

Police clash with workers fighting closure of Goodyear Amiens-Nord plant

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9 March 2013

Five to six hundred workers from the Goodyear Tire Amiens-Nord site in northern France were involved in violent clashes on Thursday with riot police, who sprayed tear-gas and fired pepper spray. Workers threw burning tyres and other projectiles at them and damaged a large police riot vehicle which was videoing them.

They travelled to the American Goodyear-Dunlop company's head office near Paris to demonstrate in defense of their jobs and against the closure of the tyre factory. An "information-consultation" meeting of the central works council (CCE) was taking place there.

The transnational company announced on January 31 the closure of its Amiens-Nord plant with a loss of 1,173 jobs, out of the 3,200 remaining in France, after the American farm vehicle tyre producer Titan pulled out of a plan to buy the agricultural tyre section of the factory.

Since 2007, the Communist Party (PCF)-aligned CGT (General Confederation of Labour) union had blocked the company's layoff plans through the courts. However, this strategy excluded any perspective of industrial action uniting Goodyear workers with their colleagues at seventeen other Goodyear factories in Europe, as well as other auto plants in France and internationally.

As during the previous February 12 CCE meeting, there was a heavy police presence controlling the residential estate where the building is situated. Hundreds of riot police prevented workers from approaching the building.

The heavily equipped police's charges against the demonstrators injured several workers. Five were pronounced unfit for work by their doctors. The police claimed there were 19 injured, with six who had to be taken away. One worker was arrested and later

released.

A Goodyear worker just months from retirement, Jean-Yves, denounced the indiscriminate police violence. "I hadn't been throwing anything and they smashed into me and hurled me to the ground. I'm here to defend the future of the kids," he said.

Jean-Louis Ditte, 48, a worker with 24 years at Goodyear, told AFP: "Workers are fed up with being beaten down." Philippe Dufaux, 43, with 13 years at the plant, added: "All we want is to protect our families."

The anger of the workers comes from the unresolved struggle which started six years ago, when Goodyear announced the sacking of 400 workers, as a reprisal for the refusal of the Amiens-Nord workers' workers to accept a four-shift system.

The unions at the next-door Dunlop tyre plant in accepted this system, which has led to great distress and caused at least one suicide but provides no real guarantee of security of employment. Twenty workers from the Dunlop plant travelled to the demonstration with their Amiens-Nord colleagues.

Under discussion at the CCE was a report by the business consultants Secafi, commissioned by the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour, close to the Socialist Party, PS) and the managerial union the CFE-CGC, who have a majority on the CCE.

The report's purpose was to advise the unions on proposals to Goodyear on how to close the factory.

The CFDT is basing itself on the Sercafi report to look for a new buyer and a deal involving 400 voluntary redundancies. Catherine Charrier of the CFE-CGC, the secretary of the CCE, agreed with the report. She mentioned the Indian agricultural tyre manufacturer BKT which "could be interested in a factory in Europe."

Goodyear Amiens-Nord CGT branch secretary Mickaël Wamen countered with a proposal to set up a workers' cooperative (SCOP) to buy the factory from Goodyear. He has already approached a conservative Euro-parliamentarian and the PS regional council for financial aid. A SCOP puts the workers, who would have to have contributed 51percent of the capital—presumably investing their redundancy money—at the mercy of the markets.

These schemes, hatched primarily to block the development of an insurgent movement in the working class based on opposition to mass layoffs, is no alternative for the workers. They would be in competition with their fellow workers in other tyre plants, under conditions where the European car market is in deep recession. Moreover, as the local *Courrier Picard* newspaper, reported on March 8, the workers' cooperative project was only "supposed to save 800 of the site's 1,173 jobs."

Wamen's CGT legal adviser, the lawyer Fiodor Rilov, made a surrealistic speech at Thursday's rally.

He claimed that since Goodyear had "beaten all records in procedural irregularities and that Goodyear would not be able to close the factory "either tomorrow, nor next year, nor in five years...It's completely illegal." He said that they would challenge the closure plans in Akron, Ohio where Goodyear's world headquarters is situated. Wamen then insisted that the closure plan was not real but merely "at the project stage."

Workers changings shifts on Friday at the Amiens Nord factory gate told WSWs supporters distributing leaflets titled " Struggle against closure of Goodyear plant in Amiens, France at a crossroads " that they were skeptical that the SCOP and the courts would defend their jobs.

They unanimously expressed hatred for the PS president François Hollande and saw any attempt to appeal to his government to prevent the wave of sackings and closures and austerity as illusory.

"He's like [the former conservative president Nicolas] Sarkozy, but worse," one said. "Hollande's for the bankers, not the workers."

Many were receptive to the perspective of a mass political struggle of the working class to oppose the austerity policies being imposed on workers throughout the European continent.



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