

Italy: Bridgestone wants to close plant in Bari

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The tyre manufacturer Bridgestone plans to close its plant in Bari (Apulia) with the loss of 950 jobs. It is responding to the declining European tyre market at the cost of workers in southern Italy.

The plant was opened in 1962 in Bari-Modugno, producing car tyres for Firestone until 1988, and since then for the Japanese company Bridgestone. On March 4, the Italian management received a short video message saying the plant would be closed by mid-2014.

Bari is one of Bridgestone's eight European plants. The world's largest tyre maker by sales volume, Bridgestone also produces in Spain, France, Poland and Hungary, as well as Italy. Out of a global workforce of nearly 140,000, Bridgestone employs 13,000 in Europe.

The global corporation has just achieved its best result in years and is heading for an eight-year record profit, as the *Financial News* reported in mid-February. Bridgestone's net profits will increase this year by 37 percent to a record level of €1.9 billion (US\$2.5 billion), and make approximately 10 to 15 percent of its revenues in Europe.

According to the company's European headquarters in Zaventem, Brussels, tyre sales in the last two years have dropped by 13 percent, from 300 million units (2011) to 261 million units (2012), and a recovery is not expected until after 2020. Compared with other locations, the plant in Bari-Modugno is sited unfavourably when it comes to logistics, and costs for both energy and production are too high, the company claims.

Bridgestone is not the only tyre manufacturer seeking to push the effects of the crisis onto the backs of its workers. Michelin, Continental and Goodyear have all responded with plant closures, layoffs and wage cuts. At Amiens in France, workers from Goodyear are currently in a bitter struggle for their rights.

In Bari too, Bridgestone workers have reacted with anger and bitterness to the news of the impending

closure. When the news arrived, the factory was closed due to short-time working, but hundreds of workers immediately gathered outside the factory gates when they heard about the closure via mobile phone, Facebook or Twitter.

An older worker told the newspaper *Repubblica* that he had worked for Bridgestone for 25 years; his son had worked at the plant as a temporary worker until 18 months ago, and two other sons were out of work. Youth unemployment in Puglia stands at about 40 percent. "If they really close [the plant], then some 20,000 workers will be thrown on the street if you include ILVA," he said. At the steel giant ILVA, in the neighbouring city of Taranto, jobs have been in acute danger since last October.

Workers are outraged that their labour is being described as "too expensive". "We have often worked on Saturdays, Sundays and public holidays, and earn just €1,500 (US\$1,945). In recent years, we have lost a dramatic part of our income," one older worker said. Wage cuts have been demanded several times in the recent past, "once, it was to save jobs, the second time for the environment—they always find a reason."

Until recently, the factory had a full order book and had even introduced additional shifts at the weekend. But in recent months, it has often been closed for days and weeks at a time.

"Only recently, they sacked 120 young men who had toiled alongside us as temporary workers for many months, earning little money," said one. "Now, we're in the same position as the temporary workers."

Other workers complained about the new pensions legislation passed by the Monti government, saying that because of the "damn Fornero law," older colleagues were not even able to retire.

Since early March, the workers have gathered almost daily at the factory, and no tyres leave the warehouse. For the first time in 50 years, white-collar staff are also

actively participating in the protests. On March 5, the workers sent a delegation to a meeting of the Confindustria employers' association, at which trade union representatives were also taking part, and where there were tumultuous scenes.

Regional and local politicians fear that the workers' anger could get out of control; and for this reason they have publicly protested against the decision to close the plant.

But their response to the closure plans is completely nationalistic. It amounts to playing off the workers in Bari against their colleagues at the other plants and throwing billions in public money at the company.

Nichi Vendola, regional chair of the party SEL (Left, Ecology and Freedom), described the "decision of the Japanese" as "vulgar and violent". For 50 years, the Bari plant has been a showcase where excellent tyres were manufactured, including for BMW in Germany, he said.

Bridgestone would only have needed to ask to obtain better conditions, he added. "Our office is always open to listen to requests", said this former functionary of the Italian Communist Party and its successor organisation, Rifondazione Comunista, who has since become established as regional president of Apulia where he is responsible for enforcing significant social cuts.

Vendola praised the Monti government (then still in office) and Minister Corrado Passera, because he had invited him to a meeting at the Ministry of Economic Affairs in Rome just 12 hours after announcement of the closure of the Bridgestone plant: "A government that takes seriously the affairs of the world of work and our factories is very important."

On March 14, about 200 Bridgestone workers and their family members drove to Rome in five buses, waiting for several hours outside the ministry. Finally, Vendola appeared together with Economics Minister Passera and the mayor of Bari, Michele Emiliano (Democratic Party, PD) and announced that Bridgestone would no longer be using the adjective "irrevocable" in the context of the closure decision.

Passera made €140 million in aid available to Bridgestone and announced a "round table" with the company and union representatives for April 5. He stressed that the government acknowledged that "the market motives that guide the company were undoubtedly convincing"; however, an attempt would

be made to try and save jobs.

The politicians present and the press immediately referred to this as a great victory. Vendola declared that the campaign for a boycott of Bridgestone tyres that he himself had called for on March 5 was now over.

In reality, nothing is resolved. Even if the plant is maintained in Bari, it is totally uncertain how many workers will stay and on what terms. Redundancy payments for those dismissed, which would be paid out of public means, are not a solution. During times of crisis, no amount of redundancy pay can replace a good job.

Like the politicians, the unions too have signalled that they are willing to take on board all the wishes of the company at the expense of the workers. For example, Filipello Lupelli, secretary general of the UIL (Italian Labour Union) in Bari, said, "There is room for a new beginning. We are willing to discuss about sacrifices."

Giuseppe Gesmundo of the CGIL (General Confederation of Labour) thanked Mayor Emiliano and Regional President Vendola "for their sympathy and support for the struggle of the workers and the union." The unions represented at the plant are working closely with the mayor and the regional president, and are prepared to accept everything that is heaped on the workers.



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