Goodyear France announces closure of its Amiens-Nord site

Pierre Mabut and Antoine Lerougetel
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Goodyear Tire, the US transnational, announced January 31 the closure of its Amiens-Nord plant with a loss of 1,173 jobs, out of the 3,200 remaining in France.

Since 2007, the Communist Party (PCF)-aligned CGT (General Confederation of Labour) union at the plant, has been able to block the company's layoff plans through the courts. This strategy excluded any perspective of industrial action uniting Goodyear workers with their colleagues at the seventeen Goodyear factories in Europe, other auto plants in France and internationally . Based in Akron, Ohio, Goodyear had a turnover of $22.8 billion in 2011 and employs some 71,000 workers and operates 53 plants in 22 countries.

The Goodyear group announced a 23 percent drop in profits worldwide last October. The company confirmed it had reached its objective of $US 1 billion dollars in savings and that new measures would be taken to cut costs.

The struggle in Amiens has been systematically isolated by the unions, notably the CGT, nationally, locally and at plant level, as have many other struggles since 2007. In this, they have been aided by the PCF and the pseudo-left New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) and Lutte Ouvrière (LO, Workers Struggle).

The narrow attempts by the factory's CGT section to ward off closure, led by Mikaël Wamen and Stalinist lawyer Fiodor Rilov during former President Nicolas Sarkozy's administration (2007-2012), failed to secure the plant's future. Those years were characterized by intense cooperation between CGT national secretary Bernard Thibault and Sarkozy, who famously said, when Thibault was having difficulty in selling out the railway workers' strike in November 2007, "Private Thibault must be saved."

Sarkozy understood the necessity of working with the unions to impose the austerity and destruction of workers rights required to boost French capitalism's profitability and competitiveness. This resulted in the CGT and CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour) unions signing in 2008 the "Common Position" to undermine national labour agreements. The latter was used as the basis for a law on union representation enhancing the status of CGT and CFDT officials, but opening up the possibility of deregulated working hours, freeing employers from national and industry-wide legal constraints. (See: "France: Unions collaborate with employers, government to deregulate working hours")

The new Socialist Party (PS) government's so-called Job Security Agreement of January 11 strengthens and consolidates Sarkozy's attacks on the labour code. Although the CGT did not sign up, the union is mounting no industrial action to defeat the measure, claiming it will negotiate "changes" before the agreement becomes law.

In 2009, the CGT at the Continental tyre plant in Clairoix, 80 kilometres from Amiens, negotiated a redundancy deal whereby, in exchange for abandoning the fight to keep the plant open and the unions' pledge "not to destroy or block any Continental sites in France or abroad", workers at Clairoix would receive a €50,000 [$US 68,000] bonus over and above the legally required redundancy compensation and other inducements.

Wamen paid tribute to the "very honourable" agreement "won in struggle by the Conti workers". He said that the aim was to get the job cuts withdrawn, but failing that, "€50,000 will be the minimum. ... There's money at Goodyear. The group must open its purse, otherwise there'll be trouble."

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The CGT, backed by the NPA, opposed industrial action against Goodyear's redundancy plan, which could have united Amiens workers with Clairoix workers and brought Continental and Goodyear workers at plants into struggle against the wave of sackings and closures throughout France and Europe. Over 1,000 French factories have closed since 2009 with the loss of 120,000 industrial jobs, with the motor industry the worst hit.

The CGT has persisted in seeking to create the illusion that workers' rights can be protected by going through the courts. Meanwhile, Goodyear has largely attained its goal through attrition at the Amiens plant, with a workforce reduced from 1,680 in 2007 to 1,173 today and the systematic dismantling of machinery. The company has made no investment at the plant in recent years. The latter is now running at only 15 percent of capacity and Goodyear claims that it lost €61 million at the plant in 2011. The CGT cites the transfer of production to the firm's eastern European plants.

Wamen and Rilov are at the centre of the fraudulent campaign undertaken by the Left Front (a coalition of the Communist Party and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Left Party), backed by the NPA, to persuade the PS government to introduce a law forbidding layoffs by companies making profits. In fact, the right-wing government of François Hollande is dedicated to improving corporate profits through job cuts.

Negotiations were broken off last September at Amiens between the CGT and Goodyear after the two parties reached an agreement in principle on a plan for "voluntary" redundancies and the sale to the American Titan group of the agricultural tyre production, keeping 536 jobs. The CGT withdrew its support at the last minute, claiming the company's "voluntary" scheme disguised forced layoffs and demanded a five-year guarantee of production instead of the two years proposed by Titan. The Socialist Party government is now attempting to restart negotiations between the CGT and the company on the basis of selling off the Amiens-Nord site's agricultural tyre business (500 jobs) to American Titan, while closing the car tyre section (700 jobs) **.** If this were to take place, it would be a disaster for Amiens, where the unemployment rate among 16-25-year-olds is already 57 percent. The PS government-imposed competitiveness agreements at the Florange steel works and Renault and PSA car plants will devastate entire regions. Minister of Industrial Recovery Arnaud Montebourg—who declared the closure of the PSA Aulnay plant "ineluctable" — is seeking to impose Goodyear's conditions. He has asked "the CGT to put some water in its wine, Goodyear to put some wine in its water and for Titan to drink both". Rilov claims Montebourg will "end up taking our side to demand a commitment from Titan in terms of production". Rilov also asserts that "the left [government of the PS] should do what it was elected to do, and not take the side of Medef [the French employers' association]."

Rilov knows full well that the Hollande PS government carries out the employers' diktats. Rilov and the CGT claim they have a proposal that would avert the total closure of the Amiens plant. "To unblock the situation, it would be enough if Titan were to commit itself in writing to maintaining production". Such a commitment, if it were forthcoming, would not be worth the paper it was written on.

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