

ArcelorMittal plant occupied

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FLORANGE

WORKERS at an idle ArcelorMittal steel plant in northeast France occupied the site yesterday, seeking to put their plight on the political map ahead of a presidential election where industrial decline is a central theme.

About 200 workers invaded management offices at the factory in Florange, in the Moselle region close to Belgium and Germany, after ArcelorMittal announced last week it was prolonging the temporary shutdown of its two blast furnaces.

Unions had announced at the weekend their intention to take action and workers found the offices empty. They say they will stay in the plant indefinitely.

The plant's two blast furnaces were shut in July and October 2011 in the face of weaker demand and workers fear that the longer they stay idle, the greater the chance the factory will be permanently closed.

The plant is the last survivor of the once bustling steel region after the neighbouring ArcelorMittal mill of Gandrange was wound down despite President Nicolas Sarkozy's promise in 2008 that he will find a way of keeping it going.

Socialist challenger Francois Hollande, who leads polls for the two-round election on April 22 and May 6, has made much of the closure of industry and relocation of companies during Sarkozy's five-year term.

France has lost 763 000 industrial jobs in the last 10 years. - Reuters