

French auto workers at Hordain Stellantis plant on wildcat strike

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On Thursday last week, autoworkers walked off their shift at the Stellantis (formerly PSA) Sevelnord assembly plant in the northern French town of Hordain. The wildcat action stopped production for three days, before a partial restart on Tuesday due to an intervention by France's pro-corporate union bureaucracies.

Stellantis workers at Hordain revolted against deteriorating economic conditions in France and across Europe and the treacherous role of pro-company union officials. Strikers are demanding a €400 across-the-board wage increase to address inflation; a €6,000 one-time profit-sharing bonus; the permanent hiring of all temporary workers; and an improvement in working conditions.

The strike began Thursday, as workers on the shop floor decided on a walkout and gathered 200 workers from other workshops at the factory to launch the action. What triggered Thursday's walkout was management's sudden announcement that 20 minutes of additional overtime was required at the end of the shift.

In its initial stages, the walkout was conducted independently of the unions. However, when it learned of the action on Thursday morning, the Valenciennes section of the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union intervened.

The movement spread to the Stellantis gearbox plant at Trith-Saint-Léger, outside Valenciennes, and the engine plant at Douvrin. However, these actions were quickly shut down by the CGT, French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT), and Workers Force (FO) bureaucracies. The unions refused to back the strikes, or call out other Stellantis workers in a coordinated walk-out between the plants, even though multiple spontaneous actions had already begun.

This experience points to the necessity for French Stellantis workers to follow in the footsteps of their colleagues internationally, as in the United States at the Sterling Heights Stellantis plant in Michigan, and form their own rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions.

While cynically posturing as defenders of strikers, the CGT and other pro-company unions have done everything they could to isolate and strangle the strike.

The unions worked to divide and break up the spreading, spontaneous struggle. They ordered workers at Trith-Saint-Léger and Douvrin back to work after the announcement of new talks between union executives and Stellantis management on September 27. At Hordain, strikers were told to go back to work while going on 50-minute partial walkouts, which the CGT bureaucracy fraudulently claims will be enough to "keep up pressure" on Stellantis management.

As in previous cases, such talks will lead to no substantial improvement in workers' conditions. The CGT has announced that the meeting with management will include a discussion "of measures to protect purchasing power." This is the same promise the union made before a similar meeting in June, but so far no action has been taken.

The FO union also launched a limited action on Monday at Trith-Saint-Léger involving about 80 workers, in which the union explicitly refused to call for support from workers in other factories. FO delegate Eric Denaene claimed the union "decided to do this alone." The CGT and CFDT cynically denounced what they called a "lone wolf" action, seeking to divide workers and strangle support for broader action.

The CGT is desperately seeking to cover its tracks as it works to shut down the strike movement. Despite

leading the push to force workers back on the job, CGT General Secretary for the Valenciennes area Cédric Brun claimed, “We are in the process of coordinating and launching walkouts in all the sites.” He then absurdly claimed that calling strikes “is a bit complicated, because of the partial layoffs here and there.”

Demonstrating just how out of touch the union bureaucracy is with the increasingly impossible battles workers face against low wages and high inflation, FO delegate Olivier Lefebvre told autoactu.com, “inflation as under control in France.”

Stellantis and the unions are particularly afraid of rank-and-file action at the Hordain plant, as it is crucial for the corporation’s transition to electric vehicles. At the moment, fully electric vehicles from Stellantis “K-Zero” range are 33 percent of total production at the site; Stellantis aims to increase this to 100 percent in the coming years. The K-Zero line assembled at Hordain is currently the company’s most profitable commercial line.

The only way to oppose the “streamlining” of the workforce via mass layoffs and the imposition of draconian cuts to real wages and conditions is to organize workers independently of the union bureaucracy, in rank-and-file committees. The CGT and other union bureaucracies will work to push through these cuts on behalf of Stellantis management. Indeed, this is what they previously did at Sevelnord, when it helped Stellantis (then PSA) push through wage cuts and other concessions in 2012.

While its workforce struggles to survive as food and energy bills soar, Stellantis enjoyed record profits of €13.4 billion profit in 2021. In the first half of 2022, it posted a profit of over €8 billion, up 34 percent, on course to break last year’s record. This is despite the ongoing semi-conductor shortage, which forced a temporary halt to production at another French Stellantis plant, at Sochaux, in August.

In other words, contrary to the claims of company and union bosses, there is more than enough money to ensure that the workers who make Stellantis vehicles can feed their families and heat their homes this winter.

Workers can only fight inflation and austerity on an international basis, building rank-and-file organizations independent of the union bureaucracies. Wages are being hollowed out by rising prices due to two essential

factors: multi-trillion-dollar bailouts of the super-rich amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the NATO war on Russia in Ukraine. In France and internationally, governments have only been able to push through these policies due to the acquiescence of pro-corporate unions.

The CFDT, CGT, FO and their partners across Europe signed off on the euro zone bailouts in May 2020, which now extend into the trillions of euros. As part of this deal, the unions agreed to the banks’ demands to prematurely force workers back to work before the virus had been suppressed, leading to most of Europe’s nearly 2 million COVID-19 deaths. Similarly, the CGT published a letter announcing its support for European governments’ involvement in the war in Ukraine, though it risks triggering nuclear war.

Rank-and-file organizations are the alternative that can be built to free workers struggles from the grip of the bureaucracies and fight to defend living standards and oppose military escalation. Following the lead of Stellantis workers at Sterling Heights in the United States, German Ford workers fighting the closing of the Saarlouis plant, and US rail workers, Stellantis workers in France and across Europe can and must form their rank-and-file committees. Workers interested in taking up this crucial struggle can contact the Socialist Equality Party today.



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