

French Renault and PSA unions try to block fight against plant closures

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Representatives of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) and other unions met with French car manufacturers Renault and PSA Peugeot-Citroen Tuesday to offer their services to block opposition against plant closures and mass sackings and implement a new “competitiveness” deal that will slash labor costs and increase speedup. Tens of thousands of auto workers’ jobs are on the chopping block throughout Europe, including in France where PSA Peugeot-Citroen has announced 11,500 job cuts and Renault 8,000.

Some 400 workers out of 2,800 at PSA Peugeot-Citroen’s Aulnay-sous-Bois plant north of Paris have been on strike and occupying the factory since January 16, shutting down virtually all production. Police and guards supervised the breaking of picket lines by numbers of workers but strikers inside the factory prevented the resumption of production despite the presence of 200 management personnel drafted in from plants all over France.

In an effort to conceal their complicity with the employers and the Hollande Socialist Party (PS) government, local unions organized a demonstration outside the Ministry of Labour. They offered workers no way forward, instead advancing the bankrupt perspective that workers should appeal to the SP government to outlaw sackings at profitable companies. Only 400 people participated, mainly trade union officials and supporters of the pseudo-left New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA).

This is the latest in a series of manoeuvres by unions, most prominently the CGT, which is closely aligned with the Stalinist Communist Party (PCF), to prevent mass industrial action against the Hollande government’s austerity measures. With the official unemployment rate already at 10.5 percent, joblessness will continue to arise as 1,500 firms are carrying out closures and sackings. These include Pilpa, Bigard, Credit Agricole, Faurecia, FNAC, Ford, Fralib, Goodyear, PSA, Renault, Samsonite,

Sodimedical, Sanofi, Sony, Valeo, ZF, Coca-Cola, and Merck Serrono.

The struggle to unite PSA and Renault workers in a common strike was deliberately sabotaged. The CGT, led by Jean-Pierre Mercier, bussed workers to the nearby Renault Flins site and were featured on TV breaking down a gate to meet up with their Flins colleagues. While there is real sentiment for a common struggle, for the CGT this was only a publicity stunt.

The proposed day of action on January 29 was used to promote illusions in the PS government, not to mobilise workers in a political struggle to overthrow it. The unions have signed or acquiesced to Hollande’s “Agreement on Job Security”, which overrides protective legislation won in more than 100 years of struggle and allows companies to change wages and working hours and move workers within and between workplaces at will.

The CGT did not sign the agreement, but it has done nothing to oppose it. After meeting with Prime Minister Jean-Francois Ayrault, CGT general secretary Bernard Thibault, said, “We shall have very concrete work sessions with the Ministry of Labour to examine the document in detail.... The Prime Minister cannot ignore the opinion of the main workers’ organisation, even if it did not sign an agreement.”

Tuesday’s demonstration in front of the Ministry of Labour, organised by factory-based union committees dominated by the CGT, was held in support of the Parliament measure being proposed by the Left Front coalition of the PCF and the Left Party of Jean-Luc Melenchon to ban sackings and closures at profitable enterprises employing more than 250 workers. Drawn up by Stalinist lawyer Fiodor Rilov, the assumption is that the PS-dominated National Assembly could be persuaded to adopt the law, which would make the government’s key competitiveness measures illegal.

Rilov has used a legal technicality to get a court order,

announced on Tuesday, for the suspension of PSA's restructuring plans, including the closure of Aulnay. The aim of this is to undermine any independent initiative of workers and inculcate illusions in the capitalist courts and government. In any case, PSA has said the measure will not prevent it continuing with its negotiations with the unions on the plant closings and other cost-cutting measures.

Rilov has been the principal CGT advisor at Goodyear Tires in Amiens, whose 1,500 workers, after over four years of such legal wranglings, are awaiting a closure announcement on January 31 (see "Court decision gives French employers green light for mass layoffs").

The drive by the global auto giants to destroy tens, if not hundreds of thousands of jobs, and use the economic crisis impose American-style "labor flexibility" and wage cuts will not be stopped by Parliamentary manoeuvres. Throughout Europe, capitalist governments of the right or the bourgeois "left" are unified in carrying out a social counter-revolution.

The attacks on French auto workers are part of a European and worldwide reorganisation of the motor companies in line with the American auto industry. Overseen by the Obama administration and the United Auto Workers union (UAW), the companies closed several factories, cut 20,000 jobs and halved the wages of new hires in order to compete with Europe and internationally.

This global attack cannot be fought on a plant-by-plant basis or by pressuring capitalist governments but only on the basis of a strategy that unifies workers throughout Europe and the whole world to defend jobs and living standards. This requires a genuine socialist programme, including taking the auto industry out of the hands of the corporate executives and wealthy investors and putting it under the democratic control of the working class.



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