

“Independent” union in Russia facilitates closure of Ford factory

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In late March, the American auto giant Ford declared it would shut down three of its four plants in Russia and stop the production of passenger cars in the country, where its market share has fallen dramatically over the last decade. Ford said an unspecified but “significant” number of jobs would be cut.

The factories threatened with closure are located in Vsevolozhsk, an industrial city near St. Petersburg; Naberezhnye Chelny, a city in the region of Tatarstan; and Yelaburg, where Ford will close one of its two plants.

Ford will sell off its share of the joint venture established in 2011 with the Russian company Sollers. According to the media, Ford has been in negotiations for months about selling the plants with Korean automaker Hyundai, the most likely buyer. Officials in Leningrad *oblast* (province), where the Vsevolozhsk plant is located, have also been involved in the negotiations. Ford plans to close the factory, which has been operating at half capacity for a year, by late June, eliminating the jobs of 1,070 workers remaining at the plant.

The closures will mean worsening privation for thousands of autoworkers and their families in areas already suffering from poverty and unemployment. This will be used to further lower autoworkers’ wages in Russia and internationally.

According to a report by *Gazeta.ru* in 2016, the average autoworker at Ford-Sollers earned 25-35,000 rubles a month (between US\$382 and \$536 at the current exchange rate). This is comparable with auto assembly workers in Mexico, where the average monthly wage is 32,798 rubles (\$502 at the current exchange rate) and far below the wages of an autoworker in China, who makes 54,229 rubles, or \$830. As miserable as wages are at Ford-Sollers, they have been up to twice as much paid to workers at other Russian auto companies.

Ford’s nearly full withdrawal from Russia is part of a global restructuring of the auto industry and assault on the working class. Industrial analysts expect the company to lay off up to 25,000 workers, mostly in Europe, including in Germany, France and Turkey. Volkswagen and GM are also in the process of destroying thousands of jobs in North America and Europe.

This international onslaught raises critical political questions for the autoworkers.

Among the most important of these is the need to break free

from the grip of pro-capitalist and nationalist unions and build new organizations of struggle that assert the rights of workers against the dictates of the transnational corporations. The fate of the Vsevolozhsk plant is of particular significance in this respect. Over the past 15 years, it has been the site of some of the most militant strikes staged by workers in Russia, yet they were sold out again and again by the so-called independent trade union MPRA (Inter-Regional Trade Union Workers’ Alliance).

The union has been entirely complicit in Ford’s efforts to prepare the shutting down of the plant in virtual secrecy. Trying to sabotage and demoralize any opposition among workers, it has delayed raising the issue of the closure for months. Workers only learned about the impending shutdown of the Ford plants from the media.

The first statement by the MPRA on the matter dates from February 15. This was well over a month after news media first reported on the possible closures. In that statement, the MPRA announced it would not take up any serious struggle to prevent the closure. The statement mentioned possible protests, but made it clear its main aim was to negotiate a deal with Ford to save the plant by shifting the burden of job and wage cuts onto the shoulder of administrative and managerial staff. The MPRA demanded a seat at the negotiation table to negotiate such a deal, or to get Ford workers the equivalent of two years’ wages if the company went ahead and closed the plant.

On March 15-16, representatives of the MPRA, its parent organization the Confederation of Labor of Russia (KTR) and a number of other organizations met in St. Petersburg to discuss this bankrupt perspective. Two weeks later, after Ford announced its final decision to shut down the plant, union officials said they would call for “strikes and hunger strikes.” These were not to be aimed at preventing the closure but getting temporary compensation for laid-off workers. The union made it clear it would not call for joint action with the workers in Naberezhnye Chelny and other locations threatened with closures.

This “strategy” serves the interests of Ford, not the embattled workers. The main aim of the MPRA is to attract a new buyer for the plant by offering wage and benefit concessions and getting such a sellout deal accepted without an overwhelming

explosion of opposition from workers.

A host of pseudo-left organizations have promoted the MPRA, claiming that new “independent” unions would be a substitute for a political struggle against the Putin government and capitalism.

Founded in 2006 at the Vsevolozhsk plant, the MPRA was promoted by Pabloite organizations and others as the model for new, militant independent unions. The MPRA and similar unions were founded when Russian manufacturing, which had been in devastating decline since the liquidation of the Soviet Union in 1991, experienced a significant upsurge as Ford and other foreign companies flooded in to take advantage of low manufacturing wages.

The official trade union, FNPR (Federation of Independent Trade Unions), was deeply discredited and within ruling circles there were fears that it would be unable to withstand an upsurge of militancy among industrial workers, especially in the growing auto industry. The FNPR had been directly implicated in the restoration of capitalism, privatizing Soviet state assets worth millions, if not billions of dollars. At the factories and workplaces, it openly functioned as a scab organization, working hand-in-glove with the employers and the state.

Under these conditions, the MPRA and other so-called “independent unions” were created not to defend workers’ interests, but to prevent them from creating genuinely independent organizations that would challenge the profit interests of the Stalinists-turned-capitalist-oligarchs. These unions were immediately affiliated with and often also co-created by the structures of the Confederation of Labor of Russia (KTR), the main rival organization of the FNPR, which, like the latter, had colluded with and profits from the process of capitalist restoration.

The right-wing orientation of the MPRA has been exemplified by the evolution of its leader, Alexei Etmanov, who, like countless union officials, used his position as a springboard for a political career. Over the past decade, he has run for office for almost every major right-wing opposition party in Russia. A founding member of the Stalinist ROT-FRONT in 2010, he has a run as a Duma (parliament) candidate for the Stalinist Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), which maintains close ties to both the Kremlin and various far-right organizations. Then he became a member of the judicial council of the Leningrad region as a candidate for Just Russia, a party widely considered a Kremlin front group to divert popular opposition.

Since 2016, Etmanov has been a member of the US-backed liberal party Yabloko, which has been complicit in the preparations of US imperialism for a “Color Revolution” regime change operation in Moscow.

The MPRA has also been involved in the coalition of Stalinist, pseudo-left and pro-US liberal forces that sought to divert mass anger over the Kremlin’s raising of the retirement age and thus facilitate its passing without the outbreak of

popular opposition. Most recently, the MPRA has openly endorsed Alexei Navalny, the central figure of the US regime-change plans, and his bogus attempts to create a “trade union.”

The ever more openly right-wing orientation of the MPRA and its enormous fear of any movement by the autoworkers is driven by the resurgence of the class struggle internationally and acute class tensions in Russia that are reaching a boiling point. According to a recent poll, 80 percent of households struggle to buy even basic necessities, and over a fifth of families cannot afford to regularly buy fruit or vegetables. With growing signs of a Russian and the world economic recession, the auto industry has been running below capacity since 2018, with an unknown number of workers receiving only a portion of their already low wages.

Russian workers cannot fight against these attacks without building new, independent organizations of struggle and turning to a socialist, internationalist program. They will find their main allies for this struggle in their class brothers and sisters internationally. In Matamoros, Mexico, auto parts workers have helped launch what has been the biggest strike on the North American continent in two decades. Autoworkers have gone on strike in Hungary and teachers have been striking on multiple continents in recent months, with half a million educators scheduled to strike today.

In a January 15 statement opposing the Ford job cuts, the Socialist Equality Parties in Germany, France and Britain wrote, “The critical task confronting workers is to develop an independent political struggle, in opposition to all the parties and organizations that defend capitalism. ... The answer is the taking of power by the working class as part of the fight for the United Socialist States of Europe, and the reorganization of economic life by the working class to meet social need, not private profit. This will include turning the giant automotive corporations into public utilities under the democratic control of the workers.”



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