

France: CGT betrays ferry workers' fight

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17 October 2005

A mass meeting in Marseilles of more than 500 SNCM (Société nationale Corse-Méditerranée—National Corsica-Mediterranean Co.) ferry workers voted October 13 by an 87 percent majority to end their strike against privatisation and redundancies. The workers voted to return to work after 23 days on strike, having been isolated and backed into a corner by their unions.

SNCM provides a maritime link with the French island of Corsica and North African ports. The strike had completely halted all maritime traffic between Corsica and the mainland.

The SNCM workers were obliged to accept a “solution” whereby the state-owned company will be denationalised and 400 jobs lost, with offers of retraining, redeployment and early retirement. The company is to be sold off to a finance company, Butler Capital Partners, and a private transport operator, Connex-Veolia, with the state maintaining a minority share.

The Communist Party-controlled CGT (Confédération général du travail—General Confederation of Labour), France’s main industrial union, is the majority union at SNCM. In putting to a vote a motion to end the strike at the October 13 meeting, CGT officials said the only choice the workers had was either to accept the deal or to face the deliberate bankrupting by the state of its own company and the sacking of the whole labour force, without any compensatory measures. Jean-Paul Israël, CGT general secretary of the Marseilles sailors, told the press, “You can fight the government but you can’t fight the law.”

The deal had been worked out between Gaullist Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin and Bernard Thibault, the leader of the CGT and a member of the Communist Party.

There was, however, another choice: the mobilisation of the workers of Marseilles, France’s second-biggest

town. This could have been the springboard for the development of a working class political and industrial offensive throughout France against the neo-liberal policies of the government of President Chirac and Villepin, which are opposed by the overwhelming majority of the French people.

The potential for developing such a mass movement was shown on October 4, when more than a million workers struck throughout France in the biggest national strike, of both public- and private-sector workers, seen in France in over 30 years so soon after the summer holidays. Supported by the immense majority of the population, workers, professionals, youth and students demonstrated against unemployment and denationalisation and for the defence of social services. More than 100,000 marched through Marseilles, with the SNCM workers at their head.

The intervention of the CGT only nine days later to end the ferry workers’ strike underscores the hostility of the CP and the trade union bureaucracy to any mass movement of the working class against Chirac and Villepin.

Indeed, during the SNCM strike, two other key sectors of Marseilles workers, the port workers and public transit workers, went on strike. The CGT has majority representation among both sections of Marseilles workers, but the union deliberately kept the three struggles isolated from one another.

The port workers went out on strike on September 27 because, according to the CGT secretary for the port, privatisation plans were afoot in several areas. However, he flatly told the press, “We are not in a solidarity strike in support of the SNCM.” On the recommendation of CGT leader Joël Meli, the port workers voted to suspend their strike on October 10.

The transport workers’ strike is continuing as of this writing, and is in its 14th day. There are virtually no

buses running in the streets of Marseilles, and the metro is down to a train every 20 minutes. The workers are opposing “an attempt to privatise Marseille public transport.” Again, the prospective private operator is Connex.

In the process of wrangling with the government over how SNCM should be privatised, the CGT opposed the capital investment company Butler Capital in favour of Connex, resulting in the spectacle of the CGT in effect backing Connex’s drive to privatise SNCM even as its public transport members were striking against the same company’s privatisation drive against their sector.

The strike was called by the CGT on September 20, the day after the chief government official for the region, Christian Frémont, announced the 100 percent privatisation of the company. The Corsican-nationalist union STC (Union of Corsican Workers) joined the strike three days later.

The strikers blocked ships in Marseilles and Bastia, and there were violent confrontations with the police. STC members took over the Pascal-Paoli ferry in Marseilles and sailed it towards Bastia. On September 28, while still at sea, the Pascal-Paoli was boarded by special forces carried by five military helicopters. No attempt was made by any trade union to mobilise the working class against this armed intervention against legitimate industrial action by workers in defence of their jobs.

The SNCM workers’ struggle was by nature political, as it was against the government’s plan to privatise their industry. The government was nervous that it might ignite a nationwide movement against its policies. The evening of the Pascal-Paoli incident, Villepin called in Bernard Thibault of the CGT for discussions at the prime minister’s residence at the Matignon Palace.

The next day, Villepin presented a revision of its privatisation plan, proposing that the state retain 25 percent ownership of the company, and that the workers be given a 5 percent share, Connex 30 percent, and Butler Capital Partners 40 percent. That evening, Butler and Connex announced they would reduce the workforce by 400. From then on, the CGT limited all negotiations to questions of how the company would be sliced up between the parties.

Perhaps the most sordid episode of the struggle was

the meeting of left groups in Joliette Square in Marseilles on October 3 in support of the SNCM strikers. It would be truer to say “in support of the trade union bureaucracy.” Not a word of criticism was uttered by representatives of the Communist Party, the LCR (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire—Revolutionary Communist League) or the LO (Lutte Ouvrière—Workers’ Struggle) about the rotten deal being worked out by the CGT.



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