

# France: CGT union betrays port workers' strike

Senthooran Ravee, Alex Lantier  
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French port machinery and crane operators launched rolling strikes starting April 14, slowing traffic at “autonomous ports,” France’s seven largest commercial ports. They are protesting privatisation plans, announced on April 8 by Transport Minister Dominique Bussereau, which aim to boost profitability and competitiveness with other major ports in Europe. Longshoremen, whose jobs were privatised in 1992, struck in solidarity.

The bill proposed by the government allows for six months of negotiations between trade unions, state agencies, and private shippers such as CMA-CGM to determine the precise contents of the law. Confident that the trade unions would ultimately collaborate with the government, Bussereau told France3 Television, “There will be discussions port by port, job category by job category. We’ll stitch it by hand. But our trade unions know well that our ports have to move.”

The CGT (General Confederation of Labor) union, which predominates in the ports, responded with calls for rolling strikes on one day each week starting on April 14. By April 18, significant back-ups were developing. Some 33 vessels and all petroleum, mineral and containerised traffic were blocked in Marseille, France’s largest port. Unloading of containerised traffic had ceased in Le Havre and Rouen, the ports nearest Paris. On April 20, the CGT called off the strike, saying that it would instead call for a one-day nationwide strike on April 23, when the proposed privatisation law was presented to the council of ministers.

After the April 23 strike, the CGT called for a return to work. Workers ultimately returned to their jobs, with 43 vessels (largely tankers and chemical freighters) stuck in the Marseille port, whose container terminals were threatened with “complete blockage,” according to Marseille-Fos Maritime Union President Marc Reverchon. Strikes continued in Le Havre and Nantes-St. Nazaire over the weekend of April 26-27, but work seemed to have largely returned to normal by the beginning of the week.

Having acted to prevent these potentially extremely powerful strikes from developing into a mass movement

against privatisation, the CGT issued an official statement on April 24, denouncing the reforms as “not socially, ecologically, or economically responsible.” It concluded: “Privatising port equipment and installations, and the positions of the workers who run and maintain them, is unacceptable. It must and it can be corrected! The President of the Republic himself has been warned. He can still correct the aims of the bill, taking out privatisation of equipment and personnel.”

In its effort to justify its sabotage of the strike, CGT is shamelessly peddling the crudest lies. One must recall a few elementary facts: President Nicolas Sarkozy is deeply unpopular. The collapse of his public support to less than 30 percent reflects deep popular hostility to his programme of social cuts. The idea that the CGT would somehow convince Sarkozy to scotch port privatisation plans is ludicrous.

Firstly, Sarkozy himself initially proposed the plans for port reforms shortly after his election as President last year. On June 27, 2007, at Paris’s Roissy airport, Sarkozy said: “The status of the autonomous ports must change.... At Marseille, container traffic has been halved in 10 years. This is not a situation that I accept. We’ll get out of this by investment and reform.” In a coded slur against opposition to privatisation in the working class, he added: “We will not let a minority prevent the majority from working.”

Secondly, the CGT has consistently collaborated with Sarkozy to help him pass his reactionary reforms. The union has no interest in successfully opposing them. This was perhaps epitomised by the CGT’s insistence on limiting the October 2007 transport strikes to one-day strikes, and then its repeated, ultimately successful efforts to force workers to bring the November strikes to a close. As Sarkozy recently admitted, the CGT pursued this policy while working in close coordination with his government.

Sarkozy wrote in an April 18 editorial in the centre-left daily *Le Monde*, “Right after the presidential elections [of May 2007] and even before going to the Elysée [presidential palace], I met with trade unions and business groups to listen to them and ask for their positions on the first actions I was

planning on taking. Since then, I have continued to very regularly meet with each of their representatives.... The reform of the special regime pensions [was] successfully carried out last fall, thanks to an intense period of coordination at a national level, and negotiations in each enterprise affected by the reform.”

Top CGT bureaucrat Jean-Christophe Le Duigou answered Sarkozy with an April 18 interview in the UK-based *Financial Times*, in which he praised Sarkozy: “He understands that we must give a place to social dialogue. We are at a turning point in the social situation of our country. Everyone believes that things must change.”

The French bourgeoisie is well aware of the CGT’s orientation. Indeed, they have come to view a short, union-controlled strike as an acceptable cost of tearing up workers’ job and benefits guarantees. Thus, when the CGT organised an isolated, one-day strike against port reform on March 23, financial magazine *Challenges* wrote, “The State fears the dockers of Marseille and Le Havre: the two ports are very militant powder kegs. Up to now, the CGT has imposed silence and restraint. Today, it showed its muscles and does not rule out doing it again. However, the State has trump cards: a real desire for coordination, which calms the parties to the negotiations.”

The ruling class tolerates these inconveniences because of the truly massive sums at stake.

The autonomous ports are legal entities created by the state in 1966 to manage France’s largest commercial ports. In 2007, metropolitan France’s seven autonomous ports—Marseille, Le Havre, Dunkerque, Nantes-St. Nazaire, Rouen, Bordeaux, and La Rochelle—transported 304.5 megatons (Mt) of the 384.7-Mt net trade of all French ports. The top three—Marseille, Le Havre, and Dunkerque—imported 100 Mt, 79 Mt, and 57 Mt. Roughly half of tonnage is in liquid goods, largely petroleum and gas, with the rest split evenly between heavy solid goods (grains, coal, ores) and merchandise.

In terms of traffic, French ports lag behind the largest ports of Asia (Shanghai, 443 Mt; Singapore, 423 Mt; Ningbo, 272 Mt; Tianjin, 245 Mt) and Europe (Rotterdam, 376 Mt; Antwerp, 160 Mt; Hamburg, 125 Mt). In particular, there has not been enough investment to rapidly unload goods transported in standardised containers. This is the best method for large-scale transportation of consumer goods, which has proved essential to the globalisation of industrial production. According to business magazine *Challenges*, “To unload a vessel with 10,000 containers, it takes 3 days in Shanghai, 4 days in Hamburg, 5 days in Le Havre, and 10 days in Marseille.”

The state has consistently refused to fund the necessary infrastructure upgrades to French ports. In fact, the 1992

privatisation of longshoremen’s jobs took place in order to get funds from private companies, under conditions where Socialist President François Mitterrand refused to invest in the ports, citing lack of funds.

From the point of view of the French ruling class, privatisation is essential so that the massive sums needed to modernise cranes, unloading equipment, and rail links will then generate returns on capital for banks and investors. As increasing amounts of goods destined for France pass through other European ports, increasing travel time and costs, the bourgeoisie views any job guarantees for port workers as an intolerable attack on its global competitiveness.

France’s efficient integration into containerised global trade is also essential to the bourgeoisie’s competitive position, so French firms can purchase cheap goods directly on world markets without creating bottlenecks in ports. *France Info* writes: “The goal of the operation, according to the government, is to reinforce French ports’ competitiveness. The Transport Ministry estimates that this reform and the 445 million euros which will be dedicated to the modernisation of the ports should allow them to pass from handling 3.6 million containers in 2006 to 10 million containers in 2015.”

This potentially progressive integration into the world economy would, on a capitalist basis, serve to further deindustrialise France, shutting down large sections of industry unable to compete with cheap goods from abroad and launching a massive attack on workers’ living standards. Nor would there be any reason to believe state guarantees of protecting current port workers’ jobs, which the CGT claims to be seeking. As CGT Nantes secretary Yves Tual pointed out, “when in 1992 the longshoremen’s status was put in question [i.e., privatised], there ended up being 4,000 job losses.”

In the face of CGT complicity with the state, the fight to protect the working class from deindustrialisation, impoverishment and Sarkozy’s reform programme must take on a political character. The working class must shake off the influence of the CGT bureaucracy and of its political allies in the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF). This means a rebirth of the socialist alternative these organisations ultimately suppressed: revolutionary Trotskyism and the fight for planned, democratic control of the global economy.



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