

Defying riot police, Moroccan autoworkers at Kénitra launch wildcat strike

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On January 27, autoworkers at Stellantis' Kénitra plant in Morocco walked out and blocked their factory to demand higher wages, proper health conditions, and improved working conditions. News of the strike spread quickly on social media, gathering strong support from workers in France and internationally. Stellantis is the new entity created by the January 15 merger between Fiat Chrysler Automobiles and French automaker PSA.

The 2,500 workers at the site, which is expected to produce 200,000 vehicles this year, including the Peugeot 208 and the Citroën AMI, marched through the plant and blocked the exits. Speaking to the production director, they issued demands which are now circulating on social media. They want to resolve in particular the very low salary (2600 dirhams, \$290 monthly), poor sanitary conditions, non-payment of bonuses and overtime, with a performance bonus that has not been paid for six months, and equipment failures.

The Stellantis-Kénitra workers also demanded medical coverage for all, compensation for work accidents, an increase in the length of breaks, and a more respectful attitude towards the workers by the plant managers. The workers said they would not resume before their demands were met.

In Morocco, *L'Opinion*, who contacted strikers in Kénitra, wrote: "The majority of workers are hired on a 12-month temp contract that does not provide medical coverage or protection in case of serious accidents, and their monthly salary does not exceed 2,400 dirhams. They also confirmed to us that many of the employees are obliged to work an extra hour after the end of their shift without pay."

On the first evening of the strike, several squads of riot police surrounded the plant to try to intimidate the

strikers before the next meeting with management on January 29. On the 28th, however, the workers staged a sit-in in front of the plant. Management refused a deal on the 29th, and the strike is continuing, according to the latest reports.

The Kénitra site is of strategic importance to Stellantis, as Morocco has overtaken South Africa to become the leading automaker in Africa. While its predecessor PSA saw a decline in sales in Europe in 2020, it also saw a 46 percent increase in its market share in the Middle East, thanks in part to significant increases in sales in Turkey and Egypt. A significant portion of Kénitra's production is sold to Middle Eastern markets.

The movement at Kénitra reflects the rise in workers' anger internationally at the effects of the pandemic and the working conditions created by the merger between PSA and Fiat Chrysler.

While PSA's sales fell by 27.8 percent and Fiat Chrysler's by 17 percent, the new corporation is trying to create maximum profits by employing a highly exploited workforce in Morocco as well as in France and internationally amid the raging pandemic. COVID-19 has infected 475,589 people and claimed 8,408 lives in Morocco, officially, with 234 new infections confirmed yesterday. There have been 31.4 million cases and 740,000 deaths in Europe.

Workers reacted to news of the strike in Kénitra with great enthusiasm on social media. On Facebook, an Alstom transportation equipment worker in France commented on the difference between the Kénitra strike and the usual corrupt deals between unions and management: "They are right, and it's rare, presenting demands at Peugeot, and presenting demands is offensive, it's not defensive like when you negotiate on proposals from bosses and management."

Another addressed the Kénitra workers: “You’re in a strong position, comrades! Keep going, they are having trouble filling all the car orders that are coming in.”

The conditions are ripe for a powerful international strike against Stellantis and a broader mobilization of the working class. This could not only improve the wages and working conditions of Stellantis workers, but also lay the basis for a struggle to stop the COVID-19 pandemic and the wars waged by French imperialism in Mali and across West Africa. In this struggle, the best allies of the workers in Kénitra are Stellantis workers internationally, and their class brothers and sisters around the world.

To wage such a struggle, however, workers will need to organize themselves in rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracies, and prepare for a political struggle. In the United States, Stellantis workers have already formed such committees at several plants.

The sending of riot police on the first night of the strike in Kénitra is a warning that the corrupt Moroccan monarchy, whose close ties to Washington and Paris are well known, sees a strike at Stellantis as an intolerable threat to its interests and its ties to international finance capital.

Moreover, the applause from French union bureaucracy for the strike at Kénitra is utter hypocrisy. Not only have the French unions given their support to the wars waged by French imperialism in Syria, Libya, Mali and throughout the Mediterranean, but they are led by bureaucrats who work closely with Stellantis management at autoworkers’ expense.

This is particularly the case of Jean-Marc Mercier, the principal delegate of the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union at Stellantis in France, who released a video cynically hailing the Kénitra strike.

A leading member of the petty-bourgeois Lutte Ouvrière (LO) party, Mercier led LO’s list in the 2019 European elections together with LO presidential candidate Nathalie Arthaud. Mercier has a long experience at Stellantis, having coordinated the shutdown of the Stellantis plant in Aulnay, north of Paris, in 2013. He is now a delegate at the Stellantis plant in Poissy.

In his video, Mercier said that in Morocco, “as in France, England, Germany and Algeria,” wages “are

blocked.” He then stressed the contrast between autoworkers’ conditions and the financial situation of the company. According to Mercier, Stellantis recorded “2.5 billion euros” in profits last year. “However, we work every day of the week, Saturdays, nights (...) Our wages, your wages must increase.” He promised, “We will publicize your strike in factories in France and in all Stellantis factories in Europe.”

In fact, Mercier, aware of explosive social anger in Europe against the criminal official handling of the pandemic and the vast increase in social inequalities, is desperately trying to prevent the unions from being overrun by the workers. Whatever token solidarity actions Mercier may organize will not help workers in Kénitra any more than it helped workers at Aulnay.

The way forward is to form an international network of rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the union bureaucracies, that will coordinate strikes and ensure health and safety. This paves the way for a struggle for a vast improvement in living standards, but also to organize a scientifically directed confinement policy, temporarily halting non-essential production to stop the pandemic. Above all, this will require a socialist political perspective to unite the workers of Africa, Europe and America against imperialism, austerity and war.



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