

Russian Ford workers betrayed by union, left with meager compensation and without jobs

By Clara Weiss
22 July 2019

On June 20, the Ford factory in Vsevolozhsk, near the city of St. Petersburg, effectively shut down production. Of roughly 1,000 workers, only 50 are left to work there until December this year to complete the factory's closure. According to news reports, the other two factories that Ford announced would be closed in Russia—one in Naberezhnye Chelny, a city in the region of Tatarstan; and one in Yelaburg—were shut down in early June.

The closures are part of a major assault on autoworkers internationally which includes mass layoffs at Ford and GM in the Americas and Europe (see “Ford announces 12,000 layoffs, five plant closures across Europe”).

In the struggle against this assault, workers are confronted not only with the transnational companies, but also with the trade unions, which strangle the workers' resistance. This was in stark display during the shutdown of the Russian factories.

The Russian auto union MPRA (Inter-Regional Trade Union Workers' Alliance) played a central role in enabling Ford to close the plants without organized opposition by the workers. The almost 1,000 workers were effectively forced to sign agreements of “voluntary retirement” and given miserable severance packages. The workers are now facing the prospect of social destitution and long-term unemployment, amid conditions of growing poverty and economic crisis.

From the very beginning, the union did everything it could to keep workers in the dark about company plans (see also: “‘Independent’ union in Russia facilitates closure of Ford factory”). Its first statement did not appear until February 15, 2019, well over a month after news about the impending closure broke. The MPRA made it clear it would not do anything to defend workers' jobs. In mid-March, union officials suddenly

announced they would fight for severance pay of 2 million rubles (\$31,733) per worker, the equivalent of two years' full wages, and would carry out “strikes and hunger strikes to win their demand.”

But this was nothing but a smokescreen for its collusion with Ford in the closure of the the factory. Beyond a small demonstration in April, which was mainly attended by pseudo-left and Stalinist groups, the union maintained a virtual wall of silence with the only information released coming from local news organizations. Behind the scenes, however, MPRA officials negotiated the sellout of the workers and their layoffs based on terms dictated by Ford.

By May, Ford Sollers, the joint venture between Ford and Russian automaker Sollers, boasted that 97 percent of the workers had agreed to sign a “voluntary retirement” agreement. Instead of the 2 million rubles that the MPRA insisted it would fight for, workers received between 300,000 (\$4,759) and 700,000 rubles (\$11,106).

Workers, who reluctantly took the deal, said the union left them no choice. One worker who had been at the factory since 2001 said: “I agreed [to the conditions]. I have to live on something and it's better to take what they give. Most of us are awaiting a dark future.” He warned that many laid off workers would be blacklisted because the Vsevolozhsk Ford workers were known for conducting some of the most militant strikes in Russia over the past two decades. “They will not want to hire you as soon as they will hear you are from Ford. They think that we are freedom-loving.”

Another worker pointed out that Ford workers had received their full wages on a regular basis because the factory had been running below capacity for long time. They often received no more than 20 to 25,000 rubles (\$317-396) a month, although the official wage at the

factory averaged 55-58,000 rubles (\$873-920). “People have forgotten what a full wage means. This played its role [in the workers agreeing to the conditions],” he said.

According to local news, 32 workers refused to sign the severance agreement. One newspaper reported that they were locked up in the factory’s cafeteria by management and only received two-thirds of their wages as punishment. The same report noted that these workers will continue to work until the end of August although most of the workforce (about 730 workers) would be laid off in June. Others took their packages and had already left in May.

The MPRA has published not a single statement on the closure of the plant. It has made it clear, however, that it hopes to get a “seat at the table” to negotiate a deal with a potentially new owner of the factory. The city government is reportedly already conducting negotiations with car companies, with several indicating that Hyundai might take over. The purpose of this demand is to guarantee that the same union officials who have served the interests of Ford will be able to retain their “piece of cake,” if a new car company takes over.

In carrying out this betrayal, the MPRA has been supported by the Stalinists and various middle class “left” organizations. The Russian Pabloite RSM, which has for years maintained close ties to the MPRA leader Alexei Etmanov, has not published a single piece on the layoffs.

The ROT-Front, a Stalinist outfit that maintains close ties to Darya Mitina's OKP and was co-founded by the MPRA Chairman Aleksei Etmanov, promoted the MPRA's line on the layoffs. After a nearly three-month long silence, in July the organization reprinted information acknowledged that Ford workers had suffered from a defeat and cynically added, “A negative experience is also an experience.”

The role of the MPRA in the liquidation of the Vsevolozhsk Ford factory contains important lessons for workers in Russia and internationally. The betrayal of the MPRA was not a matter simply of “bad leaders.” Under conditions of the globalization of production, the trade unions internationally have been transformed into organization that work on behalf of the companies and the state to suppress working class opposition and attract investment.

The MPRA was founded in 2006 in Vsevolozhsk and was presented as the model for a militant trade union. This was under conditions where workers deeply despised the official trade union FNPR (Federation of Independent Trade Union). The FNPR, which originated in the official Soviet trade unions, was hated because of its role in the restoration of capitalism and its work on behalf of the government and the companies.

However, contrary to what Pabloite organizations like the Russian Socialist Movement have claimed, the MPRA was not an organization representing the left-wing aspirations of workers. Rather, it was formed with the deliberate aim of preventing a serious challenge to the dominance of the FNPR and the development of a politically independent movement by the working class.

The MPRA represents the interests not of the workers, but of a thin layer of bureaucrats and middle class careerists, many of which are politically active in Stalinist, liberal and pseudo-left organizations. Upon its founding, it immediately affiliated with the Confederation of Labor of Russia (KTR), which has been competing since the 1990s with the FNPR for seats at negotiation tables with the government and companies.

For workers, the way forward lies in a break from the pro-capitalist trade unions and the nationalist pseudo-left and Stalinist organizations that cover up for them. This break must be based on a political understanding of the necessity for a globally integrated strategy by the working class against transnational corporations like Ford and the fight for an international socialist program.

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