

Total refinery workers go on indefinite strike in France

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Since February 17, workers at Total's six oil refineries in France have gone on an indefinite nationwide strike to support their colleagues at Flanders refinery, near Dunkirk in northern France. The site faces permanent closure, threatening some 800 jobs. The strike may cause fuel shortages in France in coming days, as crude processing operations shut down.

The strike began at Flanders refinery on January 12, and workers occupied the administrative offices of the Flanders refinery starting February 16. Workers are calling for production to restart at the refinery, which has stopped producing fuel products since last September. The refinery of Flanders—which represents 13 percent of Total's refining capacity and directly employs 370 employees and 450 subcontractors—produces 137,000 barrels per day. Thirty percent of its production is exported to Europe, the United States and Africa.

Initially, four trade unions (CGT, SUD-Chimie, FO and the CFDT) called for a two-day strike at six French Total oil refineries for February 17-18.

On February 18, however, workers voted for a nationwide indefinite strike. Moreover, workers at 7 out of the company's 31 fuel-storage depots also walked out.

The nationwide strike takes place after workers at Flanders refinery made an appeal to their colleagues at other refineries to support their strike action. Benjamin Tange, a worker at Flanders refinery, told the French daily *Le Parisien*, "We wanted to send a strong symbolic message on our determination to management and the workers of the corporation's other refineries. We need their support now."

One of the Dunkirk refinery workers told the press, "We are disappointed and angry, we have been lied to

yet again. They lied to us for five months, and there it is starting again. They can't just leave us to rot six months longer in our workplace as if we were nobodies."

According to trade union officials, "More than 95 percent of workers at the refineries, fuel depots and supply stations are on strike, blocking transport of fuel products."

Trade unions are insisting that future strike action be decided one workplace at a time, with workers voting in workplace assemblies. In the meantime, the trade unions are working on further negotiations with the company.

CFDT delegate François Pelegrina said, "Overall, pressure from workers has allowed us to establish a more precise calendar for negotiations, with the March 18 European [Enterprise Committee] meeting followed by a meeting of the French part of the Central Enterprise Committee on the 29th."

The strike is reportedly spreading to other refineries. According to the CGT, Exxon Mobil's two French oil refineries in Port-Jérôme Gravenchon, Seine-Maritime and Fos-sur Mer, in the Bouches-du-Rhone will be on strike on February 22.

The nationwide strike by refinery workers takes place amid the French government's plan to slash pensions, cut jobs in the public sector, and cut social spending to reduce soaring budget deficits to reassure international financial markets and banks.

It also comes after workers at IKEA, the Swedish home furnishing firm, went on strike demanding pay rises.

The French government has agreed in principle to the shutting down the Flanders refinery, calling for the company to submit plans for rehiring workers in other jobs. Industry Minister Christian Estrosi said, "We told

Total: the day you bring substitution plans for Total employees and contractors at the [Flanders refinery] site, the government will allow you to close its refining activities.”

On February 1, Total postponed its decision on whether to close Flanders refinery until June. It said if Flanders refinery was closed, it would set up a technical assistance centre and a training school to rehire two-thirds of the 370 employees of the site.

Total is planning job and production cuts due to falling demand for oil amid the global economic crisis, and despite the immense profits realized by the company. To justify the refinery closure, Total issued a statement citing “a lasting structural reduction of consumption of petroleum products.” It added “Our expectations for future market behaviour do not allow us to rely on an improvement of the situation.”

The company is proceeding with layoffs even though it remains hugely profitable. Last March, Total announced that it would lay off 555 refinery workers by 2013. In early February, the firm announced that it made €8 billion in profits in 2009, after making €14 billion in 2008.

Total is trying to weaken solidarity between different workplaces and isolate the Dunkirk plant, by claiming other sites in France are not threatened. Thus, the daily *Le Monde* reported Friday that Total management stated on February 19 that “no other refinery of our company in France” apart from Dunkirk “is threatened by a planned closing.”

No credence can be given to such claims. Total has plans for further plant shutdowns, and a defeat of the Dunkirk workers would simply be the prelude to more closures elsewhere.

According to Reuters, Total has plans to cut refining capacity by 500,000 barrels per day between 2007 and 2011. Reuters added, “If Total decides to close its Dunkirk refinery, the group will still need to cut another 150,000-170,000 barrels per day in capacity to meet its target.”

On February 5, French daily *Libération* cited a comment made by the president of the French Petroleum Industry Body (UFIP), Jean-Louis Schilansky: “The situation in refining is critical. We must close 10 to 15 percent of Europe’s 114 refineries to rebalance supply and demand.”

Jean-Jacques Mosconi, head of strategy and economic

intelligence at Total, said last month that demand for refined products reached its peak in Europe and the US in 2007.

According to CGT union officials, “After five days of work stoppages, there will be the beginnings of fuel shortages in gas stations.”

Government officials tried to downplay the risk of fuel shortages. French Economy Minister Christine Lagarde said on France Info, “There is no risk of shortages. That is really not an argument one should be allowed to use.”

On Friday, however, the UFIP declared, “France has 10 to 20 days of fuel supplies to cope with a worsening refinery strike.”



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