

France: Trade unions call to end strike at Total

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Yesterday evening, officials of the Stalinist *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT, General Confederation of Labour) called on Total refinery workers to halt their nationwide strike against the closure of the Les Flandres refinery in Dunkirk. Despite having received no assurance from Total management that workers' demands will be met, the union is trying to sell out the Total struggle, to break up a growing wave of strikes in France and throughout Europe.

Total refinery workers will vote this afternoon on whether to continue the strike, in general assemblies at their workplaces.

Yesterday, on the seventh day of their indefinite strike, workers closed all of the petrol company's six refineries in France, were joined on Tuesday by France's two Exxon Mobil plants. This leaves only four functioning refineries in the country. Total's plants alone account for 53 percent of petrol production in France.

The strike takes place in the context of developing struggles against unemployment, sackings, closures and austerity throughout Europe: museum staff and flight controllers in France, cabin crew at British airways, the Lufthansa pilots, the Greek general strike scheduled for Wednesday, and next month's general strike in Portugal.

CGT official Charles Foulard declared, "The CGT considers that significant advances obtained by the workers' mobilisation creates the conditions for a suspension" of the strike. Speaking of the Dunkirk refinery, Foulard said that "Total has declared itself ready to re-examine the matter." He added that Total management was preparing investment plans implying "no capacity reduction, closure or sale of refineries" over the next five years.

In fact, Total management has made no commitment

to keep the Dunkirk refinery open, or to preserve workers' jobs at the facility. Total management released a statement yesterday saying that, "beyond projects for the evolution of the Flanders establishment, there will be neither closure nor sale of French refineries over the next five years."

President Nicolas Sarkozy is well aware that a further spread of the strike and determined action by workers to block the distribution of supplies could almost immediately bring the economy to a halt and threaten the viability of his government. The daily *Le Monde* wrote Monday, "France has never had to use its strategic national reserves [with supplies for 120 days] and for the moment has about seven days supplies to deal with the crisis."

Already at 5 p.m. on Monday, despite assurances from Total's director general Christophe de Margerie that Total would "find a solution" to avoid shortages, 126 of Elf and Total's 2,600 service stations were reporting that they had run out of stocks.

AFP wrote yesterday, "Under pressure from the president and faced with the spectre of fuel shortages, Total has made an appointment with the unions this Tuesday, as its proposal to bring forward a crucial meeting on the Dunkirk site had not ended the dispute in the refineries."

The government, fearing a spread of strike activity and a collapse in the upcoming March regional elections, has pretended to support Total workers' demands, while indicating that it will ultimately support Total management's positions.

Le Monde on February 22 reported that at midday on Sunday the Minister of Industry Christian Estrosi began "by demanding that the refinery should not be shut down." On *France Inter* radio, he guaranteed to preserve "the jobs of the Total workers and the

continuance of the refinery.” However, *Le Monde* added, “By the evening the speech had been corrected. The issue was guaranteeing the jobs, the continuance of the plant and the Port of Dunkirk, while the fate of the refinery itself is considered to be secondary by the executive.”

Le Monde commented, “The hope engendered by M. Estrosi on the continuance of the refinery’s activity only served to complicate an already tense situation.”

AFP reported Monday that “The rightwing UMP (the ruling Union for a Popular Movement) spokesman Frédéric Lefebvre called on Total to take ‘precise steps in the coming hours, asserting that the majority union at Total, the CGT is fighting for jobs.’”

Even François Bayrou of the right-wing MoDem (Democratic Movement) has claimed to be in solidarity for the striking Total workers. Bayrou’s supporters have urged motorists to boycott Total garages—going against the call of strikers, well supported by the public, to fill up their tanks to run down Total’s fuel stocks.

The real attitude of Estrosi emerges in another statement on Sunday, designed to reassure big business that the government was not going soft on the working class: “The time has gone when ministers rushed the TV cameras to wave their big handkerchiefs every time a firm, public or private, announced sackings. For bleeding hearts, we have substituted combative ones.”

While it collaborates with the government in an effort to sell out the strike, the CGT is trying to present the struggle on a nationalist basis, appealing to the geopolitical interests of the French ruling class.

Bernard Thibault, the leader of the CGT, asserted before Sunday’s meeting, “A country’s access to energy is a political issue on a world scale, and it happens that France has a declining refining capacity for reasons of financial profitability.... What is being raised by the Total workers, is linked to their own future prospects, of course, but also at stake are the economic and strategic interests of our country.”

This is a reactionary diversion from an international struggle to defend jobs, industrial activity, and workers’ living standards.

The response of business circles to the world economic crisis will be to ruthlessly cut capacity. The president of the French Petroleum Industry Body (UFIP), Jean-Louis Schilansky, recently told the press, “The situation in refining is critical. We must close 10

to 15 percent of Europe’s 114 refineries to rebalance supply and demand.” The CGT’s nationalist line reduces to insisting that the impact of the crisis should be borne by workers in another country.

This is in line with the CGT’s broader, anti-working-class response to the crisis. Since their February 15 meetings, the trade unions have been in discussion with the government on how to reduce France’s budget deficit and national debt, by slashing pensions and social services. At the same time, France and Germany are leading the EU demands on the Greek government to repay its loans and avoid national bankruptcy by gutting the living standards of the workers and youth.

Workers can defend themselves only through a political break with the CGT to continue the strike and mount a broad struggle by the working class to bring down the Sarkozy government, in solidarity with similar struggles by workers throughout Europe.



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