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Tales of struggles

## **France / Continental : “Somewhere along the line, this has encouraged the idea of struggling and continuing the fight”**

Interview with Didier Bernard (CGT)

Saturday 7 November 2009, by [BERNARD Didier](#) (Date first published: 20 October 2009).

**An interview with Didier Bernard (CGT) from the car factory Continental Clairoix, in France, on the struggle launched by the workers after “” announced the closing down of their factory. sur la lutte menée après l’annonce de la fermeture de leur entreprise par des « patrons voyous ».**

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### **Can you tell us how you organised yourselves at the beginning of your struggle?**

Well, at the very beginning, when we heard the news, I can tell you that it was a terrible shock to us all. Because it placed us in an inconceivable and irreversible position. We were facing the closure of a factory managed by devious bosses who were only out to make profit. The workers couldn't understand a thing, because they thought that with the last agreement that they had recently signed on a 40-hour week, that the future of Continental Clairoix was going to be guaranteed. When the announcement that the factory was going to be closed was made, everybody was just dumbstruck.

The good side is that some of us kept our minds clear and our heads on our shoulders, and didn't give in. We got in touch with a guy about the struggle that took place in the 1990s in Chaussons in Creil. He supported us from the outset. He took a look, summed it all up very quickly, how it had happened, how

it had developed. And he took things in hand right away.

We developed our strategy that tried to say: this is what we've decided to do now. If you go along with it in a General Assembly, we must never give an inch in our demands. This is what we want, and if you try to cut corners, if you under-estimate us, you'll have problems. If you go along with the idea that we have to go from A to B to get where we want, then the bosses are going to have a problem.

It's tough to get people to face up to reality. Because getting people to accept that terrible things were afoot, and that we had to put up a fight to show the State and the management what we were capable of doing, in spite of being so hard-hit. We had to show that we were capable of getting up off our knees and fighting. That was the easy part, really. People were so disgusted. They didn't want to revenge, they wanted to fight, straight away.

The second issue was about the arrival of the advisor who had been with Chausson. He was close to Lutte Ouvrière, and there were a lot of people who didn't like this political connection, which discredited our movement to some extent. For the first six weeks struggle were organised by the CGT, in spite of the inter-union committee. After all, no one organisation has the right to be more present than another. But for six weeks, we weren't just fighting the State authorities and the German management; we were also fighting between the different unions. When certain unions in the committee realised, and understood how important and justified his presence was, as well as the proposals he had come up with, that's when our work started to be more openly accepted.

But it isn't a piece of cake, it's complicated, it's been long, and what I've been saying doesn't hold true for everyone. But all the same, once you overlook all the hiccoughs, all these little political problems, we've really rolled our sleeves up and gotten down to the real struggle. Because even though there were a one or two guys who had been recuperated by a sect or by the extreme left, there was

a united front, including the managers. There were people from the CFDT, FO who had been behind us since the beginning. They may have been a bit shy, less involved, with their own means, their own character. But at a certain moment there was a united front, stronger, more united, and everyone got together to fight for the same cause. And the opposition started to take us seriously. It took a long time, but we succeeded.

### **Fighting the closure**

Yes, from a union point of view, we were against closure from the outset. The problem with the Germans is that the factory was already shut in their minds. They told us straight off that there was no option, there were four plants that were going to be closed down, and they wouldn't give in: this plant was going to close.

We said...the legal procedures had started, and we couldn't afford to waste time on fighting against the closure, because the legal procedures would have been over, and we couldn't negotiate anything. So we took up our arms... and decided to negotiate and discuss things. But outside the framework of the legal proceedings. We weren't talking about not closing down any more, we wanted to discuss things, our demands, not theirs, not in books 3 and 4. We didn't give a damn about that. It took us two months to succeed...

There was nothing we could do about the closure, nothing at all. Had we been in France, maybe we could have managed something, but I'm not that sure. As to Germany, given how far away it was, and it's another country, we couldn't do much. We weren't supported by the right-wing policies either, with the rightwing government that has introduced laws that favour the bosses making profit. There was no point wasting any time.... So we fought to get guarantees, rights and bonuses for our comrades. They too took up this idea. Now we have almost reached a final agreement.

### **What we have succeeded in gaining**

We were totally tricked on the 40-hour

agreement that we had signed; it stated clearly that there was a bright future up to 2012. So **our first demand**, as we had been had, **was to maintain our contracts up to the end of 2011, early 2012**. This meant that they had to respect the agreement that they had signed in 2007. We won this demand to respect our contracts in one way or another. There are a few months of part-time work, and a few months of Continental work paid by Continental, but we can stay at home. That means we'll never again set foot in the factory.

And of course there are 23 months of paid time for job-seeking, although the legal time is 9 months. We managed to talk to the State authorities about that too. It was tough, and very contentious. But we overcame the legal limit of 9 months...The State authorised them to go beyond the 9 month limit. Continental are paying for all of that. At the beginning, they didn't want to, because the French State has a 9-month period for being allocated a new job. Continental management agreed: ok we'll pay for the 23 months. It means we have eight per cent of our net salary until 2012 and we won't be unemployed or in a precarious situation.

**Our second demand** was severance pay of 50,000 euros free of tax. For everyone. The advantage of this demand is that there are people who have been with the company for three or four years. Had they left without any severance bonus, they would only have got 2,400 or 3,000 euros. That's peanuts. The advantage of this demand is that even the youngest guys will be leaving with 50,000 euros. For the old-timers, it's a bonus too, because it wasn't on the cards. And it doubles their severance pay. But especially for the young guys, who haven't been in the company that long, and signed mortgages when they were hired, they wouldn't be able to keep up the payments otherwise. This bonus is a sort of substitute salary that'll keep them ahead of the game for a while.

**The third demand** was in terms of age, to carry the oldest workers. We have succeeded

in stretching the legal measures as far as they will go... There are 116 guys over 51 and half years old, who are semi-retired now. The measures we have won mean that they are almost totally covered by Continental. These three majors demands that we had for three months, since the beginning, have been won 100%.

### **What now?**

Well, we still have one major worry. To get the State authorities and the German management to sit down at the negotiating table, we had to go through a period of disarray and deep despair because people thought that they State authorities and the German management had let them down. The Germans had a negative effect on the movement by legal action...when people felt let down by the system, which should have been there to support them rather than setting them against each other, when people were in this state of disarray, when they felt they could only rely on themselves; the local authorities (Sous-Préfecture) were almost totally wiped out. It wasn't a voluntary thing; it wasn't premeditated or planned, except that at that point, people felt that they had nothing left to lose. If you are up to your ears in manure, unemployed, poor, facing job-precarity, here and now, then dead or not, you don't care. You're a goner, one way or the other.

### **Facing legal issues**

But two things happened. Two hours later, we heard that the State authorities that we had been granted an official tripartite meeting? With the State authorities and the German management. The second thing in this affair is the black spot: seven of our colleagues have been taken to court for ransacking the Sous-Préfecture. Our struggle is now to stop the proceedings against our seven colleagues. They aren't criminals, they're just workers who, for the most part have spent twenty or thirty years working and who felt let down, betrayed first by Continental who had promised them a bright future, and a second time by the State and the legal system that sided with the employers in their unfair behaviour, who make their profits in France and close down

factories without protecting the workers, the people and the citizens.

**Is the appeal by the Continental workers to all other workers victims of lay-offs meeting a strong echo?**

I am sure that this is the case. During our struggle, we were supported and followed by people all over France, in different companies where the workers have been treated abusively, localised, layed off, companies closed. I hope that by what we have achieved, even if the company did finally close down, and if we did all lose our jobs, that we have managed to get the guarantees of means that will hopefully allow us to get through the crisis, maybe to find new jobs, and get back to work. I hope that all of this will have inspired others to fight for their rights. People who thought that everything was useless, hopeless and that there was nothing that they could do. Not only did we prove the opposite, even though we were despairing, we proved that you could have an impact. No cause is a foregone lost cause. All struggles can lead somewhere. At the end of the day, it all comes down to being convinced, have the guts and the determination to go through with things.

**Are you planning to continue meeting the Goodyear and Lear workers?**

Yes, of course we are. We shall go on. The simple fact of not being paid a salary, and not going to work at the factory every day, having nothing to do means that we have a few months ahead of us before the reclassification leave kicks in. UTI, Lear, Smile, Goodyear and the others, anyone who needs us can count on our help. We said it, repeated it again and again. Anyone who needs us can count on our support. And we really mean it. Our mates, our comrades, anyone who is in a bad way or having trouble with their boss; they can all count on us. Indeed they can.

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*For more information:*

<http://continentalweb.free.fr/>

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**P.S.**

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