France: Marseilles retail strike called off after two weeks

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The strike and occupation by 100 hypermarket workers at Carrefour Grand Littoral in Marseilles was called off by the trade unions, after a two-week struggle to improve the wages and conditions of some of France's most exploited sections of workers. It expressed the determination of these low-paid workers to challenge Carrefour, the world's second biggest retail giant, with outlets in 30 countries and a €78 billion annual turnover.

The strike also came as a response to President Nicolas Sarkozy's cynical invitation to workers to "work more to earn more." Despite their determination, however, the deal struck barely improves the conditions of these workers, who are struggling daily to cope with rising prices for food, fuel and other basic necessities.

The strike by over 100 of the Carrefour's 500 checkout assistants and warehouse staff, the first of its kind, was a continuation of a national day of action called by unions on February 1 in the retail sector, covering over 600,000 workers. The hypermarket workers at Carrefour grand Littoral took a decision to stay out indefinitely, with demands for changes to their inhuman working conditions and wages.

With checkout staff taking home €700 a month for imposed part-time work, and €950 for full-time workers, the strikers demanded a €250 bonus and the possibility of more working hours. In addition, they asked the hypermarket to close at 9 p.m in winter, instead of 10 p.m. This would have at least reduced the irregular working hours that give total flexibility to management to split shifts at a whim, thus undermining conditions of family life for workers. They also requested that meal vouchers be increased from €3.05 to €4.50.

Abdellah, a member of CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour), summed up the working conditions: "Our wages no longer allow us to live and we don't want to become the slaves of the modern world." As a result of a confrontation with police over the occupation of the Carrefour site, seven workers have been dragged before the courts, accused by the company of "infringement of the right to work" and "prejudicing the freedom to work." The Carrefour site was closed to the public for two weeks with all deliveries blocked by pickets.

Carrefour Grand Littoral, with an annual turnover of €140 million, made an offer February 15 to donate a miserly €45,000 to the works committee social fund. This amounted to a one-off €80 voucher for each employee, according to union officials. The company said it would increase the meal voucher allowance if the level of wastage in terms of theft and breakages at the store were reduced from 2.6 percent to 1.6 percent. Employees found these terms outrageous.

The main union involved, the CFDT, reached a final deal with management on Sunday, February 17, with minimal improvements for workers. It said the ending of the strike took place under "good conditions." The CGT (General Confederation of Labour) refused to sign the deal, but called for a return to work in order to "avoid divisions," according to Avelino Carvalho, CGT district secretary. The Force Ouvrière (FO—Workers Power) union had already broken ranks and ordered a return to work on Friday, February 15.

Workers were offered an extra three hours work per week and a meal voucher worth €3.50, on condition that wastage be reduced from 2.6 percent to 2.4 percent. Finally, the company increased its donation to the works committee social fund to €80,000. This final offer was accepted February 17 by the CFDT union, which has a majority position at the hypermarket.

A national agreement covering over 600,000 retail

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workers had already been signed on February 13 by FO, the CFTC (French Confederation of Christian Workers), the middle management union CFE-CGC and the FCD (Federation of Commerce and Retail Distribution), the employers' organisation for the retail sector. An FCD press statement explained that the deal includes the payment for statutory break periods—up till now illegally deducted from salaries, a "concession" amounting to a 5 percent salary increase—and "a starting salary of €1,344 a month [gross]," paid breaks included. This provides little comfort to the mass of 600,000 workers in hypermarkets and super-discount stores, of whom 37 percent and 70 percent respectively work under imposed part-time contracts, leaving them well-below the legal minimum wage (SMIC) of €1,280.

A recent government Labour Department (DGT) report revealed that of the 1.5 million workers in France who are paid less than the SMIC, most are in the retail and service sectors. Aline Levron, CFDT national secretary for retail workers, explained in a candid interview with *Marianne* magazine the dilemma facing retail workers, as well as the impotence of the unions.

"*Marianne*: It has taken us years to get to this situation. Can't this be seen as a failure of trade unionism, incapable of getting justice for the workers' demands in these sectors?

"A. Levron: No. We have pushed the dialogue to the end. This report (DGT) allows us to bring into the open situations we have already talked about. But up to now negotiations were always conducted internally, sector by sector. Today, confronted with the failure of dialogue, we call upon the state to intervene. Our union is resolutely for dialogue, but we ask the minister of labour to take on his responsibilities."

The CFDT has already shown itself to be a close collaborator with the Sarkozy/Fillon government in betraying the rail workers' pensions fight last year. It has shown its willingness to work with the government's programme aimed at the dismantling of the welfare state and workers' rights in order to boost the competitiveness of French capitalism.

Despite some militant talk by union leaders, workers at Carrefour Grand Littoral are paying the price for trade union duplicity with government and employers' objectives with the reduction of their living standards. The Carrefour workers were isolated and left to struggle alone against a giant multinational corporation. Not a single solidarity call was launched by the unions for the support of workers in the Marseilles region or throughout the retail industry.

Nevertheless, social unrest is growing, as witnessed by strikes at 12 of 17 McDonald's restaurants in Marseilles on February 11 and 13, where workers put forward demands for better conditions, wages and insurance coverage.

Meanwhile French bosses are shown to be the best paid in Europe. CEOs at 77 percent of the CAC top 40 companies quoted on the stock exchange received 40 percent salary rises last year, making their average pay €5.87 million. Bosses of companies with a turnover of €40 billion and employing at least 140,000 each raked in at least €6.175 million.

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