

Workers occupy ArcelorMittal site at Florange in France

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On February 20, a hundred workers together with union representatives took over the management offices at the ArcelorMittal site in Florange, to oppose the continuation of short-time working and management threats to close the plant.

La Tribune of February 20 wrote, “Workers at the factory are planning a spectacular action once a week until the second round of the elections. They are threatening to make the issue a nightmare for the government if it does not pressurize ArcelorMittal into reopening the site.”

ArcelorMittal’s corporate committee confirmed at the end of February that it would not restart operations at Florange during the second quarter. The purchase by the Mittal group of 60,000 tons of steel slabs from its Russian competitor Severstal to deal with the near saturation of its Dunquerque blast furnace arouses fears of the closure of the site in northeast France. The site employs 5,000 workers, including 3,000 on permanent contracts.

On March 3, following measures promised by President Sarkozy to improve the installations, the workers occupied the entrances and the exits of the marshalling yard that supplies the factory, as well as the railway lines between Metz and Luxembourg, for two hours.

The trade unions and political parties are trying to turn the workers’ struggle into a presidential electioneering event. François Hollande, the Socialist Party (PS) presidential candidate, visited the site, where he was greeted in a “highly charged atmosphere”, according to the *Nouvel Observateur*. Hollande indicated that he wanted to pass laws to prevent the closure of the plant.

As part of his re-election campaign, Sarkozy said that he has negotiated with the Mittal group for it to invest

€17 million to develop new installations and products.

Meanwhile, the political establishment is also preparing the conditions for the harsh repression of the workers. On March 7, the Thionville court ordered the police to intervene to remove the workers present on the site. The police have not yet intervened, however, preferring to wait for the outcome of the negotiations between the unions and management.

According to the statements of the Florange union leaders, no call for broad support from the working class for the defence of the Mittal workers at Florange will be made. The unions withdrew the strike pickets on March 9 without having won any concessions, promising only to continue the actions. The unions’ decision seems to have aimed to end the strike before it set off an explosion of workers’ struggles.

The working class must organise the defence of the Florange workers and carry out a struggle to expose Hollande and Sarkozy’s empty promises independently of the unions. As they did in the fight against the pension reform in 2010, if there is a confrontation with the police the trade unions will act to let the police regain control of the workplace and oppose mobilising a broader struggle of the working class. Their aim is to limit the struggle of the Florange workers to providing election publicity for Hollande.

The bourgeois candidates’ guarantees are a fraud, to trick ArcelorMittal workers and to hide from voters the anti-working class measures that they intend to impose if they are elected. Such guarantees have been made in the past and have not prevented ArcelorMittal from continuing to threaten the jobs and social rights of workers.

In October 2011, in exchange for the authorisation of a state-assisted short-time working scheme, the state had already gotten agreement from the company to

embark on a €4.2 million maintenance programme for 2012, €2 million of which was earmarked for a blast furnace at Florange.

Le Monde reports that the management confirmed it would restart in the second quarter of 2012, but the investment for the second blast furnace depended on an upturn in the steel industry. After March 9, management is supposed to have planned to release €17 million whether or not there was an upturn.

According to the World Steel Federation, world production for the beginning of the year is sharply down, with a decline of 7.8 percent in January in relation to the same month in 2011—notably because of a strong decline in Chinese steel production. Out of Mittal's 25 blast furnaces in Europe, only 16 are active, due to the international economic downturn.

Just like Hollande's promise to tax high incomes at 75 percent, his promise to legislate against the closure of the factory is yet another attempt to pull the wool over workers' eyes. For the bourgeoisie and thus for Hollande, industrial activity will be maintained only if it is competitive with its international rivals. The PS therefore aims to enforce a drastic cut in wages and living standards on the working class.

The petty-bourgeois "left" tendencies are as usual playing a treacherous role. The Pabloite New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) expressed itself through its presidential candidate, Philippe Poutou, who supports Hollande's plans for legislation. Poutou said that such a law would only need three articles: "One: making sacking illegal; two: banning relocation; three: the requisitioning of factories due for closure."

Thus the NPA is participating in Hollande's deception, trying in this way to push the working class towards the PS. Poutou wants to convince people that an action led by the trade union bureaucracy can force the adoption of such a law by a "left" majority in the National Assembly, while Hollande openly admits that he is intending to carry out a policy of budgetary austerity. In fact, the collaboration between the union bureaucracy and the state has above all enabled the bourgeoisie to shut hundreds of industrial sites since the 2008 economic crisis.

Workers must create their own committees of action and call for the mobilisation of the working class to defend workers and break from the trade unions and all the political tendencies allied to Stalinism and

Pabloism. Workers will get nothing of lasting value from the state or ArcelorMittal. The action committees must carry out a political struggle to mobilise the widest layers of the proletariat in France and throughout the world on a revolutionary socialist perspective against the bourgeoisie.



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