

French unions collaborate with employers to impose mass layoffs as COVID-19 crisis deepens

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As the international wave of layoffs, wage-cutting and plant closures triggered by the coronavirus pandemic begins in France, the French trade unions are working closely with the Macron government and employers to suppress workers' opposition to this assault.

On Thursday, Airbus management met with the main national unions to discuss their plans to lay off 5,000 employees nationally. This is part of a global restructuring that will destroy 15,000 jobs, including 5,100 in Germany and 1,700 in Britain.

Of the 5,000 job cuts in France, 3,500 will come from Toulouse, where Airbus operates five separate assembly lines for five major airplane models. They include 2,398 assembly-line and 900 white-collar positions. Another 484 positions will be cut at the Nantes factory which manufactures the central structural area of all Airbus planes, and another 386 at the Saint-Nazaire fuselage assembly.

It is already clear that layoffs will have a devastating flow-on impact on entire regions. According to the Occitanie Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 85,000 jobs and 800 companies depend upon the airplane manufacturing industry in Occitanie, which includes Toulouse, with estimates of up to 40,000 jobs immediately threatened. This month, Scalian, one subcontractor, announced plans to lay off 140 of its 225 employees.

Airbus has predicted that demand will not return to pre-2020 levels for three to five years.

The trade unions responded to Airbus' announcement with empty hand-wringing: describing it as "cataclysmic" and "catastrophic" for workers, while making clear that they would do nothing to oppose it.

Dominique Delbouis, the Airbus coordinator of Workers Force (FO), announced that "for FO, the red line is to reduce this number, which appears to us to be excessive." He called to prevent all "forced layoffs."

This only means achieving the layoffs by other means, including so-called "voluntary redundancies," in which workers are harassed and pressured into leaving their job, under conditions of a general downturn in which they would likely not find another job for years.

To the extent that Delbouis had any criticism, it was from the nationalist and corporatist standpoint of Airbus itself, warning that Airbus "must have enough resources available to bounce back once the crisis has passed. And it has all the more chance of bouncing back given that it is alone in the world, with Boeing down for the count and the Chinese not yet on the market."

Jean-François Knepper of FO added that the "natural attrition in the group is 6,000 jobs per year globally," and called for slowing the restructuring over two years to achieve it via "natural erosion."

In other words, the unions support the framework of mass job cuts in the midst of the pandemic to boost Airbus' global competitiveness, and the ensuing social devastation that will be wrought on working-class communities. Their aim is to achieve this while preventing an explosion of opposition among their members. To that end, there will be four months of closed-door negotiations on the latest restructuring plan.

An identical role is being played by the trade unions in other European countries. In the UK, a report published by the New Economics Foundation, in

consultation with the national Trades Union Congress, revealed that the Unite trade union has already agreed to a “redundancy cap” of 10 percent of all positions in the aviation industry, equivalent to tens of thousands of jobs.

In Germany, Verdi and other trade unions have called demonstrations in support of a government bailout package of €9 billion for Lufthansa that is tied to the destruction of 22,000 jobs and cuts to conditions.

But the unions’ role in imposing mass layoffs extends far beyond the airline industry. A report published today by *Le Monde* points to the scale of the social catastrophe that is underway in the clothing retail sector. Procos, an industry federation for specialized commerce, including restaurants, retail and other small trading, has warned that anywhere from 150,000 to 300,000 jobs are threatened.

These jobs have little to no protections, are low-wage, and many of those who lose their position will be unable to find any work. According to a study conducted by the General Federation of Labour (CGT) union, of the 2,100 retail employees laid off by La Halle between 2015-2017, between 35-40 percent had still not found a job as of February.

Dozens of fashion brands have already gone into receivership and will either be repurchased with stores closed and staff laid off or will shut down entirely. These include Camaïeu (3,300 employees), La Halle (5,809 employees), André, Celio, Demart, and Devianne, which together employ more than 16,000 across the country.

A key mechanism for implementing the layoffs is the so-called Collective Conventional Rupture (RCC), created by Macron, in the Labour Law in 2017. This law integrated the trade unions even more closely alongside the government and corporations in employer restructurings. Unlike previously, it allowed companies to carry out mass job cuts without even the routine of claiming financial necessity. Instead, all that was required was a signature of approval from the trade unions covering a majority of the workforce, as well as the labour ministry.

The unions have already signed off on numerous RCCs in the last month. Last week, Sanofi, the pharmaceutical giant, announced that it will cut 1,700 jobs across Europe, including between 750 and 1,060 in France, which it intends to achieve by two RCC

agreements. On Wednesday, the national pilots association announced that its leadership had agreed to an RCC with Air France that will cut more than 400 pilots’ jobs by the end of the year.



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