convention, proposed by the CGT's Thibault to Sarkozy, in order to develop policies to bolster French industry in the world crisis.

In other words, the Paris demonstration was cynically used to bolster the class collaborationist policies of Thibault and other trade union leaders and the symbolic protests organised by the unions to let off steam. Olivier Besancenot covered up for this by hailing the Paris protest as a "convergence of struggles."

Both LO and the NPA have given uncritical support to the CGT chemical union leaders at Amiens Goodyear (Mickael Wamen) and Clairoux (Xavier Mathieu) whose policy is to obtain the best redundancy terms. They glorify Mathieu as the man who obtained €50,000 redundancy pay for the sacked Continental workers at his plant, yet the deal he signed between the unions, the bosses and the government involved an acceptance of the closure of the factory and the agreement not to mobilise against sackings and closures at Continental sites anywhere in Europe.

Such deals enable the companies to run down and close their plants while containing the resistance of workers and the possibility of contagion nationally and internationally. Nearly all the companies which are closing sites and sacking workers are transnationals engaged in worldwide downsizing (Continental, Goodyear, Molex, New Fabris).

While the NPA is covering up for the trade union bureaucracy, it makes purely rhetorical calls for a law "banning sacking" and a "general strike" and for trade union mobilisations which could "make the government and the bosses really and lastingly retreat." On several occasions, however, the NPA's Besancenot has reassured the unions and the government that in calling for a general strike the NPA in no way envisages "*le Grand Soir*"—i.e., social revolution.

The NPA's appeal to the unions is designed to maintain workers under the control of these organisations, whose role is to impose on workers the burden of the crisis. Nowhere do LO and the NPA put forward a programme for an independent political mobilisation of the working class.

Instead, they present a list of social demands which they claim can be obtained through the trade unions by increasing pressure on the employers and the government.

Besancenot of the NPA expressed his satisfaction with the day's events, claiming it represented a real fight back against job destruction. "It's been months and months, and now this time it's become a reality. And it came not from above but from the ranks, because there were a lot of obstacles."

Xavier Mathieu, referring to the Goodyear workers who first called the protest, claimed: "They have succeeded in mobilising the automobile union federations in the metal and rubber branches and creating a real unity." Despite his outbursts against Thibault, the political differences between Mathieu and the CGT leadership are marginal.

WSWS reporters spoke to several workers on the protest.

Florian, from the Goodyear factory in Amiens, works as a maintenance technician. "The situation is very unclear. The unions are very disunited. To struggle against the economic crisis we must avoid relocation and increase salaries. We can't defend our interests without defending those of the working class in other countries. Yes, it's a question of internationalism."

Thierry, from Continental tyres is not a union member. "The situation at the factory is that it's closing with 1,200 thrown onto the streets. For 2 years we will claim unemployment benefits and try to find a job. We have been abandoned." Commenting on the compensation received for giving up their jobs, he said "The real victory would be to keep our jobs. We leave with certain advantages compared to others. But we can't speak of a victory. The unions always think about getting re-elected and not about the workers and uniting them in a stronger fight against the economic crisis."

Emmanuel works at NDM construction in Caumont. "We are here for a victory, but right now we don't have one. If everyone goes into the street we can struggle against the economic crisis. People must be in solidarity more with the perspective of increasing salaries and job opportunities. We are here against the relocation of jobs."



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