Ford to lay off thousands, close plants across Europe

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In the latest stage of the global auto giants' intensifying assault on workers, Ford Motor Company announced on Thursday that it will slash "thousands" of jobs in Europe as part of a continent-wide restructuring.

The announcement follows by just over a month General Motors' announcement that it plans to close five plants across the United States and Canada, destroying almost 15,000 jobs. The Detroit-based automaker said it would shut another two, yet unspecified, plants located outside of North America. Yesterday, the UK automaker Jaguar confirmed reports from last December that it will slash up to 5,000 jobs, mainly engineering and office positions, as part of a 2.5-billion-pound cost-cutting plan.

In its statement released yesterday from Cologne, Germany, Ford said it plans to drive "profitability across its product portfolio," and that "structural cost improvements will be supported by reduction of surplus labor across all functions—salaried and hourly."

In addition to job cuts, the statement pointed to previously announced "efficiency actions," including the closure of the Ford Aquitaine Industries plant in Blanquefort, France in August 2019, destroying 800 jobs and another 3,000 indirectly, and a restructuring at the Saarlouis Body and Assembly Plant in Germany. It added that it would be conducting a "strategic review" of Ford Sollers, a joint venture in Russia, the results of which would be announced in the second quarter.

The company's actions are openly aimed at funneling ever greater sums of wealth from workers and their families to Wall Street banks and investment firms and the super-rich shareholders who control them. Ford gives the largest dividend payout of all the auto giants and handed out $2.3 billion last year alone.

Yesterday's statement bluntly spells out the integral role to be played by the European trade unions—which Ford correctly labels its "trade union partners"—in suppressing opposition from workers to this assault. "Ford is starting consultations with its union partners and other key stakeholders to implement a comprehensive transformation strategy," it notes.

Elsewhere it declares that it hopes to achieve "labor cost reductions, as far as possible [through] voluntary employee separations in Europe," and will be "working closely with its social partners"—i.e., the auto unions—"to achieve this objective."

The auto unions have worked hand in glove with the carmakers to impose thousands of layoffs along with plant closures, which have intensified since the global financial crash of 2008. Reuters reported yesterday that when contacted for comment, the German IG Metall union "asked for more details before it could comment."

The union's attitude toward workers was most succinctly summed up last August by the Ford Cologne Works Council union leader Martin Hennig, when he declared that the company was "going well and we make good money with them." He continued, "But nothing remains of the profit. We have to take costs into account. That must be the most important task of management."

Hennig complained of the large number of workers over 50. "At such an age, workers already have ailments."

As Ford specifies the job losses, the unions across the continent will insist that workers ultimately accept sacrifices to be "competitive." Above all, they will work to prevent any unified struggle by workers across national lines by pitting workers in different countries against one another and promoting the poison of nationalism.

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In the US, the United Auto Workers (UAW) has sought to prevent any struggle against General Motors' mass layoffs announced last month by blaming workers in Mexico and China. The UAW is already making clear it will welcome layoffs in Europe. Ford's restructuring is part of a deepening alliance with Volkswagen, the world's largest automaker by sales. UAW Vice President Rory Gamble told the *Detroit Free Press* that the alliance could result in new jobs in the US, and "we would wholeheartedly support this."

This is in line with the UAW's "in-sourcing" strategy to slash the wages and conditions of American autoworkers so drastically that it is more profitable for companies to move production to the US and away from low-wage platforms in Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe.

The automakers, however, have an international strategy. Worldwide light-vehicle output fell over two consecutive quarters in the past half-year, the first industrywide recession since 2009. The auto giants are determined to place the cost of the crisis on the backs of workers amidst a deepening economic downturn, highlighted by declining sales in China and Europe. Auto sales in Britain have fallen as well, dropping 6 percent in the past year. The companies' strategy includes an accelerated turn toward more energy-efficient vehicles.

Profits for the corporate and financial elite are higher than ever, but the major financial institutions are demanding an even greater assault on workers. Yesterday, Morgan Stanley investment analyst Adam Jonas released a note declaring that "Ford Europe could require as much as a 20 to 30 percent reduction of capacity and headcount"—equivalent to 10,000-15,000 jobs. Last December Jonas called for up to 25,000 jobs to be slashed by Ford Europe as the industry "transforms."

Among autoworkers and every section of the working class in Europe and internationally there is a growing militancy and a determination to fight against the ruling class's drive to reduce workers to penury, reflected in the ongoing mass "Yellow Vest" demonstrations in France and a growing wave of strikes in 2018. On Tuesday night and Wednesday morning, GM workers in Oshawa, Canada downed tools in a wildcat sit-down strike—initiated independently of the Unifor union—after GM confirmed the planned closure of the plant at the end of 2019.

The first step in waging a struggle is to recognize the role played by the trade unions, which are nothing more than the paid agents—or "partners"—of the corporations, controlled by highly paid executives who suppress strikes and impose cuts. Workers need new, independent organizations—rank-and-file factory and workplace committees—that are directly controlled by the workers themselves, to organize a struggle.

On December 9, autoworkers from all three US carmakers and other workers and young people attended a meeting in Detroit, Michigan organized by the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* and the Socialist Equality Party and voted unanimously to establish independent rank-and-file committees to organize a fight against General Motors' planned layoffs.

A demonstration is being held in Detroit on February 9. Autoworkers across Europe should adopt the same strategy. The first task of such committees will be to immediately make contact with workers at the auto plants across Europe, Asia and the United States to organize an internationally coordinated struggle. The axis of any successful struggle by workers must be to unify on an international scale, in opposition to the nationalism promoted by the unions and the subordination of workers to the global capitalist system.

The answer to the strategy of the ruling class is to take the automotive giants out of the hands of the billionaire financial shareholders who control them and transform these corporations into public enterprises under the collective ownership and democratic control of the workers themselves, as part of the fight for a socialist workers' government.

The WSWS *Autoworkers Newsletter* urges all workers who wish to take forward an international struggle against the corporations' assault to contact us today.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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