

Italian unions deal another blow to Fiat autoworkers

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In a 2-day consultative vote held on May 2-3, Italian auto workers at the historic Bertone plant voted overwhelmingly in favor of a plan promoted by the plant's owner Fiat and supported by trade unions.

The plan would invest €550 million, in exchange for restructuring labor relations along the lines of the previous Pomigliano D'Arco and Mirafiori contracts. (See "Unprecedented attacks on Fiat workers" and "The Fiat vote in Turin: Unions push through historic attack on Italian workers").

This defeat is the direct result of the policies of trade unions, particularly of FIOM-CGIL which has the majority of union delegates at the Bertone plant, and their supporters in the bourgeois "left" parties. The unions openly voted in favor of the Fiat plan, though FIOM continues to hypocritically pose as the opponent of Fiat's policies. In deeds, however, the union backed investors' demands for a major attack on wages and working hours.

FIOM delegate Pino Viola justified FIOM's position in a press statement: "We shall not be divided between those who want to work and those who want to defend their rights because we started this battle all together and all together we must carry it forward. We shall not allow anyone, especially the company, to assign the responsibility on us for not making the investment."

Significantly, the workers were not informed of the precise terms to be imposed. In effect, they were forced to extend Fiat and the unions a blank cheque on working conditions, in exchange for a promise of keeping production at Bertone. However, previous plans included 10-hour shifts, the tripling of compulsory overtime, and broad attacks on working conditions.

The unions have refused to organize any industrial action against Fiat's plans. Instead, after its betrayal at

the Mirafiori plant, FIOM decided to pursue a series of lawsuits against Fiat on the basis that Fiat-SpA and Fiat-Industrial aim to transfer production away from Italy, allegedly in violation of Italian and European regulations.

This nationalist stance pitted Italian workers against their class brothers and sisters worldwide—especially those who work at Fiat or Chrysler plants in the United States, Serbia, Brazil, or Poland. It was also a pretext to avoid organizing a struggle, diverting the workers behind a perspective of waiting to be saved by the courts.

FIOM's president Maurizio Landini declared that: "the goal of the recourse is to nullify the Pomigliano and Mirafiori agreements." At the same time, Landini stated that: "we won't leave syndical work to the judges. FIOM will continue to sit at the negotiating table and defend rights."

As bankrupt and cowardly as FIOM's strategy was, however, the union was ultimately forced to abandon it, as it threatened to produce a victory for the workers. After nine unexpected court victories, FIOM announced it would abandon the judicial proceedings and return to the negotiating table with the other unions and the bosses.

Meanwhile, in the Melfi plant that will soon be subject to a similar vote, 10 FIOM delegates have already come out in favor of the Fiat proposal, which will also be a further elaboration of the Mirafiori deal.

In fact, on March 31, FIOM signed an agreement with the other unions that introduces the Ergo Uas system, a labor scheduling system that is precursory to the same conditions established by the Mirafiori agreement.

More openly right-wing unions, FIM-CISL and UILM-UIL, have publicly called on workers to back the Fiat contracts and are now turning to an alliance

with FIOM, asking FIOM to explain “the situation” to workers.

The nationalist orientation of the unions and their political supporters underlies their capitulation to the cuts. In a globally “integrated” production system, where production can easily be shifted internationally, attempts to keep production in the old industrialized countries on the basis of competition and the profit system means imposing massive wage cuts on the workers.

This is an international phenomenon. Indeed, FIOM’s parent union federation CGIL tries to justify its betrayal of the workers by citing that of the American UAW auto union.

The Italian union says: “the crisis of the auto industry in the US, especially Chrysler, demonstrates the dramatic collapse of the company-specific model. In that reality what would follow the company’s default would have been not only the loss of jobs, but also of the pensions and health care benefits of all workers and retired workers. Therefore, it concludes, Bob King and UAW had no choice: they had to convert their credits [i.e., the VEBA pension fund] into stock in order not to lose everything, and accept the agreement negotiated between Obama and Marchionne.”

In the immediate aftermath of Chrysler’s bankruptcy, as President Obama impertinently announced that the court ruling would “save jobs,” he and the UAW used the threat of bankruptcy to blackmail workers and convince them to give up major concessions. This included the halving of wages for new hires.

Amid the crisis of the Italian auto industry, this is precisely the type of measure FIOM and the other unions are facilitating. The crisis is pressuring the bourgeoisie to intensify its attacks on workers, including the elimination of national collective bargaining agreements, as in the case of the Mirafiori agreement.

FIOM’s agreement with the UAW’s policies was particularly exposed at the end of last September, when a “solidarity meeting” took place between UAW’s Bob King, vice president General Holiefield and two other UAW representatives on one side, and FIOM general secretary Maurizio Landini, national secretary Giorgio Airaud and international officer Alessandra Mecozzi.

FIOM’s web site reports that in the two hours they met, FIOM reported on the state of relations with Fiat

in Italy and the situation in the different plants. There was an exchange of assessments and opinions, and it was mutually agreed that it was necessary to reinforce the relation between FIOM and UAW.

It was also agreed to rapidly establish a global Fiat/Chrysler trade-union network, with the support of another international union (FISM, or International Metalworkers Federation in the US), to seal an International Cadre Agreement with the company. FIOM publicly thanked King and Holiefield for their help at a demonstration in Italy held shortly after the September meeting.

The union betrayal is made possible by political vacuum that exists on the left, and notably the active support of the bourgeois “left” parties—from the Democratic Party (PD) to *Rifondazione Comunista*, to the Pabloite *Sinistra Critica*. Tied to the unions and compromised by the pension cuts and wars they forced through when in government in 2006-2008, they have made no serious attempt to rally opposition to the discredited government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

This is not attributable primarily to their political cowardice, but to their support for attacks on the working class. Speaking of the Fiat contract, PD senator Tiziano Treu approvingly declared: “everything is right, that there is a climate of awareness, participation not hysteria.”

Rifondazione called the vote “desperate,” but stood in full solidarity with what it calls an “intelligent move, a historic decision.”

The Pabloite *Sinistra Critica* bent over backwards to justify FIOM’s support for Marchionne’s plan. Its statement called it “a decision destined to put a new face on the Fiat issue, with a FIOM that changes position from previous consultations, even though it keeps its hands clean with a company that should no longer have any excuse for not making the promised investment.” For these ex-“left” forces as for the unions, capital must rule.



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