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More noise, more self-respect, more daring

ByWildcat

Firsthand account translated from Wildcat issue 81 (original article at: http://www.wildcat-www.de/wildcat/81/w81_dacia.htm) of the Romanian Renault/Dacia strike earlier this year, which forced wage increases of 30-40% and, in the context of a migration-induced labour shortage, inaugurated a strike wave which has since hit Constanta port and ArcelorMittal. More reports from Romania forthcoming. More noise, more self-respect, more daring Strike at the Dacia-Renault plant in Romania: a turning point On March 24, about 8,000 of the 13,000 workers at the Dacia car factory in Romania went on open-ended strike. One of their demands was a wage increase of 50-70 percent. For the first time in a strike in Romania, the strikers did not base their demand on standard wages in Romania but compared themselves to Renault workers in Turkey or France, who earn between 900 and 2000 euros for the same work (the workers at Dacia earn about 300 euros). This strike at Dacia is the most significant struggle in the Romanian private sector since 1989 and could be the beginning for a wave of strikes for better living conditions in Romania. Three days on site For many days the internet was our only source of information about the strike. An article in the German daily newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel* states that the Dacia workers had been impressed by the strike of German train drivers which took place in the winter 2007/2008. We decided spontaneously to go to Romania and find out what is actually going on there. After a two-day journey we finally reached the city of Pitesti at 1am. During the trip we were stuck without any recent news: yesterday's newspaper, nothing about the strike on the radio. Maybe it had ended before we had even arrived. Finally on the evening news: the Dacia management have made a new offer to the workers; the union leaders are to discuss the offer with the strikers the next morning and hold a vote on whether to accept it. We did not want to lose any time and drove on to Mioveni, a smaller town next to Pitesti, where the Dacia factory stretches out over a hill. There are only few cars on the huge parking lot and it is very quiet. Some security workers are around but no sign of any picket lines. On the next morning, a Wednesday and the 17th day of the strike, we went back up the hill towards the plant. The parking lot was full of cars and company busses. The early shift was at their workplace. But there was no work going on, the assembly lines weren't running. Some workers were emerging from the main entrance. When we asked one for an update he said: "The offer is bad. Everybody is against it. The strike will continue." As he was speaking, a written vote was being held inside. "Something happened inside our heads" The most important demand of the striking workers was a wage rise of 550 RON (148 euros) per month. They also wanted a 5-10 percent part of the profits, an increase of Christmas and Easter money (in both cases to half the monthly wage) as well as holiday pay (one month's wage) and an increase in extra pay for heavy work of 200 RON per year; they also demanded a 15 per cent discount when buying Renault products. During the talks with the workers we realised that these demands were really the absolute minimum for them and that they wouldn't give in on them. They expressed anger about the stressful work, the assembly-lines never stopping, the foremen in their backs endlessly controlling and pushing. Management wants to introduce weekend shifts, the so-called four shift system with only one free weekend in the month. Later we spoke to a group of older workers who were standing around in the parking lot, drinking home-made wine from plastic cups and arguing loudly. They were happy to tell us about their working conditions and what was happening with the strike: "We've let them fuck us around for too long. Something happened inside our heads! We understood that we are doing the same work here as the Renault workers in France yet our wages are so low. We are not second or third world anymore." "Neither second nor third world anymore" The factory on the hill For most of the years since 1968 the plant on the hill in Mioveni produced the Dacia 1300 under licence from Renault. The plant was the pride of Dictator Ceausescu. Renault finally took the plant over in 1999 and dismissed half of the 27 000 people employed at that time. Since 2004, the cheap Dacia Logan car has been built here. Originally this car was intended for the Eastern-European market and is built

accordingly – e.g. an entire pig can fit into the back of the station wagon version. Then, because of the decreasing incomes of people in Western Europe, the car became very popular there as well. In Germany one can buy it for 7200 euros. Today the factory complex, the only place where the Logan is produced, consists of a mechanics section (motor and gear construction) and section for car body assembly (pressing plant, body shell, paint finishing, assembly). Apart from that Dacia-Renault has its local development division for the Logan model with about 300 engineers. The workers told us that they are already working on new, modern CNC machines in the motor and gear construction section. In the car body assembly section work is mostly done manually with a low level of technology. There are also factories of supply firms on the site with a further few thousand employees. For example Johnson Controls makes the seats for Logan, while Valeo makes the cables. During the strike some information about other suppliers appeared in the media. The company Elba in Timisoara, which makes the reflectors for the cars, announced that they had to shut down production because of the strike in Dacia. Another supplier, Borla Romcat, located near Pitesti, said they had to dismiss 60 per cent of their employees because of the long-term strike in Mioveni, as Dacia is their main client. Borla Romcat produces exhaust pipes for Logan. There is an export centre at the bottom of the hill, opposite the Mioveni prison. There the finished Logan cars are taken apart again (CKD, completely knocked down), put in boxes and sent to other assembly factories in Russia, India and Morocco. This way the high customs costs for complete cars are avoided. Old and young muncitori

During the rally in Pitesti the next day we got to know Rodica. She was hanging out with an older colleague, a neighbour from Mioveni. I asked how many women were working in the factory. They said that half of the crew are women. They are doing the same work as the men and are paid the same. Most of them went directly from school to the factory. Many of the Dacia muncitori (Romanian for 'workers'), both men and women, already have 20-30 years of work at the assembly-line in this factory behind them. Rodica has worked here for 31 years and earns 253 euros before tax, which means she ends up with 157 euros per month in her pocket. Her husband used to working at Dacia, too, but was given a redundancy payment in 2002. Since then he has been working on construction sites and earns less than his wife. Both their children are grown up, and both had no choice but to start to work straight after school. The daughter is 28 she still lives with her parents in the flat they own in a 60s socialist-block-style building in Mioveni. In order to be able to buy a new Logan, Rodica and her husband gave up their traditional holidays by the Black Sea. As a worker at Dacia it takes Rodica seven years to pay off the instalments on the car, which are half her monthly wage. Only 30 per cent of her colleagues own a car. While the old ones make up about two thirds of the production workers, more than 3500 young people have been employed in the past year. Qualifications are not important. They take anybody. On the buses which transport most of the workers to the factory every day there is a big advertisement: "We are hiring!" The new contracts are limited to 3 or 6 months. Sackings and new starts are a daily occurrence. However, young workers are also resigning: "When somebody stays at Dacia, it means that she/he has family, or debts, or didn't find anything better in other countries," said Radu, who works at the assembly sector. The young ones earn the minimum wage of 200 euros before tax. Constantin already has an unlimited contract even though he hasn't been working at Dacia for long. "We were laid off in 2006 after three months of work, because they didn't need us anymore. There were about 500 of us and we were very angry. Some brand new cars standing in the yard got scratched. At the same time, it was clear that the human resources department would ask us sooner or later to come back to work. We discussed this and when they called us the following month, we told them collectively that we will only start working again if they give us unlimited contracts. It worked."

Strike in the legal framework In 2003 there was already a wildcat strike in Dacia but it stopped after a few days. The activists were fired. We couldn't find anybody who could tell us anything more specific about this particular confrontation. Only one worker from the engine section remembers that the wildcat strike was defeated because the workers did not coordinate themselves enough. About the ongoing strike he says: "Here the workers in one section have no idea what the workers in the other sections are doing or deciding on!" In order for the strike not to be declared illegal and thus stopped by

court order, the trade union has to make sure that the striking workers stick to certain rules. For example, striking workers are not allowed to move between the production sections. Everybody has to remain at his/her work place, with the difference that nobody works. It is also forbidden to stage actions outside the production halls or in front of the factory gate. Constantin told us that at the beginning they had an idea to blockade the entrance for transporters, so that even the products that were ready before the strike started could not leave the factory, but the majority agreed that the strike should not leave the legal framework. In spite of the inspiring determination we found among the workers that this strike has its limits. There is a lack of co-ordination between the workers and a lack of collective actions with which they could increase pressure. The decision processes are taking place within the hierarchical framework of trade union structures and the striking workers depend on the union's information channels. Striking workers told us various times that during similar strikes in France things break and there is sabotage. They also asked what it looks like where we are from. The idea of undertaking such kind of activities seem to be present in the minds of some workers but in the end they are not being put into action. Toiling right through the weekends "We are not giving up!" was still the common message of the union leaders on the stage and of the shouting choirs of striking workers, accompanied by whistles and drums, at the second large rally since the strike began, which took place on Thursday, the 18th day of the strike. On the next morning, Friday April 11, the 19th day of the strike, there was confusion. There was a new offer, not much better than the previous one, in some points even worse and anyway far from the demands of the striking workers. It consisted of a 300 RON wage increase starting from January 2008 (thus including back payments) and another 60 RON more from September 2008; additionally, there was to be a single bonus as part of the profit of 2007, consisting of one month's pay, assured to be at least 900 RON. On average that amounted to a 30-40 percent wage increase. Unskilled workers (cleaners) and TESA functionaries (these sectors were not on strike) would get a 15 per cent wage increase. At 1pm the union signed the agreement and declared the strike to be over. The press was told that 70 percent of the striking workers voted to accept the new offer. Nobody knew where this number came from. Certainly there was no written vote at this time and many of the striking workers didn't take part in the voting. Numerous buses arrived with workers from the surrounding areas for the second shift in the afternoon (whose only means of getting to the factory is the bus), by which time the decision had already been made. The regional newspaper "Societatea" wrote the next day: "Many of the striking workers were unhappy with the decision to end the strike. There were some very tense moments. Many of the strikers started booing the union leaders." The mood at shift-change was low on this day, nobody gave the impression of having won a struggle. Many believe that the union leadership was bribed and betrayed the strikers. One woman from the morning shift asked us if we knew whether they could take their own functionaries to court. We discussed how the struggle could be continued. Rodica was laughing when we talked about the option to take a collective extended sickie. "Oh, I understand what you mean. But we are still scared to do such things. There would have to be some changes in our mentality before we could do something like that." Shortly after the end of the strike the workers were told in an assembly that they would have to work weekends to make up for the losses incurred by the strike. How and if management will be able to enforce this remained unclear. The plan to introduce a four shift system with weekends production continued was withdrawn during the strike. The mere thought of only one weekend off in a month created serious anger amongst the workers. Another strike! The strike at Dacia had only just ended but on April 14, 2008 there is information about a strike of 3000 workers in the steel plant of ArcelorMittal, the world's biggest steel producer, in Galati, Romania. There are 1300 workers employed at the steel plant. In the early hours, 700 of the strikers wanted to enter the factory through the main gate but were stopped by security guards who also started to film the striking workers. In response there was a riot in front of the main entrance to the factory. Stones and bottles were thrown. One of the guard points got smashed. The Solidaritate, one of the four trade unions operating at ArcelorMittal, had refused to sign the labour contract. They actually demanded that wages be doubled, but minimum increase should be 25 per cent. The management of the steel plant only

offered a 9.5 percent wage rise. Because of the strike some workplaces were not covered, management said they could not guarantee safety at the ovens, there was danger of an explosion. In order not to have to switch off the ovens and to avoid stopping production, management went to court and demanded an injunction to halt the strike. On Tuesday, April 15, the court ruled in their favour: the strike was declared illegal and had to be stopped immediately because of the danger to people in and around the factory. Solidaritate ended the strike. Further negotiations are pending. 1) The SAD â Sindicat Autoturism Dacia â already existed before 1989. During the process of joining the EU, existence of trade unions in the private sector, as well as acceptance of the democratic structures within trade unions existing in the (ex)state industries, had to be accepted and introduced Romania. At the moment about 80 per cent of Dacia staff are members of the union. The monthly union fee is deducted directly from the wage.