

France: PSA uses labor law to sack workers, boost working times in Vesoul plant

By Anthony Torres
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Using the Socialist Party's (PS) labor law and French President Emmanuel Macron's labor decrees, automaker PSA Peugeot-Citroën and the trade unions are negotiating plans to sack hundreds of workers and boost working times. The unions are isolating workers in Vesoul while organizing a few token protests—allowing PSA to push through deep attacks on wage levels by imposing them one plant at a time.

In a communiqué, the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) wrote: “Management has just proposed to the trade union organizations, through a local agreement, to go back on the 35-hour work week by augmenting effective labor time by 7.8 percent, going from 7 hours to 7 hours 33 minutes per day, that is 35 hours to 37 hours 45 minutes per week.” However, there would only be a “2.8 percent raise in salaries.”

The corporation announced that its project includes plans for automatic job cuts at the rate of 150 full time workers per year until 2020. A PSA spokesman claimed that PSA's objective is to “guarantee the future of the plant” in Vesoul that builds and stores car parts, which “must continue to transform itself in order to pursue the development of its activities” in a “particularly competitive environment.”

According to the CGT, “this first attack on the Vesoul site prepares a series of attacks on all of the factories of the corporation. This challenge to the 35-hour workweek at one of France's largest industrial firms is a message sent to all workers in every enterprise in this country.” It added, “Faithful to its policies, PSA is losing no time to implement the new laws undermining the collective rights of workers, such as the labor law, which allows for establishing local factory contracts that violate national legislation on the duration of the work week.”

The CGT's response is entirely bankrupt, however. Having acknowledged that the Macron administration and PSA are pressing forward with plans aimed at industrial workers across France, the CGT is only organizing a small strike at the Vesoul plant by a tiny minority of the work force. On Thursday and Friday, of the over 3,000 workers working at the plant, less than 100 people, including union officials and their political periphery, went on strike.

The CGT's remarks are particularly cynical: the union bureaucracies helped approve the labor law and Macron's labor decrees, blocking a struggle against the PS and Macron. Now PSA is using this legislation to press for contracts violating national labor law, like the 35-hour work week.

Workers in Vesoul and across France cannot expect anything from the unions, which are helping the government to set up the legal weaponry it needs to destroy basic social rights of the working class. These organizations are seeking to isolate the workers to demoralize them and prevent them from unifying in struggle against austerity with workers across France and beyond. The only way forward for workers is to create their own rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions, to wage political struggle against the Macron administration and the European Union.

The experience of the 2016 labor law struggle is a bitter warning that the trade unions will only be able to impose defeats on striking workers. The PS government used anti-democratic emergency legislation to ram through the labor law without a parliamentary vote, while using the state of emergency to crush protests against the law. Despite the opposition of over 70 percent of Frenchmen to the labor law, the CGT rushed to end the strikes after PS Prime Minister Manuel Valls threatened to ban all demonstrations.

After it backed a Macron vote in 2017, the CGT negotiated Macron's labor law decrees that Macron, PSA and the trade unions are using to slash wages and conditions to rival those of Eastern Europe or Asia in order to guarantee PSA's competitiveness. The new contract being imposed to drastically slash jobs and wages in Vesoul, in particular, emerged from PSA using the provisions for Breaking a Collective Contract (RCC) in the labor decrees President Emmanuel Macron signed into law and promulgated at the end of the year.

The end of the 35-hour work week and plans for mass sackings are part of a broad offensive of the Macron government against the working class. With union assistance, the government aims to aggressively restructure class relations, to transfer hundreds of billions of euros from the working class to the bourgeoisie in order to finance tax cuts for the wealthy, to fund Macron's 300 billion euro armaments program, and to boost European competitiveness with trade union assistance. Macron's decrees are now being used to launch this offensive across France.

The CGT's cynical and bankrupt maneuvers in Vesoul recall nothing more than those it used to strangle the struggle against the closure of PSA's Aulnay plant and the loss of thousands of jobs. CGT Aulnay delegate and Lutte Ouvrière (LO) official Jean-Pierre Mercier admitted that "only 800 of 3,500 workers participated" in a union local meeting in which the trade unions announced they had decided not to launch a broader struggle, "because we are not strong enough."

Like workers in Vesoul today, workers in Aulnay were isolated by the unions and left with only the choice of either joining strike action by a tiny, impotent minority of union delegates at the plant, or doing nothing and aligning themselves with the bankrupt negotiating tactics of the unions.

Today, the union bureaucracies are even more hostile to organizing a struggle against austerity at PSA: they fear the broad radicalization that is taking place in the working class internationally, as protests spread across Europe since the beginning of the year. Metalworkers mobilized in strikes in Germany and Turkey, where they obtained a 20 percent raise earlier this year. In the Elysée presidential palace as well as in the union bureaucracies, such an outcome would be seen as an

intolerable attack on plans to slash wages and boost France's flagging corporate competitiveness.

This underscores the urgent necessity of a political and organizational break with the unions in order to oppose Macron's illegitimate and pseudo-legal attacks on the working class.

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