

French NPA prepares international betrayal of auto workers' struggles

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Auto companies are using the drastic attacks on US auto workers and the rise of auto plants in Eastern Europe, Asia, and North Africa to mount an offensive against auto workers in Europe. In its drive to lower wages and benefits for auto workers internationally, the auto bosses and national governments are relying on the services of the union tops and their political defenders in middle-class parties like France's New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA).

On May 28 and 29 a European automobile industry conference was held in Amsterdam, bringing together representatives of several trade union organisations and the NPA. It was attended by the NPA's candidate for the 2012 French presidential election, Philippe Poutou of the CGT-Ford union; bureaucrats of the Italian Stalinist FIOM union that is active at Fiat; Polish union officials from Fiat and Opel; and Diane Feeley, a supporter of the American United Auto Workers (UAW) union.

According to the Amsterdam conference statement published by the NPA, there will be a permanent collaboration and exchange of ideas between these organisations. The document declares: "We have decided to set up a permanent information network open to all tendencies and militants who refuse to go along with the crisis of the automobile bosses."

Although appearing to express opposition to the decline in the living standards of workers, the meeting in fact prepared broader attacks on auto workers. Its goal was to prepare further defeats by tying auto workers to a perspective of subordinating workers to corrupt union bureaucracies determined to prevent a political struggle by the working class.

The meeting took place shortly before PSA-Peugeot-Citroën's June announcement that the company was intending to close 3 factories: at Aulnay-sous-Bois (3,600 workers) near Paris, Sevel Nord (2,800) in northern

France, and also its plant in Madrid, Spain (3,100 workers).

These closures are part of a world plan developed by PSA called "factory compacting." It involves the massive reorganisation of the auto industry under the conditions of ruthless competition being exacerbated by the world economic crisis, notably in France. According to OICA statistics, the production of vehicles in France fell nearly a third, from 3,015,854 in 2007 to 2,227,742 in 2010.

This was caused by a series of outsourcing decisions and plant closures in France, especially after the September 2008 financial crash. This policy was planned at auto industry conferences organised by President Nicolas Sarkozy ("The Estates-General for Automobiles") with French auto bosses and union officials and French and Arab financiers early in 2009.

The NPA gave its support to this offensive against the workers by the bosses and the unions. During struggles against auto plant closures in 2009, it supported a union campaign for severance bonuses for the workers, though it meant that the workers lost their jobs. The NPA opposed a political struggle by workers to save their jobs, which would only have been possible if it had been carried out independently from, and in opposition to, the CGT. (See also: "How France's petty-bourgeois 'left' betrays workers—The experience of Goodyear and Continental").

The NPA will now be in permanent discussion with members of organisations which are carrying out massive attacks on the workers—a fact which the statement attempts to hide behind vague, pedantic jargon. The NPA does not criticise these organisations and collaborates with them, because it seeks to carry out similar attacks in France.

The silence on the role of the UAW in the US is particularly significant. Feeley is a member of the

political group Solidarity, and worked with her fellow member Wendy Thompson—president of Local 235 at American Axle—to tie the 2008 American Axle strike to the UAW International, which stabbed the struggle in the back. She then participated in the Autoworkers Caravan organization, which claimed that workers should fight for the Obama administration to give a greater role to the UAW bureaucracy in its 2009 restructuring of the American auto industry.

Her organization is still doing everything possible in the current UAW contract negotiations to block a rebellion against the UAW and a political struggle by the working class.

There is not a word in the NPA's Amsterdam conference document about the betrayal of the UAW in collaborating with the reorganisation of the motor industry carried out by the Obama administration.

The UAW profited from Chrysler's declaration of bankruptcy to become a major shareholder of the American company. Also the UAW holds a 17.5 percent share in General Motors, the second biggest shareholder after the state. The holdings of the union have gone from \$1.1 to \$1.2 billion. According to the US Department of Labor, the UAW spent, in 2009, \$96 million in salaries for its representatives, regional officials, organisers and others.

In exchange for these funds received by the UAW, the union imposed the closure of dozens of GM factories in the US and internationally and the destruction of thousands of jobs. It gave the go-ahead for a 50 percent cut of the salaries for new-hires in the United States.

The UAW's main concern is to carry out a policy which excludes any struggle against the auto bosses, facilitating the brutal exploitation of US auto workers. All attempts to struggle against the auto companies and the UAW were ferociously opposed by the union.

In 2007, the UAW International expelled the whole of the negotiating committee of UAW Local 3520 in Cleveland and had Freightliner sack them for having organised "an unauthorised strike." The unannounced strike—against salary and working conditions concessions, which the UAW had secretly agreed to—was decided after the members of the union had approved strike action by a 98.4 percent vote in favour.

UAW officials arrived to break the strike but, after failing to convince the workers to accept the concessions, in collaboration with the management of the plant, circulated petitions calling for a revote. With the threat of

sacking held over workers' heads, the contract was rammed through in a second vote.

These dramatic attacks on American workers have international implications. In Europe and France there will be an offensive against the workers, as the European bourgeoisie responds to the restructuring of the US auto industry.

The presence of the Italian FIOM at the Amsterdam conference is particularly revealing. The union helped Fiat—a major shareholder in Chrysler together with the UAW—to import to Italy the sort of attacks carried out by Chrysler, the UAW and Obama against the workers in Detroit.

Contracts negotiated by FIOM and other Fiat unions include measures like a 2-hour increase in the work day without corresponding wage increases; increasing mandatory overtime from 40 to 120 hours per year; and the abolition of national bargaining to move towards a principle of plant-by-plant contract negotiations. Fiat CEO Sergio Marchionne threatened to outsource Fiat's Italian operations to Poland if workers did not agree to these changes.

The NPA document declares, "The bosses' offensives are primarily aimed at the unions that directly face up to their politics, but it extends today to all labor legislation and trade union organisations." In fact, this is a lie: no trade union in the automobile industry has been broken, either in Italy or in the US. Management at all the firms in question has decided to collaborate with the unions to obtain contracts that massively attack the wages and social rights of the workers.

The attacks of the state and of the auto companies are not directed against the unions, but with the complicity of the unions and the NPA against the workers. This underlines the importance of a political and industrial struggle of the working class, independent of the unions and petty-bourgeois parties like the NPA, to bring down anti-working class governments and nationalize the auto industry under workers' control.



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