

Mass protest in Brussels opposes Audi auto plant shutdowns in Belgium

A WSWS reporting team
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Tens of thousands marched in Brussels Monday against Audi's plans to close the Forest plant in Belgium as its parent company, VW, slashes jobs amid a global restructuring of the auto industry. There is explosive social anger as Audi, as it makes over €6 billion in profits per year, prepares to put thousands of workers out of work. Workers in auto, metalworking, trucking, education and other industries joined the protest, and Brussels mass transit workers struck in solidarity.

After making €6 billion profits last year, Audi plans to move out of Belgium as auto companies cut tens of thousands of jobs across Europe. Workers walked off the job at the Forest plant early in September, accusing Audi management and union officials of working together to hide plans for a plant shutdown. The union bureaucracies are working to sabotage a struggle against the job cuts; they announced just before the rally that workers should restart work "on a voluntary basis."

Belgium's three major unions and pseudo-left parties including the Maoist Belgian Labor Party (PTB) held the rally and promoted Shawn Fain, the head of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union's corrupt bureaucracy in the United States. Fain endorsed the Belgian unions and in a video posted on the PTB's web site, promoting the "stand-up" strike he used to impose a sellout contract of US auto workers last year under the slogan: "Industry belongs to us! Let's meet in the street on September 16."

The Belgian unions echoed the nationalist, pro-imperialist politics of UAW bureaucracy, which US President Joe Biden has hailed as his "domestic NATO." They sought to suppress explosive social anger by promoting a reactionary line of using European Union (EU) corporate bailout funds to

restructure the auto industry in line with EU plans to build a "war industry" to wage NATO's war with Russia in Ukraine.

In the PTB's official leaflet for the rally, PTB official Nabil Boukili called to "ban plant closures until there is an alternate industrial plan: either making another model from the company or the sale of the site" to another buyer. Trying to promote illusions in the role of the EU and the Belgian ruling class, the claimed that "the political establishment must react."

Workers at the rally told a WSWS reporting team that came from France and Germany of their support for a European and international struggle of rank-and-file against the global restructuring of the auto industry backed by Europe's governments.

The WSWS spoke to Mario and his fellow metalworkers who had traveled from Charleroi to Brussels in solidarity with Audi workers. They had been laid off when Caterpillar shut down plants in Peoria, Illinois in the United States and in Belgium. Now at Audi, they said, "The work was getting done, the company was making profits. But they always want more, more. That is the society led by finance. ... It's the government, the transnational corporations that want that."

Audi workers "were told electric cars would give them work, that they would have lots of orders and all that. But suddenly, now, it doesn't work, because everyone is realizing that electric cars, they are really not cheap," they added. "In the Charleroi area, lots of people have lost their jobs, now many auto-related companies are disappearing. There are fewer and fewer of them. ... The auto crisis is there in every sector, in brands from France, Germany, wherever."

They firmly opposed EU plans for a restructuring of industry to wage the EU-NATO war with Russia in

Ukraine: “Who will really pay for the war? It’s the soldier who is sent to get shot at while those people are around a table talking and are nice and safe. ... On the other side, the Russians want to live, too, they don’t need to get bombs landing on their heads, and we don’t, either. We don’t want horrors on our doorstep, there, we don’t want to work for that. Workers should not be cogs in the war machine.”

Another worker agreed with WSWs reporters that Audi workers and auto workers more generally in Europe had to mobilize together in struggle: “They were promised all sorts of wonderful things, but finally, the promises of jobs are collapsing. And they are not the only ones. There are many small companies where the bosses are attacking workers’ futures whenever they please. ... In Germany, wage conditions are not the same. Salaries are quite clearly lower. I think German workers also need to make their discontent known.”

He also emphasized the class gulf separating workers from the union bureaucracies maneuvering with Audi management, the Belgian capitalist state and the EU: “A rank-and-file worker, he works in order to live. But up there, they live from the work of others. And really that makes an enormous difference.”

Amke, a Volvo worker, said he rejected the massive growth of social inequality produced by the union bureaucracies’ negotiations with carmakers and EU authorities. “It’s more for the bosses who are making more and more profits, and what happens then? The people, that is, the workers get poorer and poorer,” he said, adding: “All of Europe should be mobilized, not only here in Belgium. Today the European capital is in Brussels, and so everything is happening here. But it’s true that I think Europe should mobilize and wake up a bit more.”

Commenting on the role of the union bureaucracies, he added: “I think they are themselves already capitalists in their offices, I think that they don’t feel that affected by this, maybe.”

Ahmed, a truck driver, agreed with WSWs reporters who said that since workers create the wealth, they have power and can stop the job cuts by taking control of the industry from the bosses. Ahmed said, “Without workers, they have nothing. That’s why they are going to, countries like China. Because the work is there, there are a lot of people, and the prices are very low.”

He opposed EU war plans, noting that the NATO war

with Russia had led to a surge of energy prices and a fall in work that cost him €500 a month, and denouncing the EU’s support for the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza: “My heart is broken, and I can do nothing about except asking God for help. And Israel is very powerful. Many people don’t notice it. Israel is backed up by IMF and World Bank and the United States government. ... The European Union is like a dog. It follows its master, to be honest.”

Despite his opposition to the US and Israeli governments, Ahmed stressed he felt solidarity with workers in struggle everywhere: “Of course, with any worker, without making a difference about in which country ... anyone, even in Israel. A lot of people just say, okay, Muslims hate Israel or Jews. But I’ve never hated any Jews, because Jews and Muslims have always worked and lived together. I say that the problem is the Zionists, they are the biggest problem and threat to mankind.”

“We do have power. We can use it. But most people don’t get organized, that’s the thing,” Ahmed said, noting his disillusionment with the PTB. “I wanted to be a member of a political party, but I lost faith. ... Thirty years ago, they promised a lot of things, but when it came, they said, ‘We cannot do it. We have to make a Salvation Coalition with other parties.’”

Mobilizing and unifying the opposition to attacks on auto workers in a common struggle requires building rank-and-file committees among auto workers across Europe, independently of the union executives, and building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. Only such organizations can overcome the union bureaucracies’ collaboration with employers and the state. This also requires a struggle for socialism, to halt the war plans of the imperialist powers and place industry under the democratic control of the workers.



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