

To workers at closed Clairoix tire plant

France: Continental offers €137-a-month jobs in Tunisia

Kumaran Ira, Alex Lantier
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Laid-off workers at the Clairoix plant, shut down early this year by tire maker Continental, were outraged after Continental proposed they take jobs in its plants in Tunisia. They would receive a monthly wage of €137, or the equivalent of three days at the minimum wage in France.

In March 2009, Continental announced it would close its site in Clairoix, in northern France, as well as its plant in Hanover, Germany, eliminating 1,900 jobs. The Clairoix plant used to produce 8 million passenger tires a year. It generated a €28 million profit in 2008.

According to Continental, the Clairoix plant was closed due to high production costs. The company justified its plant closures and production cuts by citing falling auto sales in Europe and internationally. However, as the Stalinist newspaper *l'Humanité* noted on March 31, “One year later, Continental still plans to give €325 million in dividends to its shareholders.”

On March 24, workers received a letter from Continental offering them jobs in Tunisia. It added, “While this position corresponds to your professional qualifications, we would nevertheless like to draw your attention to the fact that the gross monthly salary offered by our Tunisian subsidiary is a minimum sum of 260 dinars. While this sum is in conformity with Tunisian standards, it is of course largely below the minima at Continental in France. We nonetheless have the obligation to submit this proposition to you.”

Continental cynically claims that it made this offer to respect its legal obligation to offer sacked workers new jobs. A Continental official told AFP, “This is a legal obligation and in no way a provocation. This internal position corresponds to the qualifications of ex-

employees at Clairoix and the language spoken at the plant is French, so we are obliged to propose it. A firm was found guilty in court for not having respected these obligations.”

The official referred to the court case of Olympia, a socks manufacturer, sentenced by the French courts to pay €2.5 million in compensation to sacked workers for not having proposed new jobs in Romania to its workers.

Despite its attempt to provide a pseudo-legal shield for its actions, Continental is in fact trying to evade its legal obligations—namely, the plant shutdown deal negotiated with the trade unions last June. The agreement includes €50,000 in compensation for the plant closure, offering *reclassement* (i.e., job transfers) for 80 percent of staff, at 80 percent of the net wages previously earned at Clairoix plant. It now claims that it cannot find such jobs, and is offering instead to find positions for 600 workers in Tunisia.

Christian Lahargue, a member of the Clairoix workers’ committee, noted: “They are doing everything they can to demoralise the workers and make them exit from the shutdown agreement.”

Continental’s proposal is a shameless provocation. It is an attempt to intimidate the entire working class into thinking that, whatever action workers may take at their workplaces, they will be defeated: firms can always offshore their jobs to skilled workers in poor countries—in particular, France’s former colonies—who will work for less.

In making this argument, the ruling class relies principally on the class collaboration of the trade union bureaucracies. The Continental closure is part of a long series of shutdowns they have organised with the

government since the outbreak of the global economic crisis. Once a plant was targeted for closure, the trade unions would isolate the plant and propose that workers accept a severance package. Once the workers were defeated, it was left to management and the courts to try to worm out of the terms of the severance package.

France saw a number of well-publicised, private-sector strikes—notably at Continental, GoodYear, Molex and New Fabris—against plant closures. These were often accompanied by kidnapping of management staff, or threats to blow up plants. There was wide public support for these actions, given popular hostility to the government and to bank bailouts—so wide, in fact, that Ségolène Royal, the free-marketeer and former Parti Socialiste candidate for the 2007 presidential elections, publicly declared in April 2009 that she understood why workers were taking such measures.

Workers from the Clairoix and Hanover plants mounted joint protests against Continental plant closures last year. After several months of conflicts at Clairoix, including strikes and a factory occupation, the struggle was ultimately isolated by the trade unions and defeated.

The task of preventing the outbreak of wider class struggles fell to the unions, who isolated each action plant by plant. In addition to their fear of the outbreak of mass workers' struggles, the unions' sell-outs reflected their agreement with the bourgeoisie's goal of resolving the economic crisis on the backs of the workers. In the case of Continental, as its management pointed out, "The economic motives for the layoffs were recognised by the trade-union representatives themselves."

The trend of conscious sabotage of private-sector strikes has continued this year. In February, Total oil refinery workers went on strike in solidarity with Dunkirk refinery workers, who are facing redundancies as Total announced permanent closure. After six days, the trade unions called off the strike, and the Dunkirk workers were isolated and sold out.

The task of controlling the political situation—and driving the workers back into impotence, behind the trade unions and the state—falls to the hardened traitors leading ex-left organisations: the Stalinist Parti communiste français (PCF), Lutte ouvrière (LO, Workers' Struggle) and the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA) of Olivier Besancenot.

An example of these parties' cynical phrasemongering on the Continental closure came from PCF secretary Marie-George Buffet, who said: "The state, which has multiplied false promises and allowed a bunch of criminal bosses to run rampant, owes it to itself to react as quickly as possible in this impermissible affair."

This is simply insulting her readers' intelligence, with a crude attempt to boost the government of President Nicolas Sarkozy. After dozens of plant closures—during which Buffet herself says the state deceived the workers—is anyone to believe that Sarkozy "owes it" to himself to help workers at these plants?

At the time of the New Fabris struggle last year, the NPA noted the isolation of struggles in different workplaces and 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.... The NPA could gather representatives of 15 or more enterprises in France that today are hit by layoff plans and pull an 'NPA appeal' out of a hat. But this is not how it operates."

There could be no clearer statement of the difference between the ex-left and a party that would aim to mobilise the working class in its own defence.



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