

France: How the Workers' Struggle group is helping to shut down the Aulnay car plant

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On May 17, Jean-Pierre Mercier, spokesman for the CGT (General Confederation of Labour) branch at the PSA car factory in Aulnay-sous-Bois near Paris, signed a deal that puts the seal on the factory's closure by 2014 and the loss of 11,200 jobs at PSA nationally. Mercier is a leading member of the pseudo-left Lutte Ouvrière (LO, Workers' Struggle).

The other unions represented at PSA nationally—FO (Workers' Power), CFTC (Christian union), CFE-CGC (administrative workers), CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour, close to the Socialist Party) and the SIA company union — had already signed the layoff plan (PSE) for PSA in France as a whole on April 29. The plan includes cutting 2,500 jobs at Aulnay and 1,400 at the Rennes factory.

PSA said that 1,850 jobs would be available for Aulnay workers at different company sites in France, including 1,090 at Poissy, 50 km away, where temporary workers will be forced out to make way for Aulnay workers. Another 300 possible job placements have been "identified" at the SNCF railway company, the Paris Airport and Paris Metro system. The rest will be so-called voluntary redundancies.

The CGT, however, led a four-month strike of 200 Aulnay workers costing lost production of 14,000 Citroën C3 cars. The strike, also supported by the factory's CFDT section, was aimed at creating the impression that it was to oppose the closure of the plant, while in fact it was only for the improvement of the closure package. The unions' main demands were for a guaranteed permanent contract (CDI) for all redeployed workers, early retirement for workers over 55, and €130,000 (US\$175,000) severance pay—none of which were obtained.

In fact, as made clear by Philippe Julien—the factory CGT secretary and another Lutte Ouvrière (LO) leader—the aim of the strike was only to "influence the negotiations to improve the layoff plan".

The underlying purpose of the strike, which LO leader Nathalie Arthaud fraudulently described as "a victory", has now become clear. It was not in opposition to a shutdown, but a means to facilitate it. As is evident from the deal Mercier signed on May 17, the strike was aimed at preventing any real opposition by feigning the appearance of a struggle and then luring the workers to sell their jobs for a hand-out. It offered 130 of the strikers an extra €20,000 pay-off if they abandoned their jobs by May 31, i.e., immediately.

Since this deal was signed, LO has taken it upon itself to convince other workers that they should organise some action in order to get the same conditions—that is, sell their jobs for the meagre sum of an extra €20,000.

An article published June 7 on the Lutte Ouvrière site states: "In the following two weeks, hundreds of discussions took place between the workers who had not been on strike or had not struck for the whole time. The union activists explained to them that the only way to get the same conditions was to organise and mobilise."

LO triumphantly states that the management finally gave in and "had to announce on Wednesday, [May] 29 in a strangled voice, that the agreement was open to all, and that volunteers would have until Monday, June 3 to sign the agreement, get sacked and receive the maximum sum of money."

According to LO, "There are only two solutions for the workers: choose being sacked straight away, with several thousand euros—for some €100,000—according to years of service—or believe in PSA's fine promises of alternative jobs, risking ending up outside all the same, on the closure of the factory, but with the minimum money. The choice is quickly made!"

The bosses in the executive suite of PSA must read this with rapture. LO, which has for a long time cultivated a reputation of siding with workers, is calling on the Aulnay workers to get voluntarily "sacked straight away". This

opens the way for the shutdown of the factory without any resistance and at many other factories to come. And this under conditions where attacks on workers (and car workers in particular) and working class resistance are mounting all over France and Europe.

For the region, the closure of the Aulnay car plant will be a disaster. WSWs reporters went to the factory gates on May 31. While CGT bureaucrats were having a celebratory barbecue, shouting, embracing and setting off fireworks, a worker with 20 years of service at the firm was watching the revellers at a distance and said: “That’s no party, it’s a defeat, shameful. Money is power.” Another commented: “They’re taking the money and going”.

A woman coming out of the factory said: “It’ll be a catastrophe for 93 [Seine-Saint-Denis] department”.

Previously, WSWs reporters had spoken to shoppers at the nearby “Cité des 3000” council housing estate, all of whom saw the closure as a disaster for their neighbourhood already hard-hit by unemployment. More than 40 percent of 18- to 25-year-olds are out of work. An elderly man pointed out: “Often on this estate, six people can be dependent on one salary. Whole families depend on one worker who also has to send money to his family back home. With the closure of PSA they won’t have enough to live on. Local taxes will go up and there’ll be no schools or sport for children.”

For those who have followed LO for a long time, its despicable role in Aulnay comes as no surprise. Faking as a left-wing and even Trotskyist organisation for decades, this petty-bourgeois organisation has moved ever more closely into the trade union bureaucracy and the camp of the bourgeoisie as the economic crisis has deepened.

Now they are alarmed by the threat of a social explosion and doing everything to tie workers to the corrupt union bureaucracy.

Another even more important motive is the defence of President François Hollande’s Socialist Party government, which is deeply discredited and rapidly losing support due to its right-wing, anti-working class policies. LO wants to prevent at all costs that Hollande and his government are forced to prematurely resign.

In September 2012, Hollande pledged to do everything he could “to limit the damage and reduce the number of job cuts” at Aulnay. He deliberately did not go so far as to promise to prevent the Aulnay closure plan, but merely promised tripartite negotiations between the state, the employers and the unions.

LO has created illusions that workers will obtain

concessions from the government and PSA and now, after this is exposed as a deceit, wants to prevent a political mobilisation against the government.

Lutte Ouvrière has a long history of collaborating with the PS. In the 2008 municipal elections, LO participated in joint lists with the PS and the PCF in 65 towns, 40 percent of them headed by a PS candidate.

For the second round of the presidential election of 2012, LO spokesperson Nathalie Arthaud expressed the wish for a Hollande victory in these terms: “Obviously, no conscious worker can vote for Nicolas Sarkozy, the president of the rich, the man who, during his five-year mandate, was the faithful servant of big business and the bankers. Some of my voters, confronted with the loaded choice between the open enemy of workers and a false friend, will abstain or cast a blank vote. Others, to get rid of Sarkozy, will vote for François Hollande.”

Arthaud thus fell in line with the campaign of Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s Left Front and the New Anti-capitalist Party, which both called for a Hollande vote.

While the right-wing—the neo-fascist National Front, the anti-same-sex-marriage movement—is growing due to the anti-working class policies of Hollande, the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left is moving ever closer into his camp. They are exposed as thoroughly bourgeois parties.

To defend their interests workers need to develop their own political strategy throughout the world based on a socialist and internationalist perspective. They must break from the unions and their pseudo-left acolytes and build independent committees of action to unite workers in struggle across industries and national borders with the aim of installing workers’ governments for the expropriation of the banks and basic industry under workers’ control.



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