

For a European-wide struggle to defend auto jobs

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The European auto industry faces total devastation. According to industry analysts, capacity must be reduced by at least 5 million units. This means the closure of up to 20 assembly plants, 10 engine plants, 10 transmission plants and 30 stamping plants, resulting in the destruction of 115,000 jobs, according to the US industry website *autoline.tv*.

In the last week alone, the following job cuts were announced: 8,000 at PSA Peugeot Citroën; 6,000 at Ford and 2,600 at Opel. At least the same number will be hit in the supply chain. Even the so-called premium brands BMW and Daimler are planning savings running to billions. In the utility vehicle sector Fiat subsidiary Iveco will close five European plants. MAN has sent 15,000 workers home for four weeks and is planning further short-time working at the end of the year.

Plant closures, short-time working and wage cuts are being presented as a necessary means to cut back on so-called overcapacity and make the European auto industry competitive once again. The trade unions—including IG Metall, ABVV-Metaal, the CGT and TUC—accept this and claim concessions are the only way to “save jobs”.

In reality, auto workers are being forced to pay for the worst breakdown of the capitalist profit system since the Great Depression and World War II. The car companies—backed by the corporate-controlled governments in every country—insist that workers must be made to pay for this crisis by sacrificing all of the social achievements won by the working class in the post-war period.

It is impossible to fight this assault on the basis of the nationalist and pro-capitalist program of the trade unions. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, poverty wages paid to workers in Eastern Europe, China and the other Asian countries have been systematically used to depress wages around the world. The global corporations have used the international financial crisis of 2008 to accelerate the tempo of these attacks. In the US, the Obama administration used the forced bankruptcy and restructuring of the auto industry to destroy tens of thousands of jobs, gut health care and pension protections and halve the wages of new hires. Now workers in Europe face the same fate.

The devastation of the auto industry is inseparably linked to the austerity measures dictated by the European Union, which is carrying out a savage reduction in the living standards of working people in Greece, Spain, Portugal and other countries. In every country the result is the same: workers' incomes are forced down,

social benefits destroyed and an army of the unemployed created, while stock markets rise, the bank accounts of the super-rich swell and managers' incomes explode.

The EU's austerity diktats have directly contributed to deepening the crisis of the auto industry. The austerity measures mean large sections of the population can no longer afford a car: the number of new registrations in Spain has fallen by 37 percent in one year, in Italy by 26 percent and in France by 18 percent.

Under these conditions, jobs and wages in the auto industry can only be defended within the context of an international socialist program that sets as its goal the abolition of capitalism and the creation of a United Socialist States of Europe.

All plant closings and wage cuts must be opposed. The defence of jobs and social rights cannot be subordinated to the “competitiveness” of the plants affected or the company's balance sheet. A well-paid job is an inalienable right that the working class must defend under all circumstances.

The auto companies—like the other large corporations, banks and large fortunes—must be placed under social ownership and the democratic control of the working class. On this basis, economic life can be reorganized on a higher foundation, which serves the needs of working people and society as a whole, rather than profit-grubbing billionaires, banks and speculators.

Such a program requires the independent mobilisation of the working class. All of the establishment parties, whether nominally “left” or “right”, categorically reject this. They all defend capitalist private property and social cutbacks. Auto workers face a special responsibility. The defence of their jobs and social rights is a major step towards the mobilisation of the working class as a whole.

Auto workers must unite across individual plants and national borders. There is hardly another industry that is organised on such a global scale as the auto industry. Multi-national corporations such as General Motors, Volkswagen, Fiat-Chrysler, Ford or Toyota plan and produce across the globe, ruthlessly playing off workers in one country against those in another.

The biggest obstacles standing in the way of such a struggle are the trade unions and the organisations that support them. The unions are not organisations of the working class, but are a privileged bureaucratic apparatus that collaborates closely with management and strangles all resistance by the working class. When they occasionally call for strikes and protests, it is only to blow off steam and block the development of a struggle against the

corporations and the capitalist system.

In the US, the United Auto Workers union played the key role in Obama's historic attack on auto workers—long the highest paid industrial workers in the US. In return for its collaboration in imposing poverty wages, speed up and sweatshop conditions, the UAW was rewarded with billions in company shares. This has guaranteed the union executives a large income, independent of the membership dues, which rises in proportion to the increasing exploitation of auto workers. UAW chief Bob King has now been brought to Europe, where he is working with IG Metall and the CGT to impose the same conditions.

The unions and works councils in Europe, and above all Germany, exercise the role of middle management. They sit on company supervisory boards and participate in all the major decisions. In the post-war period, in the framework of the “social market economy”, they were able to negotiate concessions and compromises. In many of the industrial areas now being targeted for plant closings, auto plants were built in the 1960s to prevent explosive struggles against the shutdown of steel mills and mines.

Under conditions of globalisation and an international crisis of capitalism, the European bourgeoisie is pursuing the same strategy of social counter-revolution as its American counterparts. The European unions act as a labor police force imposing these brutal conditions. Over the last two decades, not a single wage cut, sacking or plant closure in the European auto industry has occurred without the signature of the trade unions. If workers seek to resist, they face intimidation or are the first to be sacked.

While the unions collaborate closely with the company management on a national, international and European level, at factory level they play off workers at one location against another. Time and again, they claim that a plant can only be preserved if it improves its competitiveness by cutting jobs and making concessions on wages—until it is then closed completely. The workers at Fiat Termini Imerese, at Opel Antwerp, Ford Gent and Opel Bochum—to name just a few—are only the most recent victims of this strategy.

The unions are rewarded for their services with lavish incomes and numerous privileges. The IG Metall chair Berthold Huber receives a basic income of 160,000 euros, not including bonuses. The leaders of the works councils Wolfgang Schäfer-Klug (Opel) and Bernd Osterloh (VW) enjoy similar returns. For years, Volkswagen has maintained a slush fund running to millions, used to grease the palms of the works council members.

Breaking with the privileged and corrupt unions and works councils is a precondition for the defence of jobs in the auto industry. To this end, independent Action Committees must be formed.

Such Action Committees must establish close contact to other plants and workers across the world and coordinate their struggles. The last few years have seen struggles of auto workers in China, India, the USA and many European locations, who are all facing the same attacks by the same companies.

The Action Committees must ensure that the company books are opened for scrutiny and that the confidential negotiations and secret talks between the unions and management are made public. They must prepare strikes and other combat measures to defend

jobs and wages. They must prevent the shutdown of production facilities, upon which whole regions and large sections of the population depend for their existence, by organising the occupation of all plants and departments threatened with closure.

Such a mobilisation would be the first step in the struggle for a workers' government, which would nationalise the large corporations and banks and place them under democratic control, within the framework of the United Socialist States of Europe.

The most important condition for the realisation of such a socialist perspective is the building of a new, international and revolutionary party of the working class.

The establishment parties have long abandoned any defence of the interests of the vast majority of the population. The social democratic and Labour parties compete with the conservatives and liberals in the destruction of social benefits and rights. The German Left Party and similar organisations serve as their fig leaf.

Should the working class fail to seize the political initiative, the continent is threatened once again by barbarism and war. The crisis and decay of capitalist society are far advanced. Increasingly, the ruling class is resorting to authoritarian methods to impose their attacks on the population. Right-wing, racist and openly fascist organisations such as Jobbik in Hungary, the National Front in France and Chrysi Avgi (Golden Dawn) in Greece are being encouraged by the state and find support among desperate social layers.

We appeal to all auto workers: Read the *World Socialist Web Site*, the daily organ of the International Committee of the Fourth International. Make contact with the editorial board. We will support you in the formation of Action Committees and in the making of international contacts. Join the Socialist Equality Party/ Partei für Soziale Gleichheit and help to build a new revolutionary leadership in the working class.



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