New round of attacks across Spain's auto industry

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Autoworkers in Spain, like their counterparts in the US, Mexico, Romania and around the world, are confronting an unprecedented assault on their jobs, wages and rights.

Spain is the second largest manufacturer of automobiles in Europe and the eighth worldwide, and the premier European manufacturer of industrial vehicles. It represents 10 percent of GDP (including distribution and associated activities) and 19 percent of total Spanish exports. The industry generates 300,000 direct jobs and 2 million indirect jobs.

Vehicle manufacturing has been growing for the last four years, coinciding with two major labour union-agreed reforms approved after the 2008 economic crisis—in 2010 by the Socialist Party (PSOE) government and 2012 passed by the Popular Party (PP) government.

These reforms made it easier for companies to sack workers on permanent contracts and slash severance pay, allowing them to opt out of collective bargaining agreements and adjust working conditions such as schedules, workplace tasks and wages depending on the performance of the economy and the company. In the period between 2012 and 2016, production was up 45 percent, representing 906,728 additional units, and approaching the industry target of 3 million.

The auto industry in Spain is utilising the full conversion of plants to produce electric cars, claims of lower expectations of profits last year—combined with threats to move production offshore—to impose attacks on wages and work conditions. In Zaragoza, in the region of Aragon, Opel announced that it was considering cutting further investment in its plant at Figueruelas and threatened to cut production of the next Corsa model. The plant, operating since 1982, employs 5,300 people and generates thousands of indirect jobs. In 2017, it made 382,250 vehicles.

PSA, which acquired Opel from General Motors last year, said the plant was less competitive than its other two plants in Spain—Vigo and Madrid—due to higher wages, lower hours and less flexibility. The firm has announced that operating profits have turned from a loss of €389 million in 2013 to a profit of €3.4 billion, but it wants to save €1.1 billion annually by 2020, rising to €1.7 billion by 2026, and to take €700 off the production cost of each car.

According to *El Confidencial*, PSA never intended to stop investing in Figueruelas. The announcement was intended to "sow fear among workers." Opel management went from a January 25 statement "considering cutting further investment" to three weeks later announcing Opel will produce the next-generation Corsa exclusively in Zaragoza. Decisions of this magnitude are not taken by automakers in three weeks.

The CCOO, UGT and Acumagme unions never intended to fight and went into negotiations with Opel accepting wage freezes or wage increases below inflation. Pepe Álvarez, the UGT's general secretary, said, "The negotiations have to end with agreement and with success. We do not understand it in any other way".

CCOO leader, Unai Sordo, added that its commitment is to reach an agreement that would ensure the company's investment in the plant with job preservation. With the urging of the pseudo-left Podemos, the PSOE's regional premier, Javier Lambán, volunteered to mediate in the conflict.

Presenting it as a victory, the unions claimed that they had achieved a one-year wage freeze—instead of the three intended by the company—a salary increase of 50 percent of the Consumer Price Index (in other words, losing out due to inflation) for three years and 60 percent for the fourth (2022). This was compared to the 6 percent wage slash initially proposed by the company and a 5 percent cut, instead of the 10 percent demanded by the firm, in holidays and night-shifts.

José Carlos Jimeno, of the UGT in Figueruelas, in a statement that could have been made by a company spokesperson, said, “It’s not nice to ask for sacrifices from workers, [but] you have to tell them the truth, whether we like it or not, and to have a job you have to make small sacrifices.”

Even with massive pressure to accept, 2,008 workers out of 4,959 voted against the deal.

This was taking place while 9,000 workers in Ford’s plant in Almussafes, Valencia, were struggling against Ford’s announcement that they would invest €750 million in the plant, to produce its Kuga medium sized sports car, in exchange for workers accepting a “new competitive plan.” Ford demanded cuts in medical leave pay, the closure of the apprenticeship school, freezing bonuses for working in the paint booth, and special and overnight shifts.

The CCOO and UGT were quick to strike a deal. The agreement included pathetic salary increases of between 0.5 percent and 2.5 percent in the years between 2019 and 2021, under conditions where the predicted Consumer Price Index averages 1.5 to 2 percent over the next three years.

The anarcho-syndicalist union CGT, which exploits hostility to the larger unions, rejected the agreement because the workers “were left” out of the company’s “profits.” The statement went on to say that the CCOO and UGT had agreed over the past eight years “elimination of the retirement plan for new hires, the reduction of the pause of food from 30 to 15 minutes and the elimination of dining rooms for more than half of the staff, the increase of the working day for the night shift, and the employment of new workers with 20 percent less than the old ones.”

However, rather than calling for the development of an international strategy to wage the class struggle to defend their interests to counter the international strategy of the corporations, the CGT promotes the same nationalist divisions as the other unions. Its statement claimed that while between 2010 and 2017 the accumulated Consumer Price Index was 10.30 percent, salary increases amounted to 12.30 percent in the same period, contrasting this “with the fact that in the same period (2010/2017) Ford workers in the USA have received a total of $61,000 in pay and benefits.”

The CGT omitted any mention of the 1,000-strong walkout by Ford workers in the Craiova plant in Romania last December. There, workers took wildcat strike action after the Ford Craiova Automobile Union signed a sell-out deal with Ford Romania, which included pay freezes of senior workers and reduces new-hire wages to below the minimum salary or as little as €300 a month, while cutting payments for overtime work and introducing “flexible” schedules whenever “operational demands require it.”

Autoworkers’ experience over the years underscores that the unions, irrespective of their radical phraseology, cannot be pressured into defending workers’ interests. The experience of workers in Ford and Opel is the same as at Seat-Audi in Martorell (Barcelona), Renault (Valladolid), Mercedes (Vitoria), Volkswagen (Navarre), Nissan (Barcelona and Ávila), and Iveco (Valladolid). In each instance, new production plans have come at the expense of wages and conditions.

The need for a new voice and a new strategy for autoworkers is being recognized throughout the world. Hundreds of autoworkers at GM, FCA and Ford in the US and Canada turn to the *World Socialist Web Site’s Autoworker Newsletter* to provide analysis of the auto negotiations and a strategy to fight both the carmakers and the unions.

The *Newsletter* insists that the success of any struggle will be determined, not by the trade unions, which will only isolate workers and negotiate sell-outs, but by the ability of workers to retain their independence from the trade unions and the bourgeois parties, and by their ability to break their isolation and link up with fellow autoworkers internationally.

The WSWS urges auto workers and supporters to sign up for the Autoworker Newsletter for frequent updates and to leave your comments or questions. To do so, click here.