

France: Total workers in Dunkirk continue walkout after CGT calls off national strike

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27 February 2010

On Wednesday, the Communist Party-dominated National Confederation of Labour (CGT) called off a national strike in opposition to the closure of Total's Les Flandres refinery in Dunkirk. All six of the French oil giant's refineries had been on strike.

Despite the CGT's betrayal, which came on the same day as a one-day general strike in Greece against government austerity measures and amid a number of other strikes across Europe, the Dunkirk workers voted Thursday to continue their walkout.

In France, air traffic controllers continued to disrupt flights on the final day of their strike, while Air France pilots launched their own 4-day walkout.

The Stalinist-led CGT called off the national strike against Total on its sixth day, at a point when the strike's impact was beginning to cripple the oil company. Some 10 percent of Total's petrol stations had run out of supplies.

Total workers in Dunkirk were bitter over the CGT's action. One striker told the *World Socialist Web Site* on Thursday, "We should have continued. We could have forced [French President] Sarkozy to resign."

The CGT called off the nationwide strike in order to bolster the Sarkozy government and preempt a broader movement of the French and European working class. The union federation agreed to a tripartite deal with Total and the government which sacrifices the Dunkirk refinery in return for worthless assurances from the company that it will not cut production or close or sell any of its other refineries over the next five years.

Workers at some of the Total sites resisted the back-to-work order of the CGT. The Associated Press reported: "At Goufreville, the mass meeting in the afternoon had decided to continue the strike. Then

another vote took place after the announcement of the decision to return to work at several other sites, and the strike was finally suspended 'by a very narrow majority,' according to the CGT."

At the Les Flandres plant in Dunkirk, the workers voted to continue their strike and occupation until a meeting of the company's national works committee on March 8, to be convened at Total's central office in Paris. The Dunkirk workers have been on strike since January 12.

The refinery's joint union committee issued an appeal for solidarity, calling for "a mass turnout in Paris on March 8." The appeal reiterated that the aim of the strike is "the restarting of the enterprise to preserve all jobs at the Les Flandres refinery as well as those at all subcontractors."

The joint committee is made up of SUD (Solidarity-Unity-Democracy), which is linked to supposedly "left" organizations such as the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), the CGT and Force Ouvrière (Workers' Power). SUD ousted the CGT as the majority union at the Dunkirk refinery two years ago.

The appeal issued by the Dunkirk joint committee refrained from any criticism of the CGT sellout, merely observing that "The national strike of the Total group did not achieve a response to the matter that has been at issue since January 12."

It was signed, amongst others, by Pascale Montel, head of the NPA's list in the local elections, Christian Mahieux, national secretary of the SUD confederation Solidaires, and Jean-Pierre Delannoy, leader of the region's CGT metal workers union.

The NPA issued a statement on the Total strike, dated February 24, which avoids any reference to the CGT sellout.

At a public meeting Thursday evening organised by

SUD, the speakers likewise made no criticism of the CGT, whose plant delegate was on the platform.

Mahieux and other SUD and NPA speakers at the meeting cited as a victory and an example the Continental workers' struggle last year against the closure of their factory at Clairoux. In fact, the unions negotiated the acceptance of the shutdown of the factory.

WSWS reporters covered a mass meeting of Les Flandres strikers on Thursday afternoon at which SUD officials made no criticism of the CGT and allowed its top official at the refinery, Marc Pigeon, to defend at length the "suspension" of the national strike.

WSWS supporters distributed copies of the article "France: Trade unions call to end strike at Total" At that evening's public meeting, Pigeon attempted unsuccessfully to prevent the WSWS supporters from entering the hall.

Pigeon's contribution from the platform was largely a rant against the WSWS, which he described as a "rag." A WSWS supporter spoke from the floor and explained that workers needed to develop new organisations independent of the unions because the unions were collaborating with the corporations and the government.

He said, "The government and the unions began discussions on February 15 on how, without sparking a social upheaval, to reduce the state debt and the budget deficit through cuts in pensions, benefits and social services. The way the unions have dealt with the Total strike is an object lesson on how they intend to do this." His speech was well received by some in the audience who had expressed their bitterness at the calling off of the strike.

WSWS reporters spoke to workers at the mass meeting.

Aldo Tavani is a deputy shift leader. He has worked at the refinery for 31 years. He had been in the CGT but has grown disillusioned with it.

He said, "You can say that we're somewhat angry about the strike being stopped. We should have gone for it. The promises we've been given are worthless. What have the unions won? There are two other sites due to go with the relocation to Saudi Arabia. Sarkozy promised to save the Arcelor steel plant at Gadrage,

and its gone. They can shift production to India or Brasil at will. Five years, you have to be dreaming! We're going to go back 50 years and lose all our social gains."

Aldo agreed that the fight had to take place throughout Europe. "We'll need someone who can organise it. We need a party in each country. It'll have to be built. We're starting from scratch."

David Lenget, a SUD member, has been working at Les Flandres for 9 years. He told the WSWS, "The CGT let us down. Two or three more days and stocks would have been running out. Now we're going it alone. A lot of other workers would have joined us. It would have snowballed. My girl friend is a nurse. There's a lot of discontent among hospital workers. We should go towards another 1968.

"I can't accept that our production should go to Saudi Arabia. We've been promised that all workers will be offered jobs in the company. Some will have to move. That's not so easy—I've got family ties and commitments. I can't just up and go. The jobs should be kept in France. I'm not saying that the workers in Saudi Arabia are our enemies. Total is to blame.

"We've been on strike for six weeks. The politicians didn't come and visit us till a week ago. There were some here today. They just want votes in the regional elections."



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