A Plant Closing War, Viewed From Inside

written by Steve Early | July 16, 2019

Last winter, protesters wearing yellow vests commanded center stage in France. Their grassroots challenge to the neoliberal regime of President Emmanuel Macron drew on a long tradition of labor militancy, including factory closing fights. When these protesters still had blue collar jobs and belonged to unions, they probably looked a lot more like the red-vest-wearing strikers in *At War*.

At War, a new movie from Cinema Libre Studio, vividly portrays shop floor resistance to corporate power in small-town France. The dialogue is in French with English subtitles. But the cast is largely actual factory workers. And the film opens with a scene familiar to anyone ever involved in manufacturing union bargaining in the U.S.

A workforce of 1,100 employed in a rural auto parts plant has already agreed to 8 million euros worth of givebacks to keep the place open. The Agen plant is still profitable but, according to management, no longer globally competitive. So now, the fictional Perrin Industries is terminating its local job protection deal that was the quid pro quo for labor concessions. By order from corporate headquarters in Germany, the factory will be closed and production shifted elsewhere.

Before meeting with the company about this sudden decision, union delegates hold a tense caucus among themselves. There is palpable anger and a sense of betrayal. Their principal shop floor leader is Laurent, played by award-winning French actor Vincent Lindon. Laurent, a fiery speaker, tries to lay down initial ground rules that include “no insulting management.” Instead, he urges everyone to “fight intelligently.”

Bargaining table restraint doesn’t last long when the plant manager informs union negotiators that “it’s not bosses versus workers anymore. It’s all of us together in the same boat.” As Laurent angrily points out, the area around Agen is already an “employment wasteland,” with few new job opportunities. Severance packages are not what the workers want. They intend to fight for the jobs they already have.

The rest of this hyper-realistic film depicts a factory occupation and a public campaign to keep the plant open. Few movies have ever done a better job of capturing the rollercoaster ride of a long strike, plus the look, sound, and feel of local union life, viewed from the inside.

Road Warriors

Among the challenges facing workers in any plant closing fight is getting public officials on their side, even in situations where the employer has benefited from past state subsidies or tax incentives. ("The Constitution protects private enterprise," one French government envoy primly reminds the Perrin workers.)

The strikers in *At War* become "road warriors," a group of roving union activists who travel to seek support and put pressure on targets elsewhere. They confront riot police during a mass demonstration at the Confederation of Industries in Paris. They defy an unfavorable court ruling and send roving pickets to shut down a sister plant 500 miles away. They solicit strike fund donations from other embattled union members. "Hello Perin workers," says one message of solidarity, arriving at strike headquarters with a check enclosed. "We have the same assholes running our firm."

Throughout their struggle, they seek a face-to-face meeting with the German CEO of the Dimke Group, the parent company of Perrin which has decided to close the Agen plant instead of selling it, as the strikers demand. Meanwhile, heated exchanges between worker representatives and their management counterparts continue at the bargaining table, as workers and their families face mounting economic pressure.

Two months into the strike, fissures develop between the various labor organizations represented in the plant—the FO, CGT, and a less militant enterprise union. Laurent discovers that the company unionists, worn out and discouraged, have been side-barring with management about "bumping up the check" (i.e. getting a better severance deal in return for accepting the plant closing).

Laurent and his outspoken ally Melanie accuse their co-workers of "licking the bosses' boots." But both face wider doubts about the viability of their strike strategy and leadership. "The plant's closing down. It's done," says Bruno, a bargaining committee member ready to throw in the towel. With police and management protection, Bruno and others take off their strike stickers (which proclaim the unity of "1,100 in Struggle") and return to work.

A "Quality Dialogue?"

Nevertheless, the struggle briefly takes a brighter turn when Martin Hauser, the German CEO, finally agrees to a meeting, mediated by the French ministry of employment. Hauser proves to be a world class corporate smoothie, fluent in French. He mentions that he has a French mother-in-law and a second home in the French countryside. He welcomes what he calls a "quality dialogue" (of the German labor relations sort).

That "dialogue" deteriorates fast when the Dimke Group dismisses a rival firm's "unrealistic" offer to buy the Agen plant. "French law requires an owner to look for buyers, but does not require them to accept any offer," Hauser reminds the trade unionists. In exasperation, the CEO accuses them of "refusing to see market reality," which he likens to "demanding a whole new world or living in another world,"

It's not union negotiators who have the final word in this frustrating exchange. An angry crowd of strikers make the evening news by surrounding Hauser's car, after the meeting, and over-turning it. The CEO and two bodyguards emerge bloodied and shaken up. In the ensuing media and political backlash, union members are thrown on the defensive, leading to bitter personal accusations and recriminations.

At War pulls no punches about the personal sacrifices and weighty responsibilities of workers who become strike leaders. This film should be required viewing during union training of shop stewards, local officers, and bargaining committee members.

Cinema Libre Studio wants to reach a much broader audience when the film opens in New York, Los Angeles and other cities in July. It's also looking for labor organizations to sponsor showings to their own members. Let's hope that some unions take advantage of this offer—because the war on workers, whether in France or the U.S., shows no sign of letting up.

Upcoming Screenings

New York
Opens July 19
Village East Cinemas
181-189 2nd Ave. @ 12th St.

Los Angeles
Opens July 26
Laemmle's Royal Theatre
11523 Santa Monica Blvd.

For more information on screening the film before a labor audience, contact Jen Smith at jsmith@cinemalibrestudio.com or 818-588-3033.

Originally posted at Labor Notes.