

Romanian Ford workers defiant as company seeks to impose blackmail contract

By Jerry White and Eric London
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The new year began with the auto giant Ford seeking to impose a two-year labor agreement on 4,200 workers at its Craiova, Romania plant. Workers returned from their holiday break in a rebellious mood, however, with the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* receiving reports of sporadic work stoppages and a growing determination for collective resistance.

On December 21, an estimated 1,000 Craiova workers walked out of the southeastern Romanian plant in a wildcat strike after the Ford Craiova Automobile Union signed the sellout deal with Ford Romania. The agreement freezes the pay of senior workers and reduces new-hire wages to below the minimum salary or as little as €300 (US\$358) a month, while cutting payments for overtime work and introducing “flexible” schedules whenever “operational demands require it.”

The US-based auto giant, which made \$16.3 billion in gross profits in 2016 and \$9.4 billion in the first three quarters of 2017, purchased the former Daewoo Motors facility from the Romanian government in 2008. Romanian wages can be as low as €2 (US\$2.26) an hour or less than five percent of the overall labor costs of a German autoworker. Craiova workers churn out Ford’s compact SUV EcoSport—starting price \$19,000 (€15,777) or four times the annual wage of a new hire—largely for the western European market.

The workers have defied the blackmail by Ford management, which has threatened to withdraw plans for a second product and essentially throw them into the street if workers do not accede to the company’s demands.

If workers reject the deal, company officials warned, Ford would not compensate workers for the large tax increases they face in the new year due to the new law passed by the Romanian government. The Social Democratic government has essentially eliminated the employers’ share of the costs for health care and other social benefits, and shifted them onto the backs of workers. Without Ford transferring any of its massive savings to workers, they would face a de facto 25 percent wage cut, reducing workers and their families to

starvation.

According to a Craiova worker in contact with the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*, the difference between accepting and rejecting the deal would be 800 Romanian Lei (€171.43 or \$206) a month. “It will climb to 1900 lei (€407 or \$490), but 1100 (€236 or \$284) if we do not accept the deal.” But the wage “increase”—which is entirely bonuses, not increases in base pay—is really no raise at all, since the “added” 800 lei will be deducted from workers’ paychecks for social contributions.

With workers steadfastly opposing the deal, Ford management struck a less aggressive tone this week, while insisting that the new contract would be put into effect regardless of their opposition. “We all go through challenges,” Ford Romania chief John Oldham said in an official statement issued Wednesday, “but I want you to know that Ford’s management team will continue to maintain its commitment to the strong future of the Craiova plant. It is important to stay together and act like a SINGLE TEAM continuing to show that the Craiova factory is one of the best factories in Ford Europe.”

Nevertheless, he insisted, management “decided to apply all the provisions as they were negotiated on December 20, 2017...” The Ford executive promised salary increases for all employees as a result of “transferring contributions from Employer to Employee,” raises for new employees, and an increase in six months for other workers, “in line with those stipulated in the Negotiating Commission decisions.” With false generosity, Oldham added that meal vouchers would increase by \$0.77 (€0.64) this month. He ended his remarks by insultingly wishing workers and their families a “happy and prosperous New Year.”

With anger reaching a boiling point, union officials from the Ford Craiova Automobile Union tried to distance themselves from the deal. In an unsigned statement the union issued to workers this week, which factory workers provided to the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*, the union declared, “Following the discussions held today with the management, from the point of view of the trade union,

negotiations on the CCM [Collective Bargaining Agreement] have not been finalized, as management has informed you. The CCM for the years 2018-2019 was not signed.”

Workers should not sign “additions to their Individual Labor Agreement (CIM),” the union said, because this “implies acceptance of the employer’s offer.” The union would pursue “legal steps to conclude a CCM agreed by all members,” the statement added. In an effort to shore up its credibility with workers, union officials claimed that their signatures on the contract had been forged.

While details remain sketchy, workers informed the *Autoworker Newsletter* that the national trade union federation might be stepping in to negotiate a new deal. This has been met with a large amount of skepticism. “Everyone is unhappy,” the Ford worker told the newsletter. “We are all saying we are not going to sign the agreement, but Ford is looking to blackmail us and has threatened to sue the union if it does not respect the deal. Starting today,” he said, “the union was resuming negotiations assisted by lawyers.”

He added, “There is a lot pressure being exerted on workers. They have been told that if they disagree with what Ford has proposed, money will be taken from them. Everyone is angry but confused. We have been deceived by Ford, the union and the Romanian government. Now the union seems to be on our side, but we have already been fooled so many times, we do not know who to trust.”

Workers at the factory have been circulating the articles posted on their struggle by the *World Socialist Web Site*. “More and more people have started distributing your posts,” he said, adding that there was great interest in newsletter’s call to mobilize autoworkers internationally in defense of their struggle.

Describing conditions in the impoverished country, he said, “We work for taxes. The hospitals have outbreaks of infections. When you go to the hospital you have to buy absolutely everything to be treated. If you are operated on you have to buy the pills and everything. Many factories have been closed and whole industries destroyed, and they force us to accept the minimum wage.”

While Eastern Europe has long been used as a Mexican-style cheap labor platform and to extract wage concessions from workers in the West, over the last year there has been a rising tide of militant strikes, including Fiat workers in Serbia and VW workers in Slovakia.

Outside of the WSWS, there has been a news blackout on the Romanian struggle. The communications department at Ford’s global Headquarters in the Detroit suburb of Dearborn, Michigan, did not return a call from WSWS about the dispute. Neither the IG Metall union in Germany or the United Auto Workers in the US has issued any statements.

The last thing these nationally based and pro-corporate unions want is a common struggle against their corporate “partners,” which began to reverse the union-backed concessions that have produced record corporate profits and boosted the stock holdings and bank accounts of the union apparatus.

Conditions for unifying the struggle of autoworkers, however, have never been so opportune. Some 3.9 million auto, steel and engineering workers in Germany are pressing for significant wage improvements and shorter workweeks during ongoing negotiations and hundreds of VW and Porsche workers are engaging in partial strikes and protests this week. In France, autoworkers are battling the Macron government, which is using its new labor “reforms” to push through American-style layoffs and casual labor at PSA and other corporations.

Autoworkers around the world must take matters into their own hands by building rank-and-file committees, and coordinating their struggles against the globally organized corporations and international capitalist system.

This is increasingly the conclusion that workers are drawing. In comments directed to his class brothers and sisters in Romania, a worker at Ford’s Chicago Assembly Plant said, “Fight for what you deserve, not what they want to give you. The excuses the company and the unions give the workers are always the same. It may be in different languages and vary it a little from one place to another but in essence it’s the same excuse.

“They say, ‘We—the company and the unions—want more, much more, for less. We the corporation and the union take all the profits while you, the worker, has to suffer.’ The corporation and the union are always the winners, and the losers are always the working class. Things need to change,” he told the newsletter.

“We need to use the same strategy as these corporations use against us. We must become global. A global working class united, fighting for what we all deserve. These corporations have gone global pitting the working class from one country against another. The only answer is to unite globally as a working class. We can no longer afford to think of ourselves as an isolated group in a particular nation. We must think and fight globally.”

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