

Italian autoworkers at Stellantis Mirafiori plant walk out for the third day

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Friday marked the third consecutive day of wildcat strikes and protests by Italian autoworkers at the historic Stellantis Mirafiori plant in Turin in response to the threat of the plant's closure. Walkouts began on the second shift on Wednesday, at the end of a FIOM-CGIL union meeting, when Stellantis CEO Carlos Tavares announced that the Mirafiori and Pomigliano d'Arco plants are at risk of being shut down.

The transnational firm's next step is the extension of a "temporary layoff" next Monday, now effective through March 30, which will affect 2,260 workers. Workers have been placed on redundancy pay. The affected lines produce the electric version of the iconic Fiat 500 car as well as upscale Maserati models.

Fears that these are not temporary measures are more than justified. The move is part of an acceleration of job cuts being implemented across the global auto industry. At the beginning of February, Stellantis already shut down the third shift at its Detroit Assembly Complex-Mack plant, with similar claims that the 2,455 layoffs are just temporary. Hundreds of workers have also been laid off at the Toledo Jeep assembly complex in Ohio, forced to choose between transfers to factories in other towns and unemployment. France's Stellantis Mulhouse plant is also planning the slashing of 600 jobs.

Stellantis CEO Tavares has engaged in what amounts to extortion of state and national governments in the countries in which the company operates, demanding massive incentives to subsidize the production of electric vehicles (EV), so that the company can compete with China's rapidly developing auto industry.

In a recent statement, Tavares blamed the Italian government for not providing more funding for the nascent EV market, issuing a not-so-thinly veiled threat to reduce the company's operations in the country: "If you don't want EVs to progress, you just have to stop the subsidies," he said. "It's obvious that the Italian government has been doing that. The EV market in Italy is very, very small. It's a direct consequence of the fact that the Italian government does not subsidize the purchasing of EVs."

There is enormous pent-up anger among the workers at Mirafiori. One commented on FIOM's Facebook page: "We are just a drop, we need to block highways, freeways etc.

Striking outside the plant is no longer sufficient. Look at the tractor ones [referring to farmers' protests]." Another suggested: "As soon as Mr. Tavares shows up, we must block everything to disrupt him."

Another worker commented on the increasingly precarious character of many jobs: "In 2022 and 2023 workers only worked 7-8 weeks a year, no one is talking about this. These are people with health issues, they are discriminated against. They have a right to live and not starve to death!"

In one interview, a worker described how "the situation is very serious. We've been dealing with redundancy pay for 17 years, production is at a historic low, we are really fed up. A union assembly that was supposed to be cool shifted into a real strike."

An examination of the role of the political establishment in Italy as well as the trade union bureaucracies further underscores the need for workers to mobilize independently of all these hostile forces.

First, the recent criticisms by fascist prime minister Giorgia Meloni's government of Stellantis' corporate executives have nothing to do with defending the interests of workers in Italy. Rather, Meloni's government is seeking to funnel a greater share of Stellantis' profits, produced by autoworkers globally, towards the Italian ruling class.

Minister for Business and Made in Italy Adolfo Urso stated that Stellantis had an "unbalanced, absolutely not equal" shareholding structure between its French and Italian stakeholders. In other words, so long as Italian capital is in charge of exploiting workers, everything would be fine.

The so-called opposition is in full agreement. Democratic Party (PD) Secretary Elly Schlein appealed to the government of Meloni to become a stockholder: "Tavares launched a challenge: the government must accept it and not miss Stellantis' provocation. The option of an Italian participation in Stellantis must be taken seriously as balance to that of France."

The union FIOM-CGIL assumed a similar tone. Giorgio Airaudo, head of CGIL in the Piedmont region where Mirafiori is located, anticipated the unviability of the plant's future: "For what we know today, Mirafiori will no longer produce any line by 2027. Unless new products arrive and the tendency on the European market shifts, the plant will be reduced to a flickering

light.”

Similarly, Samuele Lodi, national secretary of autoworkers for CGIL, appealed to the fascist Meloni government as well as Tavares: “After [all the autoworkers’ unions] FIOM, FIM and ULIM’s joint request to the prime minister and CEO Tavares, workers ask for initiatives that push the institutions to protect production and jobs.” FIOM National Secretary Michele De Palma issued a similar appeal for a joint meeting between unions, government and Stellantis executives.

Mirafiori workers know too well what to expect from a fascist ultra-nationalist government: loyalty to big capital and repression of workers. Meloni’s political ancestor, Benito Mussolini, presided over the opening of the plant in 1939 in front of 50,000 workers, who compelled the “Duce” to leave the stage after they showed contempt for his words.

Meloni’s government has been carrying out ruthless attacks on the working class and the poor, and working to ensure continued funds for the war in Ukraine. A few days ago, the prime minister was praised by all European leaders for convincing Hungarian President Victor Orban to agree to a European Union fund for Ukraine. While there are plenty of resources for war and genocide, an intervention of the Italian state in Stellantis would only mean the subordination of workers to the harshest austerity measures in the name of the “national interest.”

Workers also know what to expect from Stellantis in light of the slew of layoffs that are taking place at virtually every plant around the world. Under capitalism, the transition to EVs, like the use of artificial intelligence (AI), will be at workers’ expenses: thinner assembly lines, smaller workforce and flexible contracts have already been planned in Stellantis’ corporate offices.

The union bureaucracies are playing a crucial role in aiding the corporations and the capitalist states in forcing through job cuts and attacks on workers’ living standards. The lessons of last year’s United Auto Workers sellout contract should be assimilated by all workers.

The administration of self-proclaimed “reform” president Shawn Fain orchestrated a fraudulent “stand-up” strike which kept the overwhelming majority of autoworkers at Ford, GM, and Stellantis on the job and producing profits for the companies. The UAW leadership then shut down the limited strikes after announcing tentative agreements with the companies, before holding votes or even showing workers the contracts.

The deals—worked out between the companies, the union apparatus and the Biden administration behind workers’ backs—were hailed as “historic” and “job-saving” by the UAW leadership. But only weeks later, a wave of mass layoffs and firings of temporary workers have begun.

“We should have a global strike”

Stellantis workers in the United States responded to news of the walkouts in Italy with enthusiasm. “The Italian workers are showing real solidarity,” said Hannah, a former Warren Truck worker in suburban Detroit who was one of the hundreds of supplementary (temporary) workers terminated last month. “The workers at the Mirafiori plant are seeking answers and not getting any from the union leaders, just like us. So, they are taking matters into their own hands.”

Hannah, who is a member of the recently formed Rank-and-File Committee to Fight Job Cuts, said, “When I posted news about the strike on our Facebook page lots of workers liked the posts. They posted replies like ‘Let’s go out too,’ ‘Why weren’t we the first ones to walk out?’ and ‘Only if we show them our strength can we do anything.’”

“The UAW reps are saying ‘that’s over in Italy, it doesn’t have anything to do with us.’ Well...hello...we all work for the same company! We should have a global strike. It was choice of the workers in Italy to fight, not the apparatus. The UAW officials are always trying to woo the membership with false hopes. But these job cuts are not just threats, they are happening all over, and workers are on the verge of taking matters into our own hands here too.”

Italian autoworkers, like their brothers and sisters in the US, are ready to fight. But the union bureaucracies are curtailing the struggle to what is acceptable by Tavares and the fascist Meloni. The one-hour wildcat strikes for three consecutive shifts instead of an all-out general strike are the unions’ attempt to control a situation that is threatening to escape their grip.

It has never been more urgent for workers to mobilize independently, on the basis of their common interests as an international class.

A new, global form of struggle is being spearheaded by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), a network of militant workers’ organizations. The IWA-RFC is coordinating the fight against job cuts and for workers’ interests across national borders.



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