

Mercedes-Daimler imposes unpaid work at French Smart car plant

Antoine Lerougetel
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On September 11, Mercedes-Daimler management held a “referendum” on its “Pact 2020” plan to increase the exploitation of the workforce at its Smart subsidiary in the eastern French city of Hambach. The already profitable factory, Smartville, produces 100,000 two-seater Smart cars annually and employs 800 workers.

Pact 2020, designed facilitate the sacking of 110 interim workers, extends the 35-hour workweek to 39 hours, with only 37 paid hours. The 12 percent increase in working time is compensated only with a six percent rise in salary and a one-time €1,000 signing bonus.

Under conditions where workers have no confidence that the unions will oppose factory closures or mass sackings, and with unemployment over 10 percent, the company secured a majority vote by workers.

Workers voted ‘yes’ by 56 percent to the question, “Are you for the return to a 39 hour working week, remunerated for 37 hours, between 2016 and 2019, in exchange for securing your job until 2020”? Ninety-three percent of the workers voted on the concessions. Reportedly, 74 percent of 385 management staff voted ‘yes’, overriding the 61 percent of the 367 production workers who voted ‘no’.

Stephanie, a production worker with 18 years seniority, said, “Management is blackmailing people over jobs. The youngsters only see the €1,000 bonus but it’s a con job”. Etienne, a white collar worker with five years experience, said, “The sacrifices agreed to are just not acceptable”.

The workers’ decision to vote for the deal despite broad opposition testifies to the reactionary role of the unions. After they isolated and sold out strikes against factory closures in France and across Europe—at Continental Tyres-Clairoix, the PSA Peugeot-Citroën auto plant at Aulnay, or the ArcelorMittal plant at

Florange—workers rightfully have no confidence the unions would defend their jobs.

Daimler’s moves in Hambach plant are part of an assault on workers at all of its plants. Workers at the Smart site in France are being thrown into a fratricidal competition against workers at the company’s Slovak factory in Novo Mesto, which assembles a four-seater Smart car. The Renault Twingo model is also made there.

More broadly, the attack on Daimler workers in Europe is part of a worldwide assault on autoworkers, which has been accelerated by the global economic crisis. At present 141,000 US autoworkers are faced with a massive attack on their wages and conditions by GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler, with the collaboration with United Auto Workers union. (See: The way forward for US autoworkers)

Pacte 2020 is designed to override France’s “35 hour” law, under which employers must pay overtime to all hours beyond a 35-hour work week. This follows the announcement by the Socialist Party (PS) government and employers’ groups of a proposed change to French law, allowing unions to negotiate contracts at individual plants that violate the national labor code.

Daimler officials told *L’Observateur* that they regretted that “for the moment, the law does not authorize us to abandon the 35 hour week permanently”.

The “referendum” on Pact 2020 was accepted by all four unions at the plant: the white-collar General Managers Union (CFE-CGC), the French Confederation of Christian Workers (CFTC), the PS-aligned French Democratic Labor Federation (CFDT), and the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT). The last three, representing 65 percent of the

workforce, called for a 'no' vote, while the CFE-CGC supported the deal.

The deal can only be legally binding if unions representing over 30 percent of the workforce sign it, and if unions representing at least 51 percent of workers do not oppose it. If allied with the CFTC, the CFE-CGC would have the required percentage to pass it, while the CFDT and the CGT with over 51 percent can block it.

Workers must be warned that the opposition of the CGT and CFDT is entirely phony. The SP and Stalinist-aligned unions are opposed to any serious struggle against the concessions because they fear this could spark a broader movement of the working class against the reactionary agenda of the PS government and the austerity policies being pursued by every European government. Their main focus at talks with management is how to suppress opposition from workers and secure enough concessions from workers to entice Mercedes-Daimler to keep the plant open.



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