

Spanish union betrayal at Ford Valencia exposes their role in Mercedes strike

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Last week, auto workers at the German automaker Mercedes-Benz plant at Vitoria, the capital city of the Basque Country in northern Spain, resumed activity after the summer holidays. They do so under the new collective agreement imposed by the unions in June, entailing savage wage cuts in exchange for a supposed billion-euro investment at the plant.

The agreement is now overshadowed by Ford's recent announcement of a delay in investments in the Almussafes plant in Valencia, Spain, which has 6,000 autoworkers. In Valencia, the social-democratic General Union of Workers (UGT) rammed through the most savage attack on workers in the Valencia plant's 46-year history to ensure it "won" a fratricidal bidding contest against Ford's Saarlouis plant in Germany. Reports indicate that there could be up to 3,000 job cuts at Almussafes.

The Electrification Agreement signed by UGT and Ford imposes a four-year wage freeze. With the latest Consumer Price Index (CPI) figures at 10.4 percent, this would mean real wage cuts of 30 percent or more by 2026. This represents thousands of euros less for each worker. In exchange for these cuts, Almufasses was supposed to receive investment to produce the new electric vehicles for Ford. Last week, however, Ford announced it was renouncing free public money to invest in the plant, signalling that a plant closure is still on the table.

The lesson at Ford is clear: workers cannot defend their jobs and salaries through the union bureaucracies, corporate management, and Spain's PSOE-Podemos government. The only way forward is to break with the unions and form independent rank-and-file committees to unify their struggles across Europe against plans by Mercedes, Ford and the other automakers. They plan to ruthlessly restructure the industry at the expense of

jobs, wages and working conditions.

Anger is again mounting at Mercedes. Last July, the UGT and the Podemos-linked Workers' Commissions (CCOO) unions rammed through wage cuts after a bitter struggle erupted at the plant against wage agreements below inflation levels.

Five thousand Mercedes autoworkers went on a nine-day strike supported by 95 percent of the workforce. Production was paralysed in the factory. Workers then extended the strike in defiance of the unions' attempt to limit it to a three-day action.

Workers opposed Mercedes-Benz management's blackmail. In what is now a recurring theme in autoworkers' struggles, Mercedes promised a €1.2 billion "investment plan" for electric vehicle production. In exchange, however, they demanded deep cuts to real wages and working conditions, even though the corporation reported €16 billion in net profits last year.

Like the other automakers, Mercedes-Benz is determined to make autoworkers bear the brunt of a restructuring of the global auto industry that has already destroyed tens of thousands of jobs worldwide. The aim is to turn workers into super-exploited temporary labor, totally at the mercy of management.

Mercedes set out a new round of attacks, confident they could rely on the unions to carry out the attack. Since the 2008 economic crash, CCOO and UGT have worked with management in the works council to impose Saturday night shifts, more flexibility, and a two-tier wage system. Seizing on the opening of negotiations around a new collective agreement, Mercedes demanded a new round of cuts.

In June, even as inflation reached over 10 percent, the company offered a 2 percent raise for 2022 and 1.8 percent raises each year until 2026. It also demanded an

extension of working hours by establishing a sixth night shift and requiring more weekend work.

The demand provoked mass anger, forcing the CCOO and UGT trade unions to call a three-day strike. In protests in the streets of Vitoria and picket lines at the factory, workers chanted “6th night no,” “CPI [consumer price index] Yes or Yes,” “[Mercedes general director of Spain Emilio] Titos, slacker on Sunday you come” and “UGT and CCOO, sellouts.”

CCOO and UGT signed a pre-agreement with Mercedes in which the latter withdrew its demand for a sixth night shift, allowing the unions to present it as a victory while the rest of the cuts remained.

The Basque separatist trade unions, ELA, LAB and ESK also assisted CCOO and UGT in their betrayal. Posing as critics of the works council dominated by CCOO and UGT, they called to extend the strike action by a few days, while refusing to broaden the struggle to other sectors. They had previously shown that when they control the works council, they play the same role as CCOO and the UGT: they signed a 4 percent wage increase—massively below inflation—in a contract at Guipúzcoa.

These unions never sought to coordinate the mobilisation with others in the auto sector in Spain or internationally. During the same month, British workers employed at VFS Southampton Ltd, who assemble large vehicles for Ford and Mercedes, threatened to strike over a pay dispute. In the US, dealership technicians at Mercedes-Benz of San Diego went on strike.

In an atmosphere of misinformation and intimidation—CCOO and UGT re-tweeted management threats to close the plant if concessions were not accepted—the unions called a vote. Replicating the filthy tactics the UGT used at Ford Valencia in February, they held a vote via their app without disclosing the text of the contract, refusing traditional ballot votes. It was thus impossible to count the vote.

In the end, 57 percent of workers voted for the agreement, which represents a historic attack on the workers. It slashes real wages by setting a wage increase for 2022 at 6 percent—four points below official inflation figures—and only 2.25 percent per year until 2026, or 8 points below inflation. This represents a loss of thousands of euros per worker in the coming years.

The vote, however, pointed to rising mass discontent. The “yes” vote was supported by the better-paid office workers, while support for the agreement fell to 38 percent in the assembly line, 46 percent in painting and 48 percent in the final assembly depot. The vote showed that the group of workers that will mostly suffer the cuts is overwhelmingly opposed to it.

CCOO General Secretary in the Basque Country, Loli García, welcomed the yes vote, claiming, “we believe that the agreement that has been reached is a very good agreement and we want to put the emphasis that, above all, we have not lost anything because there are no regressive measures.”

While workers are now working on the conditions of the new collective agreement, Mercedes has not followed through with its announcement of a €1.2 billion investment.

A battle is looming once again at Mercedes, and autoworkers have powerful allies—the millions of autoworkers and the billions of workers throughout the world who are beginning to fight back. The urgent task is the development of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to coordinate these struggles, mobilize opposition to the union bureaucracies, and the fight to unify these struggles across companies and national borders in the struggle for socialism.



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