

Dutch unions sell out three-week strike against steel layoffs

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The giant multinational Tata Steel has dusted out its long-standing “reorganisation plans,” exploiting the COVID-19 crisis to eliminate an estimated 1,250 to 3,000 jobs at Tata Steel Europe’s Dutch and British facilities. This comes down to 1,000 job cuts from the current 9,000 workforce at the former Hoogovens steel plant, affiliated to Tata Steel Europe since 2007.

For the first time in almost three decades, Dutch steelworkers staged a strike at the steel factory in IJmuiden, just west of Amsterdam, in defence of jobs and to secure future investments in the plant. Netherlands Trade Union Confederation (FNV) official Roel Berghuis told reporters from state funded news outlet NOS: “For the first time in 28 years a strike took place, in a crucial department of the company.”

Despite its bogus claims that it aims to “secure jobs,” Prime Minister Mark Rutte’s government has been deeply exposed by its criminal handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and its indifference to the mounting social crisis in the Netherlands and across Europe. Unemployment rates have surged since April and May. However, more mass layoffs are expected to follow; they are being negotiated by and executed with the complicity of the Dutch trade unions (see: “Dutch government exposed by disastrous handling of COVID-19 pandemic”).

Since March this year, 201,000 workers lost their jobs, bringing the official unemployment count to 330,000. As not every unemployed worker is counted in the statistics, the real number is kept obscure. In 2019, the Dutch Foodbank served food packages to 151,000 people. Currently, more than half a million Dutch households live in poverty, and half a million are on the brink of falling into poverty. On the other hand, more than 200,000 Dutch are millionaires.

Moreover, according to the Oxfam report, Time to

Care, from January 2020, the Netherlands, as a tax haven, helps perpetuate extreme poverty not only at home, but also worldwide.

The Dutch trade unions bargained a “collective” agreement with Tata while promoting a poisonous nationalist line among the workers, alluding to the history of the 100-year-old plant, calling for the defence of their own Dutch turf, and claiming profits from the Netherlands to keep Tata afloat.

The steelworkers’ strikes that were attracting attention across the Netherlands and beyond, were quickly strangled by the FNV union bureaucracy. A deal with Tata Steel was made that postpones forced job cuts until 2025, although temporary contracts will not be renewed, and retiring workers not replaced.

The FNV, the biggest Dutch trade union, has less than a million paying members after a historic dip in its membership in recent years. It currently represents 14 affiliated unions and concludes more than 800 “collective agreements” with the employers and government per year, affecting a total of 5.1 million workers. This is over half of the entire Dutch workforce of nearly 9 million.

Scanty reports in the media claim that Tata had “promised” not to sell divisions of the plant or to outsource work to other plants. A Tata spokesperson told NOS: “It has been a turbulent period. We have always understood the unrest and worries of employees and we are very pleased with this result. We can now look to the future together.”

Despite what emerges as a classic sellout of the strike, the trade unions, media and their affiliates seek to dupe the workers at the plant with a carrot-and-stick approach: the prospect of forced layoffs looming at the horizon. Both Tata Steel management and FNV agree on the necessity of “increasing competitiveness” on

international markets in order to secure the plants' profitability.

This reflects the hackneyed arguments and orientation cemented and implemented by the Dutch trade unions since the infamous "Wassenaar agreement" was signed in 1982 that gave birth to the so-called "Polder Model." It marked a watershed of redistribution of income and wealth from the bottom to the top of the income ladder.

Thus this agreement constituted a fundamental change in social and wage policies. Henceforth, the improvement of social conditions was no longer the object of "consensus politics," but rather budget cuts directed against workers, the unemployed, the sick and pensioners. These cuts were meticulously negotiated and worked out in detail by the governing parties and effectively orchestrated by the trade unions, primarily in an effort to contain working class discontent.

This "Dutch Model" has since been praised internationally by governments, bourgeois economists and bankers, and many governments in Europe and across the world have taken it as an example. Trade unions are bound to the interests of the ruling financial oligarchy and impose social cutbacks and agreements to legitimise deteriorating working conditions on the working class.

The prospect of mass layoffs also hangs over the heads of Nederlandse Spoorwegen (NS) workers. The largest Dutch railway company seeks to cut 2,300 jobs in the coming years, stating the drastic drop in passengers using public transport during the pandemic as its excuse.

Also, massive job cuts and worsening conditions are also planned to be underway in KLM, the Dutch wing of the Dutch-French airline Air France-KLM. KLM received a €1 billion loan from the government, and state guarantees for loans up to €2.4 billion. In return for this bailout, KLM has to "reorganise." Many KLM employees have already been subjected to pay cuts up to 20 percent, and forced layoffs loom.

Four decades of the bitter Dutch experience with the treacherous Polder Model has provided ample evidence that yet again, trade unions in country after country have systematically abandoned the base they once had in the working class. In the process of the globalisation of production they have transformed into a well-to-do layer of trusted and go-to henchmen working in the interests of the financial oligarchy and ruling elite in

the Netherlands.

The fight for decent and secure jobs that are humane, and above all, safe amid a fatal pandemic requires a conscious political break with the trade unions and advanced through building independent rank and file committees at the work place in a struggle for socialism and workers power.



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