

Wildcat strike stops production as workers eject union leaders at Ford Romania

Eric London
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A wildcat strike broke out Thursday at a Ford auto plant in Craiova, Romania after workers forced the removal of the leader of the trade union and repudiated the 2018-19 contract agreed to Wednesday by the union and the company.

Tensions at the plant boiled over Thursday morning when roughly 200 workers spontaneously stopped work and began to march out of the plant. When the next shift began to come in to work, hundreds from the new shift joined the protest, which grew to about 1,000 workers. Production ground to a halt.

The strike at Craiova is a milestone in the growing opposition among autoworkers worldwide to the demands of the corporations and the pro-company unions. Autoworkers in the US, Canada, and around the world will recognize the struggles of their Romanian brothers and sisters as their own.

The strike began because the union-corporate contract agreement did nothing to offset the pay cut imposed by the Romanian government of Prime Minister Mihai Tudose of the Social Democratic Party (PSD). The government recently passed a tax law, set to go into effect January 1, which drastically increases workers' tax contributions to fund social insurance. Whereas in the past each worker split the cost of this tax with their employer, the new law forces workers to pay the whole cost of 37.25 percent of their income.

The contract agreed to by the union includes a small wage increase that does not make up for the impact of the tax hike, which cuts pay by 22 percent. For this reason, Thursday's strike is first and foremost a protest against the union, which workers view as an arm of the corporation. One striking worker told local press that "we didn't succeed" in the workers' plan to be represented at contract negotiations by an organization that wouldn't "be paid by Ford."

Ford said, "Ford Romania does not comment on internal discussions between trade unions and their members. Negotiations on the new 2018 and 2019 collective bargaining agreement were completed yesterday and we have nothing to add."

The similarities between the situation confronting Romanian workers and those facing their US and international counterparts are striking. As in the US, Romanian autoworkers hate their union, which is bought and paid for by the company. In the US, the United Auto Workers is currently under investigation for accepting bribes from GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler in exchange for policing the workforce.

Ford Romania threatened workers that if they did not accept the company's offer, the company could move production elsewhere. Ford official John Oldham wrote on December 13, "Over the last few weeks, we've worked with your union to negotiate the new [contract]. Our priority was to reach a two-year agreement to improve the competitive position of the Craiova plant, which is a key factor for attracting new products and securing jobs."

The new contract parallels the sellout agreed to by the UAW and the big three auto companies in 2015 and by the Canadian union Unifor in 2016. The deal includes added "flexibility," a Romanian version of the Alternative Work Schedule used in North America in which workers' hours are subject to change. The deal also allows the company to shut down production during slow periods, leaving workers without an income for days or weeks at a time. As in the US and Canada, Ford played off the economic desperation of Romanian workers by offering modest wage increases and a paltry signing bonus, which workers courageously spat on.

In recent years, Ford has worked with the union to

carry out mass firings of workers who opposed the union-corporate alliance.

According to a 2016 study by the Central European Labour Studies Institute, Ford fired 520 workers in 2014 who had voiced opposition to repeated sellout deals and cut wages by eight percent for the rest of the workforce. The union let this firing happen. The study notes that the mass firing “took the representative union by surprise but did not trigger a significant response.”

A contract signed by the company and the union in 2015 allowed the company “to promote substantial cuts in the labour force over a very short period of time” and “gave managers full flexibility in deciding production targets,” meaning rapid speedups and dangerous slowdowns.

The most recent contract was the last straw. According to Romania-insider.com, “Maria Manea, the former union leader, was suspended after employees accused her of not representing their interests, but those of the American corporation. According to an internal document, Ford has directly threatened employees that it would not increase their gross salaries following the transfer of social contributions if they don’t sign the contract for two years and don’t follow the company’s requirements.”

The company recently began production of the EcoSport compact SUV, which had previously been produced by even lower-paid workers in Chennai, India. European sales for Ford SUVs grew over 30 percent in 2016 and rose 27 percent in the first eight months of 2017. The plant also manufactures Ford’s EcoBoost engine.

The action taken by Romanian Ford workers shows that autoworkers across the world confront the same enemies and must conduct their struggle on an international level in a common fight against international corporate enemies like Ford. Major strikes have taken place against Ford elsewhere in recent years, including in Turkey and Brazil in 2015.



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