

Spanish unions isolate Nissan workers' struggle

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Hundreds of Nissan autoworkers have demonstrated outside the company's Cantabria factory in protest at the planned closure of its Barcelona plant. The closure will lead to the loss of more than 2,500 jobs at the factory, with at least 20,000 more indirectly threatened.

Around 300 autoworkers and their families from the Barcelona factory travelled to the town of Los Corrales de Buelna in the northern Spanish region of Cantabria for a multi-day demonstration beginning Tuesday June 30. Workers also travelled to the Cantabrian regional capital of Santander on Thursday July 2 to continue their protest. The more than 500 workers at the Los Corrales plant produce vehicle parts for factories in the Nissan-Renault Alliance across Europe.

This was the latest in a series of token actions organized by the unions, designed to allow workers to let off steam amid mounting opposition to Nissan's attacks on jobs, and to hide their own complicity in pushing through wage and job cuts. The unions aim to isolate and wear down the indefinite strike called by autoworkers on May 4, when Nissan demanded the resumption of production in Spain. Workers at the Barcelona plant remain on strike after more than two months in opposition to the planned plant closures.

The trade unions are trying to sow illusions that negotiations with Nissan remain open, and that workers can win an isolated, national struggle against the international Nissan-Renault Alliance. They have isolated the struggle of Nissan workers even within Spain, limiting the strike to just the Barcelona plant and leaving workers at the company's two other Spanish factories, in Cantabria and Ávila, to continue production.

While the Cantabria protest was organised by the Barcelona factory committee, run by the Podemos-linked Workers Commissions (CCOO) and pro-PSOE

(Socialist Party) General Union of Labour (UGT) unions, to "strengthen our collaboration" with the Cantabria factory and "show the necessary solidarity," union representatives in Los Corrales could barely conceal their hostility to the mobilization of workers.

Seeking to divide workers from the two Nissan factories, a spokesperson for the factory committee at the Cantabria plant, Eduardo Seco (UGT), claimed workers there were "very unhappy" about the demonstration and that the inhabitants of Los Corrales are "quite uneasy" about it. The plant would run at its "normal pace," stated Seco, with the factory committee having taken measures to ensure that the protest affected the Cantabria plant "as little as possible."

The CCOO representative in the committee, José Ángel de la Peña, also tried to distance himself from the protesters, saying that they had come to Cantabria of "their own accord." There is "not much point protesting in front of the Cantabrian plant," said de la Peña, because "it is not going to do damage to Renault like they [the Barcelona workers] claim."

Meanwhile, Ángel Anibarro, the president of the Cantabria factory committee, which is dominated by the CCOO, claimed to support the protest, but only "as long as everything goes ahead peacefully." Protesters responded with hostility to this slanderous suggestion that they were intent on violence, shouting "Get out!" and "That was out of order!"

Despite claims from union officials that Nissan workers and the wider population of Los Corrales were hostile to the protest by Barcelona autoworkers, the delegation was met with applause and raised fists by assembled inhabitants as they entered the town. Workers leaving the Cantabria factory at the 2 p.m. shift change also applauded and thanked the Barcelona protesters, with many coming to greet them and show

their solidarity.

Under the pretence of concern over the impact of the protest on the spread of COVID-19, the PSOE regional government delegate for Cantabria, Ainoa Quiñones, mobilised a massive police presence to the small town. In addition to local police, Quiñones brought in an extra 40 police force members from outside the region, including from the anti-riot GRS division of the paramilitary Guardia Civil.

Riot police lined the streets near the Los Corrales factory, with a police helicopter also seen circling overhead in an obvious attempt to intimidate protesters. Shouts of “We are workers, not terrorists!” were heard in response to this massive display of state force.

Whatever the rhetoric of low-level bureaucrats in factory committees, the unions have made it clear that they intend to block any attempts to organise a coordinated struggle against Nissan’s attacks on pay and terms. Workers from Nissan’s Spanish plants are being set against each other in order to drive down conditions for all autoworkers.

At the end of June, union representatives at the Los Corrales de Buelna factory came to a sell-out agreement with Nissan to keep the plant open, using the threat of the factory closure in Barcelona to force workers into accepting worse pay and conditions.

The so-called “ultra-competitiveness” agreement will see workers’ hours slashed by 5 percent as of January 2021, with a corresponding reduction in wages. Pay will be frozen at this lower level for the duration of the 2021-23 plan. This will be accompanied by a massive production-line speed-up, aiming to reduce costs per part by as much as 28 percent.

The 2021-23 plan also proposes to invest €40 million into the plant which would, among other things, apparently be used to finance new technologies to increase speed and output

The viability of the Cantabria factory remains unclear: 90 percent of the parts manufactured there are for vehicles put together in the Zona Franca industrial region of Barcelona, where the soon-to-be-closed Nissan factory is located, according to CCOO representative José Ángel de la Peña.

The jobs massacre planned at Renault-Nissan is only an initial indication of the brutal assault on the working class being planned by Spanish businesses and government, in conjunction with the unions.

According to a study by financial consultancy firm KPMG, 60 percent of Spanish companies will cut or freeze worker pay in the next six months, with only 4 percent indicating that salaries could increase. Twenty-seven percent of companies plan to modify workers’ terms and conditions, 18 percent will rescind contracts of outsourced workers and 34 percent will cancel new hires and promotions.

Thousands of job cuts have already been planned across Spain, including nearly 900 at Airbus and over 200 at the Siemens Gamesa renewable energy plant in Navarra. More than 500 jobs will be slashed by aluminium manufacturer Alcoa from their San Cibrao factory in north-western Spain. Engineering company SENER is also planning on laying off over 100 workers from Las Arenas, Madrid and Barcelona.

Nearly 4 million (3,862,883) Spaniards are already unemployed as of the end of June, the highest figure since 2016. This does not include the 1.8 million workers still furloughed under the PSOE-Podemos government’s ERTE scheme, many of whom will find themselves added to the unemployment rolls when the program ends in September. Youth unemployment in Spain reached a staggering 32.9 percent in May.

The fight against this assault on jobs and working conditions cannot be carried out through the bankrupt national framework of the trade unions, but requires the construction of an international movement of the working class. Workers at Nissan and elsewhere in Spain must join their struggles with those of workers across Europe and internationally, in a cross-border fight against the transnational corporations, which shift production from one country to another to maximise profits.

This requires building rank-and-file committees of action independent of the nationalist and pro-capitalist trade unions.



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