

Renault and PSA Peugeot-Citroën workers in joint protest against factory closures

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Last Wednesday, four busloads of striking workers from the PSA car factory in Aulnay near Paris, who have been occupying the factory slated for closure since January 16, travelled to the neighbouring Renault plant in Flins to join workers also facing a fight against job losses and speedup.

The Aulnay plant is set to close in 2014 with the loss of 2,500 jobs. The Flins plant is also a candidate for closure. All told, Renault has announced it will eliminate 7,500 jobs, or 14 percent of its workforce of 44,000 in France, by 2016. This comes after the loss of 4,000 jobs through attrition over the last two years.

PSA is in a global alliance with US-based General Motors, which has announced the shutdown of its Opel factory in Bochum, Germany—the first auto plant to be closed in Germany since the end of the Second World War—and a wage freeze for its 20,000-member German workforce.

The threatened closure of two of Renault's 12 French factories led to a one-day strike by 600 workers at the Flins plant on January 23, which was joined by workers at several other Renault sites. Management is threatening to close plants if workers do not accept a “competitiveness agreement,” which, in addition to the job cuts, would clear the way to greatly intensify the exploitation of workers in the factories. Ongoing negotiations with the unions on the deal are due to be concluded by January 29. (See: “Renault announces 7,500 job cuts in France ”)

The PSA workers broke down the gates at Flins and joined Renault strikers with cries of “unity” and “the same struggle.” The protesters were addressed by leaders of the CGT (General Confederation of Labour—the union federation closely aligned with the Stalinist Communist Party) from Flins as well as PSA plants in Poissy and Aulnay.

Two days after PSA Aulnay workers began their strikes at, they were locked out by management. They were met by 15 busloads of riot police at the PSA Poissy plant near Paris when they called upon workers to join their action.

Management is planning to reopen the Aulnay plant on Monday with 100 private security guards stationed inside the factory. Union leaders at the local and national level have opposed any mass mobilisation of auto workers to defend their jobs and oppose police repression.

Instead, a local CGT communiqué called for the *préfet* (government representative) “to engage in the necessary initiatives to hold real tri-partite negotiations.” It urged the government “to use its pressure on the Peugeot PSA management to obtain a more open attitude to dialogue.”

While the unions have accepted the closure of Aulnay, workers walked out after the CGT criticized management for “divulging derisory propositions” within “the framework of negotiations after the announcement of the factory closure”.

The company’s attitude has hardened since three unions signed the Socialist Party’s “Job Security Agreement” on January 11, which slashes wages and gives employers the power to tear up work place rights in the name of improving the competitiveness of French industry.

The Hollande Socialist Party government is demanding that workers accept such agreements under the threat of losing their jobs. However, the minister of labour, Michel Sapin, claimed “there must not be blackmail” and that discussions with the unions must be “loyal”. In fact, the government itself is the major shareholder of Renault, still holding 15 percent of the shares, down from 53 percent when it was privatized

under President Mitterrand's Socialist Party government in 1994.

PSA boss Philippe Varin has made it clear that after eliminating more than 11,200 jobs at PSA's French sites he will launch a drive to cut labour costs and increase working hours and labour "flexibility" at all of the company's plants.

The joint Renault/PSA rally demonstrated the striving of workers to unify their struggles throughout the auto industry, but the CGT leaders offered no way forward. This would require the defeat of the Socialist Party government, something the unions are opposed to, having just voted it into office last May.

A CGT video of a speech by the Aulnay union delegate Philippe Julien shows that the unions are opposed to an extension of the strike to others factories, either in France or Europe. Julien expressed the wish for work-sharing among all the PSA auto plants and the need "to publicise the strike". He also called on the government to pass a law "forbidding layoffs."

This demand addressed to the anti-worker Socialist Party government has been a recurrent theme of the unions and pseudo-lefts before and after Hollande's election—which they wholeheartedly supported. Since then, the government has introduced a brutal austerity program and ripped up workplace rights with the January 11 agreement.

The unions are now proposing a joint day of action of PSA and Renault workers for January 29. This does not even involve a one-day general strike at all the company's French sites. At the same time, trade union leaders both nationally and in the engineering sector have maintained a deafening silence on the strike movement.

A leaflet issued by the joint trade union committee at Aulnay and endorsed by the CGT, CFDT (French Democratic Labour Confederation) and SUD (Solidarity, Unity and Democracy), simply states "this strike can become yours" and "we are perfectly conscious that we are not the only ones threatened". It makes an appeal for financial support, but makes no call for an extension of the strike. Although neither the CGT nor FO (Workers Force) signed the January 11 Job Security Agreement—in order to maintain some credibility among workers—they fully support the Socialist Party's program of making French capitalism more competitive at the expense of the working class.

The pseudo-left New Anti-capitalist Party issued a factory bulletin on Thursday placing its hopes in the non-signatory unions (CGT, FO) "to call for actions" to prevent the January 11 agreement from becoming law. Under the previous president, Nicolas Sarkozy, the CGT, FO, and other unions did the bidding of the government in attacking jobs and pensions. They have already shown that they will do nothing to oppose a new round of anti-working class attacks. The NPA's role is to cover up for these organisations and try to head off a rebellion against them by the working class.



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