

Auto parts workers' year-long struggle betrayed

Lessons of the Sodimatex sell-out in France

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On April 13, Sodimatex workers ended a year-long battle at their factory in Crépy-en-Valois, an industrial town in the Oise *département*, north of Paris. Their struggle made the national news after Sodimatex workers wired Molotov cocktails to a gas canister at their plant April 2 and threatened to detonate it.

Less than two weeks later, workers accepted an agreement—jointly prepared by the trade unions, local officials and corporate management—to end their plant occupation and lose their jobs. In exchange, workers were promised a severance package of €51,000. The media now report that, after a closer reading of the fine print of the agreement, workers will get several thousand euros less than was originally thought.

This defeat was not inevitable. The struggle was betrayed despite many favourable conditions: overwhelming public sympathy for Sodimatex workers, opposition to the unpopular government of President Nicolas Sarkozy, and a wave of strikes in France and Europe affecting nearly every major industry.

The defeat was the product of an absence of independent politics in the working class. For the unions dominating the Sodimatex struggle, there was no consideration of an attempt to save the plant, of the economic-political forces behind the plant closure, or of an appeal to broader social opposition. As unions delegates told the WSWs, there were no plans to organize a sympathy strike, which would have found wide support. Instead, it was taken for granted that the plant would be shut down, and that the only issue was the size of the severance pay.

As for “left” organizations such as the Parti Communiste Français (PCF—French Communist Party), the Parti Ouvrier Indépendant (POI—Independent Workers Party), Lutte Ouvrière (LO—Workers’ Struggle), and the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA—New Anticapitalist Party) of Olivier Besancenot, they played their appointed role: covering up the anti-working class policies of the unions by issuing sentimental and deceitful calls for solidarity, while sowing demoralization in the working class.

A year-long struggle against the shutdown

WSWS reporters travelled to Crépy-en-Valois to speak with Sodimatex workers on April 12.

Vincent Riebourg, a line worker with 10 years’ experience at Sodimatex, recalled that the workers had received the news of the plant closure on April 10, 2009. He said, “We went on strike for 15 days, to try to negotiate with the management of the corporate group. Their principle was not to negotiate”.

The workers twice took the Trèves auto parts group—which owns Sodimatex—to court, in an attempt to force negotiations. However, a

regional court in Amiens threw out a decision favourable to the workers, on appeal.

Starting last fall, workers occupied the plant, hoping they could organize a return to work. Vincent explained: “Since September 9, the plant was supposed to be closed. They have continued paying us, but they did not give us any work. Our trade union delegates do not know anything, and the factory boss says nothing.”

As at the Clairoux plant of tire-maker Continental, management tried to demoralize workers by offering to relocate them to jobs in French-speaking North African countries, at poverty wages.

Vincent said the Sodimatex workers went to protest in front of the National Assembly in Paris in February: “They fired tear gas at us and then charged us; there were 150 CRS [riot police] against 47 workers”. A delegation met with French Communist Party (PCF) deputy Daniel Paul. It demanded that he investigate Trèves’ receipt of €55 million in public funds prior to the plant closure.

After that meeting, they were briefly addressed by Olivier Besancenot, who claimed the NPA was in solidarity with Sodimatex and promised he would mention them in a television appearance.

Asked about what help Sodimatex workers had received from the trade union federations, Vincent replied, “Our delegates have received no support from their federations. They showed up only when there was media coverage. We have never had any contact with them, and our delegates no longer wear their trade union badges”.

Pascal Baugrand, a machinist at the Sodimatex plant, asked the WSWs to convey his thanks to the population of Crépy-en-Valois: “People bring us food and drink. A mayor’s deputy is travelling to Senlis [where the trade unions are negotiating with state authorities] to try to calm things down. We are under a lot of pressure”.

These interviews were cut short when these workers were called away. Several people wearing CGT union badges surrounded WSWs reporters, slandering them as “provocateurs”, and forced them off the Sodimatex premises. When WSWs reporters tried to leaflet and interview workers at another plant entrance, the same delegates appeared and again forced them off the premises, threatening to smash their cameras and take their notes. They shouted that Sodimatex workers did not want “politics” in their struggle.

As WSWs reporters were forced off the premises, a woman carrying the POI’s *Informations Ouvrières* (*Workers’ News*) newspaper arrived and was allowed to distribute her paper inside the plant.

How unions, the state, and management work together to close plants

The hostility of the trade unions and middle class “left” organizations to WSWs reporters reflected not only their own hostility to working class

politics, but the fear that their role in the shut-down might become clear to the workers.

Trèves decided to shut the Sodimatex plant and its sister plant, PTPM in Aÿ, during the worldwide cuts in the auto industry in the first months of the economic crisis. It received €55 million from the Fonds de modernisation des équipementiers automobiles (FMEA, Modernization Fund for Auto Suppliers) shortly before announcing the closures.

In a recent letter to the PCF-linked daily *l'Humanité* explaining the plant closures, Trèves said it would rely on “factories in Portugal, Spain, and, regularly, on its partner Trevertex”, a Trèves subsidiary in Romania. Trevertex supplies Romanian carmaker Dacia, which was bought by Renault in 1999.

As several press outlets would later point out, the Sodimatex closure was an outsourcing “financed by the state”. In banners hung around their plant, Sodimatex workers denounced Trèves as “hoodlum-bosses”, hoping to rally broad public hostility to the corporations’ use of public funds to pillage the economy.

What the unions and middle class organizations failed to explain was that the “hoodlum-bosses” were acting on a plan laid out by the state, in collaboration with the unions. The same forces who told workers they were trying to get a good deal for them were, in fact, the ones who had arranged the shutdown.

The FMEA was set up at the “Estates-General for the Automobile Industry” in January 2009, convened by state agencies, private corporations, and the trade unions. It is a joint public-private fund, given an initial capital of €300 million by auto giants Peugeot and Renault and France’s Fonds d’Investissement Stratégique (FSI). A French government website declares the FMEA’s purpose is to assist in “consolidating and reinforcing the competitiveness of the automobile industry”.

The interest of Renault and Peugeot in having cheap labour and cheap goods in the auto parts industry is clear. The FSI’s goal was no different.

The €20 billion FSI was set up in 2008 with funds from the state, the Caisse des dépôts (the financial entity overseeing France’s state-owned corporations), and the Mubadala investment fund of the emirate of Abu Dhabi. The FSI website says its goal is to help “enterprises whose growth plans will increase the country’s competitiveness”. It even insists that it will limit the length of time it owns firms, to restore them to private investors as profitable firms as soon as possible.

In short, by outsourcing its production, Trèves was playing the role assigned to it by the banks, the state, and the unions: keeping France’s major car makers profitable and competitive, at the expense of the workers.

The threat to blow up the plant and the role of the unions

On the morning of April 2, Sodimatex workers placed a series of Molotov cocktails around a gas canister at their factory and threatened to detonate it, while the trade unions attended negotiations with local authorities and Trèves management.

The unions greeted the workers’ desperate action, aimed at attracting public attention and improving their bargaining position, with undisguised hostility. Gérard Declair, a *Force Ouvrière* (FO—Workers’ Force) union delegate at Sodimatex, told the daily *Le Monde*, “Even if we tell them not to do it, some of them are uncontrollable”.

As the threat made national headlines, several government ministers denounced the Sodimatex workers. Industry Minister Christian Estrosi said he “condemned with the greatest firmness the unacceptable attitude of a minority, with which not all of the factory’s employees agree”. The

plant was surrounded by 15 vans of CRS riot police.

Negotiations continued over the next week, after workers agreed to remove the Molotov cocktails from the gas canister. Police were also allowed to inspect the site.

Contacted by the WSWS on April 9, CGT factory delegate Julio Tavares said he expected a “positive” outcome to negotiations. This was because, as Tavares said, “We’re not asking for very much, only €21,000” in severance pay per worker (i.e., above the €29,000 minimum required by law in the case of the Sodimatex plant).

Asked if there had been any discussion of broader sympathy strikes inside the trade unions, Tavares replied, “No, no. None. Our federation [i.e., the CGT national leadership], we’ve heard nothing from it. The federation, we finance it, and they are never with us to give us a hand”.

The picture that emerged from Tavares’ comments—of an isolated, parasitical bureaucracy trying to keep control of the workers—is not exactly new. In one of the more publicized cases last year, the CGT delegate at the Continental-Clairoix factory, Xavier Mathieu, attacked CGT chief Bernard Thibault as “scum” for not having come to Clairoix after it was slated for closure.

The fact that trade unionists could make personal criticisms of Thibault, while selling out the workers at the same time, demonstrates the critical importance of a political critique of the trade unions. Thibault personally has contempt for ordinary workers. Far more important, however, is the trade unions’ support for the state and French companies. This underlay the entire union apparatus’ collaboration in executing the FMEA plan to shut down auto plants.

These corporatist politics and the social interests they represent, and not the character traits of individual union bureaucrats, underlie the unions’ hostility toward and social alienation from the working class.

Most trade union offices would not comment on the Sodimatex struggle to the WSWS. However, the WSWS did speak to CFDT-Picardy General Secretary Dominique Bernichon. Asked what the CFDT’s position towards the threat to blow up the Sodimatex factory was, Bernichon said, “It comes from the workers themselves. It’s a struggle taking place largely outside the trade union apparatuses. Workers don’t want the trade unions to unfurl their banners. It causes problems, we feel a definite exasperation from the workers”.

Asked if workers would in fact be able to find other jobs, Bernichon said, “That’s the whole problem: Picardy remains marked by a very industrial culture, so finding new jobs is difficult. Workers must obtain other qualifications to work in other sectors. There are not really other sectors that are emerging, either, so it’s not so obvious what to do”.

Nonetheless, he said that the workers had to fight for “the best possible retraining and severance packages”.

Asked if the CFDT could satisfy workers’ expectations with such a strategy, Bernichon said, “What we can see is that the worker representatives [i.e., factory delegates] have become spokesmen for the workers, so we are no longer in a trade union approach. This is an experience piloted by the workers”.

He stressed that Sodimatex factory delegates had emerged as spokesmen for the Sodimatex plants “because of their positions”—that is, not because they supported the action themselves.

The criticisms such factory delegates level at leading union bureaucrats have made several of them popular figures—notably Xavier Mathieu, who has received much positive coverage in the mainstream press.

They are not, however, spokesmen for the interests of the working class. By their training and their outlook, as well as by their job situation, they are principally answerable to the union bureaucracy or the political establishment for ensuring that the plant closure does not get out of hand. This underlies their decision to expel WSWS reporters from the Sodimatex site.

Like other workers at plants slated for closure, they are also looking for

new jobs. Their “skill set” and prospects are quite different from those of other workers, however, and point them in a different class direction. To cite one example, Guy Eyermann, the CGT delegate at the New Fabris plant in Châtellerault that workers threatened to blow up last year, has since become a spokesman for Ségolène Royal—the Socialist Party’s presidential candidate in 2007.

The sell-out

On the evening of Tuesday, April 13, Industry Minister Christian Estrosi announced that a deal had emerged from negotiations with Sodimatex delegates, trade unionists, and management. Estrosi announced that workers would receive “€51,000 on average for each worker according to his seniority, that is €22,000 above the minimum required by law”.

The *Journal du Dimanche* noted, “The agreement had been struck Tuesday afternoon, but it was not revealed until the evening to ‘shield the news’, according to the trade unions, who did not want the agreement to fall through”.

Though the trade unions had based their struggle largely on obtaining an average severance package of €51,000, it appears they did not get even this sum, and sought to initially hide it from the workers. CFDT delegate Patrick Testard later said of Estrosi’s figures, “I don’t know where those came from, but they’re not right”.

Caroline Substelny, the lawyer for the Sodimatex workers, told the *Journal du Dimanche* that workers had in fact only received €10,000 beyond the legal minimum.

Sodimatex workers are being cheated, even of the pitiful sums promised by the unions, and forced onto a job market with few prospects for decent-paying work. Official unemployment rate in the Oise *département* stands at 12.5 percent. A town of roughly 14,000 people, Crépy-en-Valois lost 1,000 jobs in 2003, when excavator and hydraulic motor builder Case Poclair closed its plant there.

WSWS spoke to Mrs Cousin, while leafleting at a supermarket after being expelled from the Sodimatex plant.

She explained she had just lost her job as a temp accountant: “Jobs here are almost all gone. People who have lived here for generations say it’s going from bad to worse. If you’re over 40, virtually everyone is facing the axe. There are supermarket jobs, but they pay very little...or you can earn minimum wage as a baggage handler at Roissy airport—but then you have to pay for gas, and fees. Can you do that on a few hundred euros a month?”

She said that in the region, “about 50 percent of the workforce is either unemployed or working jobs that they don’t really want”.

Asked about her views of the trade unions and the “left” parties, she said, “They don’t feel concerned by what is going on...left, right, there is no difference. I understand why people take bosses hostage; you see a lot of things as an accountant”.

The role of the ex-left

The “left” (or ex-left) parties created the political climate in which the trade unions could carry out such a shameless betrayal of the workers. On their various websites, in any case, they have not commented on the Sodimatex affair since the sell-out.

During the struggle itself, however, the ex-left groups issued several appeals, aiming to tie the workers to the trade union bureaucracy. They all

laid out the same perspective: pretending that Trèves was shutting down the plant independently of the state and the unions, and calling on the government and Industry Minister Christian Estrosi to intervene to organize a severance package and the shutdown of the plant.

In an April 2 statement—immediately after workers threatened to blow up the plant—French Communist Party general secretary Marie-Georges Buffet called the decision to close the plant “scandalous”. She demanded that Sodimatex workers be given €21,000 in severance pay, insisting that “Estrosi has a duty to intervene so that the negotiations [i.e., between unions and the authorities to arrange the plant shutdown] can continue”.

In an article posted on April 15—but apparently written before the shutdown vote—Besancenot’s NPA made similar points. It said that Trèves’ decision to take €55 million in FMEA funds and then shut down the plants was a “good reason” for “Estrosi to get mad”. Standing behind the unions’ demand for a €21,000 severance package, it hopefully noted, “It’s not sure that Estrosi might not get mad again”, prior to the April 13 vote—as though by pressure Estrosi might be made a friend of the workers.

In its April 2 statement, Lutte Ouvrière called for Sodimatex workers’ “modest demands at least to be satisfied”. It made a moral appeal to the government: “Does indecency know no bounds? After having filled the wallets of this delinquent company with public funds, does the minister [Labor Minister Eric Woerth] have to make himself their accomplice?” It closed by asserting that it was time for “justice to be done”.

To answer LO’s question—posed by a party still formally claiming to be Trotskyist!—yes, Woerth and Estrosi and the rest of France’s bourgeois government are, with the unions, accomplices of Trèves and the banks. This is not only the conclusion one reaches by examining the FMEA and the particulars of the Sodimatex case. It is also the ABC of Marxism, which all of the ex-left parties reject.

These parties have rendered an essential service to the bourgeoisie, by implicitly suggesting to workers that the most left-wing course of action available to the working class was to rely utterly on the decisions of the state. This has left the working class defenceless during the economic crisis, as the state organizes the wrecking of wages and production.

The ex-left’s decision to politically disarm the working class goes in tandem with a decision to isolate each individual factory struggle. 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”.

The disunity of workers’ struggles has even attracted commentary in the mainstream press. *Le Monde* recently noted the large number of strikes taking place, citing over a dozen ongoing struggles, and commented that the rise of social struggles was “discreet”. This is a bourgeois journalist’s way of saying that—despite the “faster trend of radicalization” and “tougher reactions” by the workers—bourgeois politicians can go about their day-to-day affairs undisturbed, cutting social programs and shutting down plants.

The essential task facing workers and socialist-minded students and intellectuals is to articulate and popularize the socialist perspective needed so that workers can mount a broad political offensive against the state and the trade unions.

This is inseparable from a struggle in the working class to re-establish the basic principles of Marxism, which the ex-left distorts and betrays. This underscores the political significance of the *World Socialist Web Site*—created as an organ to report on, unify, and provide political leadership to the struggles of the working class, while providing a forum for the rebirth of Marxist and Trotskyist culture in the working class.

As the experience of Sodimatex has shown, this is the precondition to

any serious attempt by workers to defend themselves against the unions, the state, and the banks.



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