

Goodyear union in France touts cooperative to “save” Amiens plant

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On Saturday the Communist Party (PCF) aligned General Confederation of Labour (CGT), the majority union at the Amiens-Nord Goodyear Tire plant in Amiens in northern France, convened a mass meeting where it outlined plans for transforming the factory into a so-called “workers’ cooperative”, or Scop.

After the US agricultural tyre manufacturer Titan pulled out of a plan to buy the farm section of the factory and keep 500 jobs, Goodyear announced January 31 that it was closing the plant, which employs 1,273 workers.

The Scop proposal is designed to prevent the fight against the closure from developing into a broader political mobilization of the working class against the Hollande Socialist Party government. French workers are facing a wave of closures, sackings and record unemployment rates. This is part of the social counterrevolution being carried out by the European bourgeoisie across the continent.

More than 160 years ago, Karl Marx pointed out in the Communist Manifesto that proponents of cooperatives as the solution to the evils of capitalism, “endeavor, and that consistently, to deaden the class struggle and to reconcile the class antagonisms ... they are compelled to appeal to the feelings and purses of the bourgeois ... they sink into the category of the reactionary [or] conservative Socialists. ... They, therefore, violently oppose all political action on the part of the working class. ...”

Plenty of water has gone under the bridge since those words were written. The experience of workers throughout the world with so-called “workers’ owned” cooperatives under the profit system has been disastrous. In the name of staying competitive workers have sacrificed their pensions, wages and ultimately their jobs. While workers ended up in poverty, the

union bureaucracy, which insisted workers could not strike “against themselves” used the schemes to gain positions on corporate boards of directors and climb up the ladder into highly paid financial positions.

The resort to cooperatives as a means to defend jobs under the conditions of the world economic crisis, the exacerbated drive for competitiveness and profitability, especially in industries dominated by transnational giants like Goodyear, is illusory and will only lead to the increased exploitation of the work force.

Goodyear workers have been fighting the closure since they refused a savage speed-up plan six years ago. CGT secretary Mickaël Wamen and his legal advisor Fiodor Rilov told 200 workers at the meeting they could “save” the factory by forming a Scop to buy out its farm sector.

After the meeting, Wamen told the media that, far from saving all the jobs, “the Scop project envisaged the maintenance of agricultural production along with a plan for voluntary redundancies and the continuation of car tyre production for two years.” He also said that the minister for productive renewal, Arnaud Montebourg, had found potential buyers for the site and that court action against closure was continuing.

An Amiens-Nord CGT bulletin posted March 20 said that the union had sent a letter to Rich Kramer, the CEO of Goodyear in America, for negotiations on the Scop which “won’t only be for volunteers”. In addition, the union said, the plan was for the other workers and “Goodyear will have to finance it as it was ready to do with the so-called Titan plan.”

Workers at the meeting asked Wamen if he would be the manager of the Scop. He denied such ambitions but told another worker, “it’ll be us who will run it.” He could not say what the wages might be.

After the meeting, a worker told the WWS, “This is

not the expropriation of the factory. We'll be involved with the machines and production and Goodyear—the commercialization—it'll be more like a partnership. We'd be subcontractors. The CGT's mantra is that the bosses are making too much profit. It's a petty bourgeois attitude, which wants to share the profits with the big bourgeoisie."

The industrial consultants Secafi have calculated a €20 million investment would be necessary to make the agricultural tyre section viable. Wamen has approached a conservative European Union parliamentarian, Phillippe Boulland, and Socialist Party regional and departmental government leaders for funding for the Scop—the very forces carrying out the savage attack on workers in France and Europe.

Significantly, the previous day, when lobbying a meeting of Goodyear France's Central Works Committee (CCE) discussing the arrangements for the closure of the site, 300 Amiens-Nord workers, under the direction of the union, did not confront the police guarding the company's headquarters near Paris as they had on two previous occasions. Instead of throwing eggs they pelted the cops with roses.

This was a peace gesture to the Socialist Party government, which is preparing harsh repression against the mass resistance to austerity and sackings. Minister of the Interior Manuel Vals gave instructions on January 30 to the SDIG police intelligence service to "closely" follow developments at troubled companies where labor unrest could break out. The order called for police to monitor plans for labor actions and watch out for "threats to production in the event of a radicalization of the conflict." It noted, "In an economic downturn ... it is important to closely monitor the situation in vulnerable companies or sectors." (See: "French government prepares repression against workers")

The CGT supported the election of Hollande and is committed to its nationalist program of making French capitalism more "competitive" through a historic attack on the social position and achievements of the working class.

It is clear from the 50th Congress, which took place between March 18 and 22, that the CGT is promoting cooperatives as a means of preventing workers' struggles from challenging the government and the capitalist system it supports.

The CGT gave great prominence to the Amiens-Nord Scop as a means of fighting unemployment. The Communist Party paper *l'Humanité* on March 19 enthused, "More and more firms in struggle are considering forming Scops to free themselves from shareholders and purely financial considerations". It mentions several supposedly "perfectly viable" cooperatives represented at the congress, asserting that the CGT proposal at Amiens-Nord "would be saving some of its 1,200 jobs. The idea is attractive and is posed more and more as a concrete means of resistance to the logic of neo-liberal economics."

The Stalinist daily on March 12 cites the Hélio-Corbeil printers as an example of what "the trade unions are proposing" but has to admit that Helio workers had to give up €1.8 million to continue production. Out of the 120 workers still at the factory, 80 agreed to invest 3 months' salary and their redundancy money—€5,000 per person. They are also obliged to take out loans from their regional council, the Cooperative Credit bank and the arms manufacturer Dassault, which they must pay back.

Helio's former CGT leader, Bruno Arsa, now the manager, earns the highest wage in the firm and asks, "How can a trade union—when the workers have formed a Scop—become a real anti-capitalist force?"



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