

French MBF metal workers on hunger strike against threatened plant closure

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Since May 18, four employees at an MBF Aluminium foundry in Saint-Claude, in the Jura region of eastern France, have been on hunger strike. The factory has not been operating since March. The workers have threatened to dynamite the factory if it closes. With the closure of MBF, the town's largest employer, 280 people, including 30 temporary workers, would be thrown into unemployment.

On May 25, the Dijon Tribunal of Commerce rejected the offer of the only buyer, Michael Azoulay, but opted to give a temporary reprieve to the MBF employees and allow the local government to regain control of the project. The decision to grant a stay on the closure of the plant was motivated by a fear that the radicalisation of the MBF workers would spread to workers at other foundries in France which are also in crisis.

Two reasons are generally cited to explain the decline in corporate orders at the metal works: the reduced use of diesel engines (and the planned phasing out of thermal engines over the next 20 years as part of the switch to electric cars), and the international economic crisis that was emerging even before the global pandemic.

Other sites are also threatened with closure are: the Brittany foundries (attached to Renault, with 340 employees), the Société Aveyronnaise de Métallurgie (365 employees), the Fonderie du Poitou and the ex-Française de roue (850 employees in all), the last manufacturer of aluminium rims in France. Dependent on car manufacturers, such as Stellantis (Peugeot) and Renault, these factories depend on ever smaller orders.

The Renault group has indicated that the Fonderie de Bretagne, put up for sale by the manufacturer, has filed a criminal complaint, after a video posted on social media showed the destruction of machinery and, in particular, threats to destroy other tools of the Fonderie

de Bretagne, according to the terms of the complaint.

Several days before the decision of the Dijon Tribunal of Commerce, MBF employees installed gas cylinders threatening to dynamite the foundry, and some employees went on hunger strike.

After three days without food, Isabel Alves Da Costa, a 45-year-old operator, warned of the social catastrophe that the closure of the foundry would represent. "It's hard, physically and morally. But we have held so many demonstrations, and they don't hear us. ... They have to understand that the situation is serious. The Saint-Claude region has been devastated. If MBF closes, it's not just 280 employees and their families who will be affected, it will be a disaster for everyone!"

The employees have expanded their actions to warn of the possible liquidation of the company and to raise awareness of the difficulties of the industry. According to the union, MBF Aluminium's two almost exclusive customers, Renault and PSA-Stellantis, are not honouring orders according to the terms of their contracts.

The trade union apparatuses are isolating the workers and blocking a unified mobilisation of workers throughout France and Europe also facing the destruction of their jobs, as part of the broader global restructuring underway in the auto industry.

In a press release dated May 9, the unions stated: "The French manufacturers have decided to KILL MBF, because even the volume of commitments they had made during the last contracts were revised downwards at the end of last week, further complicating the company's survival."

The General Federation of Labor (CGT)-Metallurgy proposed nothing except for "a moratorium on restructuring" of the foundries and said it had "reiterated" on May 4, in a meeting in Paris, its demand

for a roundtable of the automobile sector bringing together “all the players” in the industry. The unions have called on the government to provide financial guarantees and to put pressure on Renault and Stellantis (PSA) to maintain the site. Union leaders and their representatives denounce the “bulls...” of the employer’s plan.

The unions asked Macron’s Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire on April 13 for a roundtable with the auto manufacturers. They complained that they had not had any response: “This really raises the question of the government’s commitment to maintain sovereignty? in the foundry sector and more particularly at MBF.”

In May last year a source close to the presidential Elysée Palace stressed that the government’s investment in the sector was “an industrial issue, an issue of jobs and transformation of the sector towards the transition and conversion to clean vehicles” and “also aims to preserve the competitiveness of the sector.” Edouard Philippe, then prime minister, suggested that the government would accept the loss of jobs in exchange for maintaining assembly activities in France.

The unions are trying to channel workers’ anger by creating the illusion that by relying on the union apparatus, workers can force the state to save MBF.

Yet the unions have been present for years at the negotiations between the government and the employers to restructure the automotive sector. As Le Maire’s comments make clear, the entire premise of such “restructuring” is the increase of the “competitiveness” of the sector, i.e., the lowering of wages and conditions, and the wiping out of plants deemed “uncompetitive.”

This is financed by hundreds of billions of euros of public money from the European recovery plan for the pandemic, which the unions led by the CGT, have hailed. As the recovery plan is financed publicly, the foundry workers themselves contribute towards it. Yet this bailout serves only to oversee the destruction of jobs and increase corporate profits. The unions are not organising any large-scale action, even of a purely symbolic character.

The trade unions participate in the framework of “social dialogue” to make French capitalism and its strategic sectors more competitive, to the detriment of workers’ entitlements and jobs. Since the

announcement of the European bailout plan, the CGT and the trade union apparatus have imposed the reopening of work in the Renault and PSA factories throughout the pandemic, by removing days of leave and increasing working hours, among other measures.

The struggle against the closure of MBF Aluminium and the crises in the industry demand the building of an international workers movement, independent of the trade union apparatus.

The International Committee of the Fourth International has called for the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) for a common mobilisation of the working class internationally. To fight for the livelihood of workers, it is essential in all countries that the major international corporations, which are being infused with trillions of euros in public funds, be taken out of private hands and transformed into public utilities, under the democratic control of the working class. The factories threatened with closure, like the MBF foundry, must be maintained. Factories already closed must be reopened, under workers’ control, operated as international public utilities.

In the face of the capitalist state’s determined hostility to the working class, the implementation of this perspective requires a struggle for the seizure of working class power on an international scale.



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