

Amiens, France: Goodyear tyre workers face attacks on jobs and conditions

By Pierre Mabut
23 July 2008

Bitter opposition by workers at Goodyear/Dunlop tyre in Amiens, northern France, to management's rationalisation plans came to a head on July 15. The company announced 402 redundancies from next September, with 600 more to follow within months.

The 2,700 workers at the Goodyear and Dunlop plants, owned by the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company, voted by a 64 percent majority in October 2007 to reject plans to implement a four-shift system. The new set-up would mean four shifts (instead of five) working seven days a week, each shift working two mornings, two afternoons, two nights, with two rest days in continuous rotation. These inhuman conditions would further undermine workers' health and any weekend family life. This was in conjunction with the elimination of 450 jobs over three years through attrition due to the elimination of one shift.

In an attempt at intimidation, management had declared that a "no" vote would mean closure of the two plants. A "yes" vote, they insisted, was the only option to maintain tyre production in Amiens, claiming production to be 25 percent cheaper in Germany. A €52 million modernisation investment scheme was made conditional on the introduction of the four-shift system.

Goodyear Amiens currently exports two-thirds of production to Europe, but not of the high value-added consumer or commercial tyres variety, the most profitable, now favoured by the multinational.

The attempt to intimidate workers into accepting the system or face job losses and plant closure has had some effect. In spite of the majority's rejection, two dissident delegates of the main CGT union (Confédération générale du travail—General Confederation of Workers) at the Dunlop plant, along with the FO (Force Ouvrière—Workers Force), CFTC (Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens—French Confederation of Christian Workers) and CFE-CGC (Confédération Française de

l'Encadrement—Confédération Générale des Cadres/French Confederation of Management—General Confederation of Executives), representing mainly white-collar and technical staff, signed up to the deal. The two CGT delegates at Dunlop who sided with the management's position have since had their credentials removed by the union.

In collaboration with management they forced yet another vote on June 27, which resulted in a less than 50 percent turnout by production workers after the CGT at the Goodyear plant called for a boycott. The 27 percent vote against, plus abstentions, demonstrated once again the overwhelming opposition of workers. However, the lack of support at the national trade union level, especially of the CGT, led to the Dunlop plant capitulating to Goodyear's demands.

Goodyear, the third largest tyre manufacturer in the world, with 70,000 workers in 25 countries, announced its latest business strategy in a press release on June 26. It seeks to capitalize on worldwide demand for high value-added tyres in growth markets such as China, Russia and Brazil. Investments of \$500 million in Germany and Poland and \$500 million in China are planned. It intends to cut costs by more than \$2 billion by 2009, closing the Somerton plant in Australia and reducing what it calls "high cost capacity" by 25 million tyre units.

The situation in France is not addressed in this overall picture, but the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company's cautions about future trends are a warning: "Our plans, however, are flexible so that we can adjust both the pace and amount to reflect the macro-environment and market trends while maintaining positive cash flow.... These factors include, but are not limited to: actions and initiatives taken by competitors; increases in the prices for raw materials and energy, our ability to realize anticipated savings and cost reduction initiatives..."

In other words, under the impact of the credit crisis and world recession, nothing is certain. What is certain—as in the case of General Motors in the US, which Wall Street rumours is verging on bankruptcy—is that the working class will be made to pay and profitability is to be maintained at all costs. GM has slashed 53,000 jobs over two years and cut wages by up to 50 percent. The outlook, therefore, for Goodyear workers in Amiens and internationally looks ominous.

In a last ditch attempt to force the Goodyear plant into submission, Goodyear/Dunlop France Chairman Olivier Rousseau wrote July 4 to Bernard Thibault, general secretary of the CGT (close to the Stalinist Communist Party), asking him “solemnly that the CGT not use its veto to the agreement.” In reply, the CGT leadership put out a public statement on July 8 titled: “Negotiate a project for the future and guarantee the rights of workers.” After denouncing the four-shift system of working as “illegal, and not in conformity with the national agreement of the rubber industry,” the union “solemnly asks the management of Goodyear France to open negotiations while respecting the legislation on the conditions of work and collective bargaining.”

The leadership of the CGT, fearing any continued escalation of resistance by workers, declared: “It is urgent to reply to our demand, all the more so as management’s decision to instigate an illegal lockout from Sunday evening will worsen an already tense atmosphere.” Two hundred workers set up a picket at the factory gate on July 4 to protest the loss of jobs and were answered by management with a lockout and factory shutdown. The company got an emergency court order to clear the peaceful picket line by the use of riot police and reopened five days later.

While the CGT and other unions appeal to Goodyear’s sense of negotiation and refuse to mobilise any general action in support of their members against the company’s “illegal” actions, the determination of Goodyear workers has been reflected in the fact that the two local CGT delegates vetoed the agreement. One CGT delegate, Mickaël Wamen, already expressed fears about the company’s real intentions: “For two years we have noticed a net reduction in activity. We have lost 180 full-time posts ... at the same time the number of temporary workers increased.” The four-shift set-up was always “fictitious,” he claimed (*Le Courrier Picard*, April 4, 2008).

The fight in defence of jobs is now posed. The struggle of Goodyear workers is at a crossroads and thus far has

remained isolated without any initiative on the part of the unions to mobilise solidarity on an industry, national or international level. The CGT and CFDT’s signing in June of the “common position”—an agreement with the Medef employers’ organisation, which paved the way for the legislation undermining all previous labour law protecting workers conditions—has undoubtedly strengthened the hand of employers like Goodyear with the message that official trade union opposition will be non-existent. As President Sarkozy arrogantly commented, “Nowadays, when there is a strike no one notices.”

The trade union bureaucracy is chiefly responsible for the isolation in which the Goodyear and other workers, such as teachers and rail workers, find themselves. However, trade union militancy at the Amiens Goodyear plant is unable to offer a perspective to challenge the multinational’s blackmail. The factory CGT branch issued a statement on July 16, which, while angrily rejecting the company plans, expressed illusions in militant pressure and appeals to the government’s nationalist sentiments. “We continue to ask for round table discussions, the State must intervene in this case where an American company tramples on the rights of hundreds of French workers.... We are always open to dialogue ... but there is no one who wants to work with us in the common interest.”

As most Goodyear workers are aware, President Sarkozy intervened last year to no avail with promises at the Arcelor Mittal steelworks in Gadrage to save the 575 jobs threatened by the world’s biggest steel manufacturer. The Goodyear workers are confronting an unscrupulous employer and their only common interest lies with all workers in similar struggles. Ties must be forged with fellow Goodyear workers in Australia, Germany and worldwide to fight back against the company’s cost-cutting and fight for united action with workers in the Amiens region against the government’s austerity measures.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>