

Striking Spanish Nissan workers boo unions and Podemos mayor of Barcelona

By Alejandro López
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Last week Ada Colau, the Podemos-backed Mayor of Barcelona, was booed when she tried to speak at a demonstration of Nissan autoworkers protesting the announced plant closures in the city. Union officials intervened to stop the outburst of working class anger against Podemos. This points to the explosive conflict emerging between the working class and the pseudo-left and the unions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and an upsurge of class struggle.

On Thursday, a group of 1,500 autoworkers demonstrated under the slogan “Nissan will not close” in the Montjuic neighborhood of central Barcelona. The closures threaten 3,000 jobs directly and 22,000 indirectly. The protest was the second in the same week, after more than 1,000 people marched through the center of Barcelona at night. Nissan workers’ fight against the closure is arousing enormous sympathy and solidarity.

The demonstration was the latest in a number of protests organized by the trade unions to wear down and finally suppress the indefinite strike called by the workers since the May 4. The Works Council, run by the Podemos-linked Workers Commissions (CC.OO) and pro-PSOE General Union of Labour (UGT) unions, are trying to sow illusions that negotiations with Nissan remain open, and that workers can obtain something from the bankrupt framework of their national negotiations with Nissan.

At the demonstration, union officials read a manifesto in Japanese addressed to Nissan’s president, Makoto Uchida, and another in French for the management of Renault, a partner of the auto alliance which will be in charge of managing the European market according to the new strategic direction of the company.

Uchida was criticized for putting people “out of work in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic,” which they said was not “ethical or moral,” urging him to reconsider the announced closure. The manifesto proposed to accept

whatever attacks was necessary to remain open. “We are competitive, we have shown it, and we are a flexible and highly qualified staff. We just need a firm commitment from the company you lead,” said the union-drafted statement.

Reading the manifesto in French, Renault was asked not to allow “Nissan to leave the European Union” because, they assured, “the network of factories created in the vicinity of the Free Trade Factory Zone in Barcelona works and with a bit of support you can get a very big return.”

In its efforts to break any attempt of forging unity among workers, the unions consciously refused to make any appeal to Renault workers. Renault is planning to cut nearly 15,000 jobs worldwide, or about 8 percent of its work force, and pull out of China. In neighboring France, Renault has received a state-backed bailout of €5 billion in exchange for job attacks and wage cuts.

The union-organised demonstration was disrupted, however, when Mayor of Barcelona Ada Colau tried to speak. She was one of the mayors attending, along with those of Montcada i Reixac and Sant Andreu de la Barca, where the factories are based. When she stood up to pick up the microphone, workers started booing her. They also chanted “Janet resignation,” rereferring to Janet Sanz, Deputy Mayor of Barcelona.

The anger with Colau and Sanz comes after both attacked the car industry, ostensibly for its polluting effects. Sanz went even further, suggesting that “We must prevent the automotive sector from reactivating again” and calling for “the industrial reconversion of the sector.”

Colau immediately gave back the microphone to the head of the Workers Council, trade union delegate Juan Carlos Vicente, who called for order. “Comrades, comrades, this is not today’s subject, today they have come to give us their support, and we have to respect it,” he said. Afterwards, Colau made empty threats to Nissan,

saying that if it went ahead, Barcelona would “break all relations” with Nissan.

Colau concluded: “We are here not only to show our solidarity. I am not speaking only as mayor or as Barcelona en Comú [the local party affiliated to Podemos], I am speaking as a City Council that has spoken several times in favor of the struggle of Nissan workers.”

The truth is that Colau is part of the unions’ orchestrated campaign to stifle social opposition by promoting illusions in talks with Nissan. Workers, however, are aware of Colau’s anti-worker record.

Colau was a leading representative of what Podemos dubbed the “Mayors of Change,” after making her name as the spokesperson for the anti-evictions movement, Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH), which developed after the collapse of Spain’s housing boom and the mass evictions that followed of those unable to pay their mortgages. She was elected in 2015 as Mayor Barcelona, backed by Podemos, and lost in the 2019 elections, only to be invested in power thanks to the support of other minority parties.

During her tenure, Colau has made a name for herself for attacking workers. She attacked Barcelona’s public Metro system workers on strike for more job stability and pay rises, insisting it was not in the “general public interest.” When workers struck, Colau supported a legally mandated “minimum service” requirement to keep trains running, helping to ensure the strike’s defeat. She has also sent Barcelona’s police force to target migrants working as street vendors for dispersal, arrest, and possible deportation. Last May, as Covid-19 killed hundreds in Spain each day, Colau demanded an end to confinement measures: “We want de-confinement as soon as possible, but we want to do it well, we do not want to wait long.”

The Nissan workers’ anger reflects the growing left-wing opposition brewing in the working class against not only Colau, but against the Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government and its back-to-work order amid the pandemic, its austerity policies and its jailing of Catalan-nationalist political prisoners. Similar opposition is growing internationally, against Podemos’ “left populist” allies, whether the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), Unsubmissive France (LFI) or the German Left Party. Everywhere, workers are coming into confrontation against these forces.

It substantiates the analysis made by the WSWs as to why forces like Anticapitalistas, a petty-bourgeois

political tendency that helped found the Podemos party in Spain in 2014, have left the PSOE-Podemos government. They are being sent as a paid agent of the Spanish government to intervene on social media and in protests and strikes hostile to Podemos to spy on and strangle them.

Podemos Euro-parliamentarian Miguel Urbán recently intervened in the Nissan struggle to channel the anger into illusions that the PSOE-Podemos government and the EU could avert Nissan’s actions. Urbán drafted an appeal with the unions addressed to Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, Industry Minister María Reyes Maroto, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Commissioner for Employment and Social Rights Nicolas Schmit, stating: “The Government must prohibit the dismissals in companies with benefits and compel the multinationals to return the millionaire aid and reuse that money for the conversion of production under criteria of social and environmental sustainability.”

The concern of these forces is that, as explosive class struggles are breaking out internationally amid the ruling elite’s malign neglect of the population during the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic effects, rising confrontation will expose the bankruptcy of Podemos.

It points to the need to build a new political leadership built in the working class irreconcilably opposed to pro-imperialist, petty-bourgeois groups like Podemos and all its hangers-on. The reactionary record of Podemos in all levels of power underscores that the decisive strategic question today is building the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) as the revolutionary leadership in the working class. This requires building sections of the ICFI in Spain and internationally, based on the colossal political experiences embodied in its history, to wage an uncompromising struggle against groups like Podemos.

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