

# France: Fishermen strike against rising energy prices

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Fishermen continued to strike and blockade ports to protest rising fuel prices in France this weekend, despite government attempts to get fishermen back to work with promises of temporary fuel subsidies. Fishermen are also protesting the gap between the high prices consumers pay for fish in supermarkets and the low price they receive for their catch. This is part of an international wave of protest in industries—notably fishing, trucking, and agriculture—suffering heavily from the explosion of world oil prices, which reached as high as \$135 a barrel last week.

The strikes and blockades started on May 10 along France's west coast, at La Rochelle, Saint-Gilles-Croix-de-Vie, and Sables-d'Olonne. The strikes spread to ports on the English Channel—with Cherbourg, Caen, and Dieppe blocked and Saint-Malo and Boulogne-sur-Mer striking—and the Mediterranean coast. There, fishermen blocked Fos-sur-Mer (an industrial port near Marseille with oil refining and natural gas storage operations), Sète (another port with an oil refinery), Frontignan, and Grau d'Agde. For a time, strikers also blocked ferry travel to the UK.

In several ports, striking seamen and boat owners have organized strike committees independent of local fishermen's organizations, which are correctly seen as political tools of the government. Yannick Hemeury, President of the official fishermen's committee in the port of Paimpol, told the conservative daily *Le Figaro*: "There is a crisis of confidence in our social base with regards to its representatives and the government."

At Cherbourg blockading fishermen held up a banner reading, "We're mean and angry fishermen! We sell conger at € 0.19/kg, it's sold at € 12.90 in fish shops! Who's getting all the money?" Others protested getting € 3.50 for 1 kg of cod, but seeing it sold for € 25 in supermarkets.

Fishermen have particularly targeted ports with oil refineries for blockades, at Fos and also at the major port at Dunkerque. Though fishermen have let through some oil shipments, supplies are running increasingly low—on May 20, there were reports of gas stations running out of gas in Montpellier and La Rochelle.

The government has organized a series of negotiations with fishermen's committees in an attempt to end the strike with temporary concessions and fuel subsidies. On May 21, Fishing Minister Michel Barnier proposed a subsidy plan for € 110 million and the disbursement, over two years instead of three, of a € 310 million plan announced in January to help fishermen improve fuel efficiency and get lower interest rates on business loans. Fuel prices would fall from € 0.70 to € 0.40 per liter, according to government sources.

These measures might be held up, however, by European Union (EU) officials in Brussels, who would object to them on the basis that they distort free trade.

Fishermen greeted the measures with undisguised suspicion and opposition. Pascal Guénézan, skipper of a boat at La Rochelle, told the center-left daily *Le Monde*: "They want to make us go out to sea again with pretty words. We want action this time and lasting solutions. We can break even when fuel is € 0.35 per liter. It's at € 0.72 today. Apparently, they're proposing fuel at € 0.40 but that's only until December 31. Then what? We strike again?" Guénézan added that in the last fifteen years the number of fishing boats at La Rochelle had decreased from forty to ten, with two scheduled to cease operations soon.

*Le Monde* continued: "Even young seamen, who are at the head of the protest movement, still want to believe in a future. 'This line of work is getting beat up on but it's our line of work,' comments Kevin

Perrinaud, age 17. ‘I’ll remain a seaman until there aren’t any ships anymore.’ “

The government hopes to buy off the strike with as small a concession as possible and is bitterly opposed to any lasting assistance to the fishermen over fuel prices. Barnier himself tactlessly underlined this fact on France 2 television on May 23, responding to a question about a € 0.40/liter guarantee as follows: “I need [the fishermen] to return to work. [...] We’re not in Moscow anymore, or at a time when there was a planned economy and one could simply fix gas prices by decree.”

Barnier’s admission is highly significant politically. Uncontrolled global price increases (for oil, food, etc.) are greatly aggravating workers’ hardships and undermining entire industries, raising the question of democratic control and planning of the economy as a pressing practical matter. Experienced capitalist politicians such as Barnier recognize this tendency as leading towards socialism and seek to get workers back to work before such demands can acquire political momentum.

There is, however, every indication that protests will continue. Despite a return to work by fishermen at Sables-d’Olonne over the weekend—trumpeted by the bourgeois press as a sign the struggle was “on the road to calming down,” as *La Tribune* put it—the broader fishermen’s strike is continuing in France and spreading over Europe.

Strikes and protests by fishermen are planned in Spain and Portugal for May 30, with a protest march in Madrid. Hundreds of Belgian fishermen protested at Zeebrugge on May 23, demanding lower gas prices and distributing one ton of free fish to the population, according to local police.

French truck drivers have mounted mass slowdowns on major highways to protest rising oil prices, as over 400 trucking companies have ceased operations amid high gas prices. Further slowdowns, and possible road blockages, are being prepared in Belgium as well as in the French regions of Bourgogne, Rhône-Alpes, Auvergne, and Normandy.

This movement poses serious political risks for the government of French President Nicolas Sarkozy—now highly unpopular and politically weakened by waves of strikes and protests in October-November 2007, and the compression of workers’ purchasing power despite his

campaign promises to the contrary. Over the last month, Sarkozy has faced two national strikes and protest actions—on May 15 against job and education cuts, and on May 22 against pension cuts—which both brought together hundreds of thousands of marchers; his planned reform of France’s major commercial led ports to a two-week strike by port machinery operators in late April.

*Le Monde* expressed the bourgeoisie’s fears that the fishermen’s strike could become a rallying point for far broader layers of the population to enter into struggle with the government, writing: “There is a risk that all the other victims of gas price increases—farmers, truck drivers, and more generally car drivers—could conclude that they also are part of ‘suffering France.’ And demand that the State relieve their pain. The truck drivers are already standing up. What next?”



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