

Nissan confirms job cuts as strike against Spanish plant closures continues

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Thousands of Nissan workers, their families and sympathisers are striking, protesting and blocking roads to protest the Japanese automaker's decision to shut down its Barcelona plant by December. Twenty-five thousand workers are to be directly or indirectly affected by the closure of Nissan's largest plant in Spain.

Since May 4, amid the resumption of production in its plants after the Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government imposed the reactionary back-to-work policy, unions have called Nissan workers out on strike. The cynicism of the company formerly led by fugitive CEO Carlos Ghosn could not be clearer. They ordered workers back to work on May 4, amid the pandemic, to complete 1,300 unfinished Mercedes vans and then close the factory.

Last week, Nissan reported a US\$6.2 billion loss for the fiscal year ending in March, its first annual loss in 11 years. The plant closure is part of a plan to restructure the Alliance, cut costs and raise profits. Under the plan, the company aims to reduce its production capacity worldwide by 20 percent, to about 5.4 million units, and cut its costs by 15 percent. Another Nissan factory will also be closed in Indonesia.

Their aim is to intensify the exploitation of workers by pooling production facilities elsewhere in Europe as well as in South America, South Africa and Southeast Asia.

Last week, soon after the announcement, workers blocked off streets and burned tires outside the plant, located in the Zona Franca industrial area.

Cristina Montero, 43, a single mother with a mortgage who has been working at the Nissan plant for 15 years, told *El País*, "It's very tough news. We knew about it, we imagined it could happen, but you never think it's really going to come true. There are many families who could be left out in the street, and we feel impotence and a lot of anger."

Another Nissan worker with 21 years seniority, José

Antonio Pina, said, "We have been doing badly for many years, and now it has been a total collapse."

Outside, hundreds of workers gathered to hear the head of the Workers Council, the trade union delegate Juan Carlos Vicente, after a meeting with company executives.

In an orchestrated announcement to the media, Vicente complained, "They've left us to die," and asserted that workers "will not make it easy" for Nissan to shut down: "We now have six months to try and make them change their plans. ... This is a long process, we have to pressure both the politicians and the company so that they understand that Nissan must stay, because around 20,000 families are at risk, and the industrial fabric of Catalonia and Spain are at stake."

Nissan workers' fight against the closure is arousing enormous sympathy and solidarity. The following day, thousands of autoworkers gathered at the doors of the four main Nissan dealerships, shouting with fists raised, "War, war, war, Nissan will not close!" As protesters marched and blocked roads, dozens of vehicles honked their horns in support; neighbours clapped or raised their fists.

Yesterday, Nissan workers organised a slow march of hundreds of vehicles in the centre of Barcelona. Autoworkers, many accompanied by their families, also received support from taxi drivers, who have been waging a bitter struggle against Uber for over a year.

Amid this jobs massacre, workers now confront a concerted attack by the PSOE-Podemos government, the Catalan nationalist-led regional government, and the trade unions to isolate, wear down and finally suppress the strike.

The unions and the PSOE-Podemos government are sowing illusions that negotiations with Nissan remain open, and that there still exists a possibility of the plant remaining open. The Works Council, run by the Podemos-linked Workers Commissions (CC.OO) and pro-PSOE General Union of Labour (UGT) unions, has argued for

delaying any escalation of the strikes and protests until the business meeting of the Nissan executives on June 6, insisting that Nissan could reverse its decision.

In a joint statement with the Catalan regional government, the Foment Del Treball business association, and small business groups, the CCOO and UGT, urged “Nissan to reconsider the decision bound with their responsibility with their workers.” They added that they would “continue working to maintain Nissan’s supply chain in Catalonia and value the unity of action of the different administrations, employers and unions to avoid confirming the definitive closure of the plants in Catalonia.”

Similarly, Economic Affairs Minister Nadia Calviño claimed she is willing to look for “an alternative solution,” adding, “We have proposed to the company to implement a process of discussion and negotiation to see how this process can be channelled,” since “it is a plant that made strategic sense for the company, being the only one in Europe.”

However, Gianluca De Ficchy, president of Nissan Europe, reappeared to state that the decision to close the Barcelona plant has been taken and is irreversible.

Last week, Nissan indirectly alluded as to why it wanted its plants in Barcelona to remain open until December. Ashwani Gupta, the Japanese company’s global chief operating officer, said that it would close its Sunderland manufacturing plant in the UK if London leaves the EU in a no-deal Brexit. He stated that with the EU being the Sunderland factory’s biggest customer, the tariffs that would come with a no-deal Brexit would mean manufacturing in Britain would not be viable.

Whether in Spain, the UK or France, all the unions are using the same “common front” to lull workers to sleep as they work to increase the exploitation of workers or force workers to accept plant closures.

In Spain’s Nissan plant, the last “common front” of unions, big business and regional and national governments happened in June 2019, when the USOC, CC.OO and UGT accepted a redundancy scheme, backed by the regional Catalan government, affecting 620 workers through early retirement and other cuts. In exchange, Nissan fraudulently committed to making new investments in Barcelona plants.

Spanish unions have even refused to mobilize workers in the other Nissan plants unaffected by the closures, let alone other auto factories of Seat, Mercedes, Volkswagen and PSA. On the same day as Nissan made its announcement, at Ford the UGT and CC.OO signed a

redundancy scheme affecting 350 workers from the plant in Valencia, to make the plant more competitive.

This same tactic is now being implemented in the UK, where Nissan announced plans to end a defined benefits pension scheme for hundreds of workers as part of its cost saving measures.

British trade union Unite reacted by announcing that it “is more than willing to help Nissan recalibrate to a changing world but this must not come at the expense of our members’ jobs, terms and conditions or other benefits. In the coming days we will be seeking our members’ views and be sitting down with the company to find a positive way forward for all.”

In neighbouring France, Renault has announced plans for an international wave of plant closings and layoffs, including 15,000 jobs worldwide, 4,600 of these in France. The French unions are not even organizing symbolic protests. Philippe Martinez, the head of the Stalinist General Confederation of Labour (CGT) union, responded with impotent and nationalist rhetoric. “We are very upset,” he said. “What Renault needs is to produce Renault cars in France and work on creating French jobs.”

Whether in Spain, the UK, France or other countries, workers confront the same reactionary trade union tactics to divide workers on national lines, trying to sell multinationals their workers’ labour power for a cheaper market rate than other countries.

A fight against this requires the construction of an international movement among workers. The opposition of autoworkers, including strikes and other struggles, can only be effective if it is mobilized across national borders against transnational companies, which shift production from one country to another to maximize profits. This requires building rank-and-file committees of action independent of the nationalist and pro-capitalist trade unions.



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