

Trade unions call off strike at Alcoa aluminium giant in Spain

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Spain's largest trade unions, the Podemos-affiliated Workers' Commissions (CCOO) and Socialist Party (PSOE)-affiliated General Union of Workers (UGT) have called off the four-month strike at Alcoa's San Cibrao aluminium plant in Spain's northeastern region of Galicia. Having isolated the strike, the unions moved to shut it down as it coincided with an international upsurge of struggles against wage cuts, job losses and the ruling class' "herd immunity" policy.

The San Cibrao strike opposed the decision of Alcoa, the world's third-largest aluminium producer, headquartered in Pittsburgh, USA, to close this smelting plant and fire all 530 workers. Another 1,500 indirect jobs were affected. Since 2008, Alcoa has closed or sold 18 aluminium factories worldwide, four in recent months, including at A Coruña and Avilés in Spain and Intalco in the United States.

It is part of an international offensive against aluminium workers as major corporations restructure operations to maximise profits. Worldwide, the industry is beset by oversupply, as Chinese demand has slowed in recent years, and especially now, with the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Alcoa arrived in Spain during the privatisation wave of the 1990s. It acquired a number of plants from the state-led aluminium company at very low cost, promising to reinvest €400 million. This never came. Instead, over the next decades, it sold plants to investment funds and sacked thousands of workers, while making over €1.5 billion in profits.

Alcoa's high electricity-consuming plants were also showered with state electricity subsidies. The company managed to save around €1 billion. A ludicrous situation emerged where Alcoa, a transnational company, paid an average of four euro-cents per kWh, while its workers paid 23 cents for the same electricity

in their homes.

In 2019, Alcoa sold its two plants in Avilés and A Coruña to Parter Capital Group, a Swiss hedge fund. The PSOE-Podemos government promoted this as the deal of the century. Industry Minister Reyes Maroto declared: "This is a day of hope. Spain needs industry, and we hope this announcement will serve not only to maintain jobs at the two plants, but also to create new jobs."

Just over a month later, in September, Parter Capital Group moved to sell it to Grupo Industrial Riesgo—but not before Alcoa paralysed the electrolytic cells, thus stopping the production of primary aluminium.

In May, at the height of pandemic deaths in the spring of 2020 and amid a nationwide lockdown, the company announced the closure of its San Cibrao plant. The unions reacted with their well-rehearsed tactic of wearing down workers with isolated protests and strikes.

The unions criminally aided the company in preventing a united action between all workers at the three Alcoa plants in the same region. Instead, each plant issued strike actions and protests on separate dates. The CCOO and UGT also made sure no combined struggle emerged with the thousands of Nissan workers striking against the Japanese automaker's decision to shut down its Barcelona plant, attacking 25,000 direct and indirect jobs.

The unions claimed that a "united front" of the regional and central governments, trade unions and workers would put "pressure" on Alcoa. The same tactic was used in the Nissan struggle to wear down working class opposition to plant closures.

At Alcoa's San Cibrao plant, CCOO union leader José Antonio Zan called on the PSOE-Podemos government to "be brave" and "take over the plant."

Zan claimed the government could “intervene in the company and keep part of the shares.” He called on it to “start legislating” to take over the plant, given “the lack of respect on the part of the company. … It is shameful how Alcoa behaves.”

The unions promoted talks between the regional and national PSOE-Podemos government to shower Alcoa with new subsidies. The CCOO and UGT, effectively working for management, even submitted a draft proposal on subsidies for Alcoa, giving it more tax cuts and exemptions.

In October, Alcoa announced mass redundancies. Amid mass anger, the unions called an indefinite strike and plant occupation, which was widely supported by the workforce. For four months, not only was production stopped—blocking over 50,000 metric tons of metal shipments—but workers prevented any attempt by Alcoa to remove machinery or other manufacturing equipment. The strike showed the strength of the working class.

The need for a broader, united and international mobilisation in Spain and throughout Europe was directly posed.

Instead, the unions intervened to promote illusions that a court decision in December, ruling that the collective dismissal process was “null and void,” was a victory. The pseudo-left online daily Izquierda Diario hailed it as “the first victory for Alcoa workers.” It did not stop the redundancies, however.

The key task facing workers was to unite their struggle with other sections of the working class. In December and January, mass strikes and stoppages in Spain’s health care, transport, agriculture and industrial sectors emerged, as unemployment surged to 16 percent of the population, around 3.7 million workers.

These struggles are part of a global upsurge of class struggle, vastly intensified by COVID-19, as the ruling class seizes on the pandemic to slash wages and benefits and impose murderously unsafe working conditions.

The trade unions rapidly decided to shut down the strike on January 22. The CCOO, the UGT and the Galician-nationalist trade union CIG (Confederación Intersindical Galega) reached a deal behind the workers’ backs with Alcoa, for the company to sell the plant to the Spanish government, which would then resell it to another private firm. Even this possibility,

however, is remote. As the unions said, the main issue was maintaining “social peace.” That did not mean maintaining jobs and salaries, however.

CCOO delegate Zan declared that “the agreement to achieve the social peace demanded by the multinational has been signed, now everything is in the hands of Alcoa and the SEPI [Spanish Society of Industrial Participations, the agency that manages state-owned companies], who have to negotiate to come to a deal. How could it be otherwise?”

Zan expected the plant to be sold to Liberty House, part of the British conglomerate GFG Alliance. However, he had to admit that he knows none of the details of “the operation,” although he claimed that “SEPI, Liberty or anyone who buys the company has to ensure the future through investments and modernise the factory.”

This is a fraud. International experience and Alcoa’s own previous deal in 2019 with Swiss firm Parter Capital Group shows that workers cannot put any hope in such operations. In each case they entail job losses and massive attacks on workers’ wages and conditions. Basic rights won over generations of struggle, including the eight-hour day and equal pay for equal work, are eliminated in defence of “competitiveness.”

Lessons must be learned. The only way forward to fight transnational companies, which act internationally to relocate production to improve their profits on the backs of workers, is to break from the nationalist straitjacket imposed by the trade unions and their perspective of “national” competitiveness and support for capitalist bailouts. This requires the building of international rank-and-file committees of action independent of the nationalist and pro-capitalist trade unions.



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