

France: PSA car workers' strike at an impasse

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Last Friday, about a hundred PSA Citroën car workers from the Aulnay plant near Paris, which is threatened with closure, occupied the offices of the Engineering Employers Federation in Paris.

They were demanding a government mediator, negotiations for redeployment of the 2,800 workers on full-time contracts, and early retirement provisions for workers over 55 after 2014, the target date for the plant's closure. The protest was quickly ended by police intervention in line with government crackdowns on all action by workers against its austerity policies.

Around 500 workers have been on strike at the Aulnay plant since January 16, bringing production to a halt. The workers have solid support in the working class, as testified by the €300,000 collected for the strike fund.

This contrasts with the lack of any initiative to mobilize other auto workers in struggle against plant closures by the unions, including the CFDT (French Democratic Labour Federation, close to the Socialist Party), the CGT (General Labour Confederation close to the Communist Party), and SUD (Solidarity, Unity and Democracy).

PSA seems to be in no haste to return to the negotiating table, but is willing to let the strike drag on until it can impose its conditions. Overall, it intends to lay off 8,000 workers at its French sites by 2014.

The unions are blocking any meaningful mobilisation because the trade union bureaucracy has no intention of challenging the austerity policies of the Socialist Party (PS) government, which it helped vote into office and supports. They are well aware that such a struggle would jeopardize their position as a “social partner” in talks with the government and employers' groups, aiming at making French industry competitive.

Incoming CGT General Secretary Thierry Lepaon is

well regarded inside the CESE (Social, Economic and Environment Council, where unions and employers jointly shape policy)—of which he is a former member.

The unions' isolation of struggles against sackings in different workplaces and industries is facilitated by the local union delegates, who, while using “left” rhetoric, in practice work with the union tops to limit any strike action.

This was evident when Thierry Lepaon visited strikers at the Aulnay plant on March 1. While mouthing platitudes about “support,” Lepaon had no plan to widen the struggle or save the plant.

On the contrary, the unions have accepted closure as an accomplished fact. In a 15-minute speech, Lepaon commented: “your struggle is a just one, for the future of the industry of our country”. He promised the union's support for six victimized strikers facing disciplinary proceedings. None of the strike leaders present—including the Aulnay CGT spokesman, Jean-Pierre Mercier, a leader of the pseudo left Lutte Ouvrière—challenged Lepaon to call for broader strike action.

The latest strike bulletin of March 1 offers no way forward to defeat PSA's plans. Workers are informed of legal procedures to oppose PSA's redeployment plan and support for legislation on an amnesty for workers convicted for offences during strike actions. The bulletin is mainly concerned with collection of finance, to which the CGT and the other unions have made meagre contributions.

Under Lepaon's leadership, the CGT will be no different from what it was under Bernard Thibault, when for 14 years it opposed any broader mobilization of the working class in opposition to state austerity measures. Both Lepaon and Thibault are members of the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF).

A right-wing UMP member, Jean-Marie Geveaux, who worked closely with Lepaon on the CESE, described the latter's opposition to the class struggle: "He's someone capable of finding a consensus. And he keeps his word. That can be useful in a period of social conflict".

Attempting to promote illusions that the PS government can be pressurised into ceasing its attacks on workers' rights and living standards, the CGT joined forces with the Force Ouvrière (FO, Workers Power) union to stage a day of protest on March 5.

The protest was called against government legislation on the "flexibility" of labour agreement worked out on January 11 between the employer's Medef organisation, a middle managers union, and the CFDT. Only 200,000 workers demonstrated throughout France, reflecting the disillusionment with the unions' collaboration with the social-democratic PS government.

The very next day, FO signed a national agreement based on "flexibility" at the Renault plants, of which the government is the main promoter as the major shareholder of the company. In exchange for acceptance by the unions of the destruction of 8,000 jobs, the company claims it will not close plants for the time being.

The CGT has refused to sign the agreement, claiming it has a better policy to save Renault factories by cutting global production costs. Fabien Gâche, the national CGT official, proposed bringing back production from Slovakia and Romania "to balance production".

"That would permit the full use of capacity [in France] but also lower global costs of production," wrote the PCF daily *L'Humanité* on March 11.

This underscores what lies behind the Stalinists' cynical nationalist rhetoric about the "future of industry in our country" and plans to "balance production" back towards France: cuts in production costs, which ultimately mean deep attacks on wages and jobs—supported by the CGT and the PCF.



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