

Unions suppress opposition to closure of Belgian Ford plant

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The three trade unions at the Ford auto plant in Genk, Belgium have systematically sought to undermine any effective resistance by the workforce following the announcement in late October last year that the factory would be closed by 2014.

The 4,600 workers at the plant, as well as the approximately 5,000 employed at associated suppliers, reacted with outrage to the news of the scheduled shutdown. The unions, however, accepted the closure plans from the start and merely declared their intention to achieve a “costly social plan”.

Rohnny Champagne, the regional chairman of the Social Democratic trade union federation (ABVV [General Federation of Belgian Labour]-Metaal), promised “to sell our skin at a high price in negotiations”, although it is clear that what is being sold is the workers’ skin and not union officials’.

Many workers refused to agree to such a sell-out and organized spontaneous walkouts. The unions then intensified their cooperation with Ford management. Along with the ABVV, the Christian ACV [Confederation of Christian Trade Unions] and liberal ACLVB [General Confederation of Liberal Trade Unions of Belgium] have members in Genk. The unions immediately began negotiations with the company and demanded that workers return to work. Nevertheless, there have been a series of spontaneous protests and disruptions on the production line.

The unions and management subsequently agreed the following process: after the first joint meeting, the negotiations were declared to have failed and a government-sponsored agency was established chaired by the mayor of Genk. To prevent further strikes and protests, the unions agreed to short-time working for the whole of December. This meant that workers had to sacrifice 40 percent of their salary.

A vigorous discussion then commenced within the

workforce, in which the necessity for a strike and the “betrayal of the unions” were central issues.

At the end of 2012, workers were sent letters from the arbitrator requesting them to vote on the labour dispute.

The workers were given three choices: First, for a strike; second, for the production of 1,000 cars a day, plus a bonus of 40 percent for the remaining life of the plant; third, for daily production of 950 cars, with a bonus of 25 percent.

In an accompanying letter, Ford management warned that in the event of industrial action, strikers would not receive any form of aid from the government, nor could they claim anything from their own strike fund.

The unions did not challenge the letter. Evidently the entire procedure had been agreed by both parties—company and the unions—in advance. Many workers were angry. The blackmail was obvious and the voting procedure was vulnerable to manipulation and falsification. Some workers reported they had not received any documents, others were given several ballots.

To participate in the vote, Genk workers were neither required to identify themselves at the plant or by means of their factory pass. They were merely called upon to return the ballot by post or hand it in at the factory.

The three unions made unmistakably clear they were opposed to a strike. Their aim was to shift the dispute from the factory into the courts, declaring that workers had to place their trust in the legal system. They accused Ford of breach of contract because two years before the unions had agreed—without consulting Ford employees—a 12-percent pay cut in exchange for a guarantee of jobs until 2020.

The result of the vote on January 7 only intensified the workers’ ire. Despite the ultimatum from the company, almost 47 percent of the workforce voted in favour of strike action. The unions then added together the results

for the other two options and claimed that 53 percent of the workforce had voted in favour of a resumption of work.

Union officials told furious workers that the voting farce was a “democratic decision” to be accepted by all. This provoked vehement protests, with a number of workers burning their union jackets in front of television cameras.

Workers at supplier companies in particular felt they had been deserted and left to the mercy of Ford management. While the average age of Ford workers is around 50, after years of job cuts, workers in the supplier companies are much younger. In addition, many of the latter workers come from Turkey and Morocco and lack extensive training. The position of the unions, focused on severance packages and early retirement for the older Ford workers, is regarded with intense hostility by workers at the suppliers.

An action committee set up by a combination of Ford workers and supplier employees decided January 9 to recommence strike action. This committee was dominated by shop stewards from the Maoist-Stalinist Workers Party (Partej van de Arbeid, PvdA). The action committee blocked several factory gates at supplier companies and at Ford where its supporters came to blows with workers going into work. This led to significant loss of production in January.

Just 8,000 of the planned 1,000 cars per day in January were built. In order to put pressure on management, workers guarded 7,000 of the autos produced. This was one of the demands raised by the action committee.

Ford management and the government then used the police to break up the factory gate occupations and end the blockades. Pickets seeking to prevent workers from entering the plant were threatened with 1,000-euro fines [\$US 1,345] and both the media and the unions agitated against the strikers.

Eventually, on January 21, the isolated protest led by the action committee, involving a few hundred employees, came to an end. Strikers were refused strike pay and placed under enormous pressure. Union officials also tried to break the strike front by promising to include the employees of supplier companies in future negotiations and pledging that the latter would receive the same sort of severance plan as Ford workers.

Attacked from all sides, the striking workers were forced to end their strike. They also had to sacrifice two vacation days during the nine-day strike. Following the strike, Stephen Odell, the CEO of Ford Europe, promptly rescinded the promise to include the subcontractor

employees in the negotiations over social and severance plans.

The events of the last three months at Ford Genk have made clear that workers not only confront the global auto giants, but also their own unions.

Workers have undergone an important experience. When the dispute threatened to escalate into an open conflict between workers and the unions, the Maoists of the PvdA intervened. Their glorification of an undefined and isolated “struggle” posed purely in syndicalist terms was aimed at diverting and demoralising the rebellious workers and ensuring once again their subordination to the unions.

The only substantive difference between the union leaderships and the Maoist stewards was the latter’s demand that all Ford workers continue to be paid until 2020 even if the plant closed at the end of 2014. They claimed this concession would have cost Ford about a quarter of its profits made in the year 2011. In other words, they also accepted the shutting down of the factory, but simply wanted to exact a higher price from Ford.

The Maoists’ efforts in the action committee are directed at preventing a political break with the existing unions. “The union representatives [stewards] did not aim to work outside of the trade unions” the chairman of the local PvdA organisation, Stany Nimmegeers, told the WSWs, and added, “But that was a risk, however”.

Other PvdA members emphasized they favoured action within the framework of the official unions, “because only together are we strong”. The “unity” proscribed by the PvdA means the subordination of workers to the unions as the latter actively sell out Genk workers in collaboration with Ford management. Ultimately, the role of the PvdA was to pacify workers and permit the three unions to regain control of the situation. Having achieved its central objective, the action committee has since been dissolved.



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