

# Belgium: 20,000 protest against closure of Ford plant in Genk

**Our reporters**

**13 November 2012**

On Sunday, around 20,000 people demonstrated in the town of Genk in northern Belgium against the closure of the local Ford plant. On October 24, Ford management announced the plant was to be closed, throwing 4,600 workers at the factory out of work and eliminating more than 5,000 jobs in related industries. Genk was a production site for the midsize Mondeo model, the Sportvan S-Max and the Galaxy van.

Joining workers from the plant and their supporters were representatives from other factories, including Audi Brussels and Philips. About 500 Ford workers had traveled in 10 buses from Germany to participate.

The closure of the Ford plant will have huge consequences for the already struggling local economy. Just two years ago the Opel plant in Antwerp, about 100 kilometres away, was closed.

Genk and the province of Limburg was once an industrial centre with steel mills and coal mines. The first of the area's three mines closed in Genk in the 1960s; the remaining two pits went 20 years later. Steel is now produced only by ArcelorMittal, employing just a few hundred workers. Opened in 1964, the Ford plant is by far the largest employer in the town of 65,000 inhabitants.

The demonstration reflected the decline of jobs and prospects in the town. Protesters marched out of the city centre to a former colliery site, which now houses a multiplex cinema complex.

The unions and the works councils have repeatedly made concessions to the company to keep production in Genk. Only two years ago they had agreed to a pay cut of 10 percent. Nevertheless, production in Genk is now to be transferred to a Ford plant in Spain with parts of Spanish production transferred to the company's factory in Saarlouis, Germany.

The union-organized demonstration under the motto "March for the Future" was limited to a pathetic appeal directed at Ford management to face up to its

"responsibility". On Tuesday production at the Ford plant will continue for three days while the unions negotiate redundancy measures.

The unions have already accepted closure of the factory and are merely haggling over severance pay. Rohnny Champagne, the regional chairman of the social democratic trade union federation ABVV-Metaal, confirmed this at the rally on Sunday. "To secure the future of our children let's make sure we are not simply slaughtered by the Americans," he declared. If that meant early retirement, he said, "then so be it."

The workers who spoke with WSWS reporters were disappointed and angry. They were well aware that the only way to defend the factory was with the international solidarity of Ford and other workers. They had little confidence in the unions.

Franco Langone is one of the older Ford workers who Champagne wants to force into early retirement. He has worked at Ford for 35 years and is currently employed on the assembly line of the S-Max. Aged 52, he sees no chance of getting a job elsewhere.

"When Ford closes I can line up at the labour office and collect my stamp", Langone said. He said that more had to be done, including strike action at all of Ford's European plants. "The workers have to unite and speak with one voice. But the unions are opposed to this." Officials were sitting together with management and negotiating terms for closure, he said.

Decraie Chartal formerly worked at the now-closed Opel plant in Antwerp. She had arranged to meet a few other former colleagues via Facebook to drive together to Genk and support the Ford workers. "We've been through it all before; we must learn to draw lessons", she said. Workers must unite across borders. The permanent concessions granted by the unions were "the beginning of the end and prepared the closing."

Decraie was annoyed by the fact that workers were

being continually lectured from all sides to abide by the law. The company had blatantly violated laws and contract agreements. “In Antwerp we had a contract guaranteeing production until 2016, and at Ford up to 2020”, she said.

Cynthia and her friend Rogerio are worried about their future. Cynthia, 21, currently has a 15-month apprenticeship with Ford working on the production line. Rogerio, 23, works at a supplier company and earns only €1,500 (US\$1,900) a month.

“We live together”, Cynthia told us. “We have to pay rent, electricity and everything else.” They had originally planned to buy an apartment or small house and have children. “Just normal wishes”, she said. “But if we have no more work, we cannot afford to do that.” The older colleagues who already have a house and family were even worse off.

Rogerio interjected that the same applied across all Europe. Cynthia’s parents had emigrated to Belgium from Spain decades ago while Rogerio has Portuguese roots. Both have relatives in Spain and Portugal, who report that the situation is terrible.

Rogerio was angry with the decision to move production of the Mondeo to Spain although Genk has been guaranteed production. “This is a breach of contract”, he said. Both had heard from relatives that Spanish Ford workers had been informed that production of the Mondeo was to be switched to Germany. It was all very confusing, and nobody knew what was really going on.

Apparently the trade unions and works councils at various European locations were still haggling over the division of the Belgian production. Cynthia and Rogerio had no time for the unions. “The unions have done nothing for us”, Rogerio declared. “Nobody does anything for us”, Cynthia added. “That’s why we’re here. We want to work.”

Together with his older brother, Cengiz Baykal has worked for Ford for 20 years. The 39-year-old is employed in the pressing plant. He emigrated from Turkey to Belgium at the age of two and a half. His father had worked at the local colliery. In 1983, his father had lost his job but declared that he was happy that his two sons had followed his advice and begun working at Ford. Now the family does not know how it will survive.

Cengiz said that the workforce had expected cuts and job losses for some time, “But we thought at worst there would be a reduction of about 1,500 jobs—and then I find out news of the closure.” The company and union

representatives have always stressed that the pressing plant was central to the entire European production. He did not know where the work was to be done.

Cengiz and his colleagues did not understand why production was being relocated within Europe. “If they went to Asia I could understand”, he said. Belgian workers could not compete with the low wages paid in countries such as China.

“But why Spain and Germany? Are the wages so much lower than here?” he asked. Like his colleagues he had always worked hard and at times earned good money. “If we have to take other jobs we will all have to accept lower wages”, he added.

Cengiz also has no time for the unions and works councils: “They do not represent the workers.” Previously the situation had been different. But now “We do not know what they discuss behind closed doors with management.”

Cengiz also sees a connection with the welfare cuts in Europe. People in Greece, Spain or Portugal could simply no longer afford to buy the cars. This is one reason why Spanish workers were also suspicious, because they are now to produce the S-Max model. “The S-Max is a big expensive car. Who can afford it?” It is a question of time before jobs would be slashed in Spain, he said.

Cengiz thought that politicians in Brussels were the proper target for protests: “The EU is helping the banks, not workers. We are the only ones to pay for everything.”

He reported that on Wednesday last week about 170 representatives of the Christian and liberal unions had driven to the Ford plant in Cologne. When protesters then set off some firecrackers and ignited tires in front of the factory gate, all those present were apprehended by police and fingerprinted. Ten trade unionists were arrested. The prosecution wants to charge them with breach of the peace, criminal damage and minor bodily injury after some police officers claimed to have suffered an “acoustic trauma”.



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