Sarkozy mobilizes riot police to break French oil strike

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The French government on Friday ordered CRS riot police to disperse workers occupying the strategic Fos-Lavéra oil depot near Marseille. Similar attacks were carried out at depots in Cournon d'Auvergne in central France and Ambès on the southwestern coast.

Port, transport and energy workers, joined by high school students around the country, are striking to oppose the deeply unpopular austerity policies of President Nicolas Sarkozy.

The strikebreaking moves came after a week of mass protest actions against Sarkozy's pension cuts, which include a two-year increase in the retirement age and a corresponding increase in the required pay-in period. A further national day of action against Sarkozy's cuts is called for today, and another one-day strike is scheduled for Tuesday.

The use of state repression against the workers has placed in sharp relief the political issues at the heart of the struggle. The defense of pensions means a political confrontation between the working class and the French state. To be successful, the struggle must be consciously waged as a political fight to bring down the Sarkozy government.

In attacking the oil depot occupations, Sarkozy is seeking to smash the workers' most effective leverage against the cuts—the threat of a nationwide gasoline shortage. Sarkozy was personally present at the meeting late Thursday afternoon that decided on the police action, together with Prime Minister François Fillon, Interior Minister Brice Hortefeux, Labor Minister Eric Woerth and top members of Sarkozy's staff.

The CRS intervened at the Fos depot in force, with CRS troops arriving in 50 buses. The unions advised workers not to offer resistance and the police occupation of the depot "took place without incident," according to police sources.

The French Union of Petroleum Industries (UFIP), which represents the oil companies, reported that only "several hundred" gas stations had run out of fuel and less than 10 percent of the country's 12,500 gas stations had been affected. However, there were continuing reports of panic buying and long lines at gas stations. pipelines feeding the main Paris airports are no longer functioning. Orly has 17 days' supplies left, and Roissy has "supplies until past the end of the weekend."

It appears that Friday's CRS operations will not be sufficient to restore gasoline supplies. Workers occupied seven more oil depots yesterday, although two of these occupations were subsequently lifted. According to France Inter reports, teachers joined strikers' pickets at oil facilities in Bordeaux.

Moreover, the last two of mainland France's 12 refineries that were still operating went on strike yesterday, completely shutting down the domestic refining industry. Such a shutdown has not taken place since the general strike of May-June 1968.

Government and corporate spokesmen did not say how much of the existing oil at depots has already been refined and how much of it is crude. However, the UFIP requested permission from the state to dip into its legally mandated corporate reserves and to access France's strategic petroleum reserve. According to AFP wire reports, the strategic reserve has 17 million tons of petroleum, enough for a 99 days' supply, consisting of 60 percent refined petroleum and 40 percent crude oil.

CFDT-Energy (Confédération Française et Démocratique du Travail—French and Democratic Labor Federation)union sources said that if the authorities "use strategic stocks on a national scale, strikers will begin mass blockades of fuel depots," adding that "things are just beginning."

The ongoing oil strikes show the immense social power of the working class, which can bring the economy to a halt if it engages in determined struggle. But the CRS intervention highlights an important danger—that militant sections of the working class can be isolated and then defeated by the state.

The issue that is posed before the working class is the preparation of a nationwide, indefinite general strike, called for the purpose of bringing down the Sarkozy government. This, in turn, requires a rebellion by the workers against the official trade unions and the establishment of new, democratic organizations of struggle.

The CGT (General Confederation of Workers) union leadership is playing a treacherous role, seeking to defuse and dissipate the opposition movement while it negotiates a sellout of the workers' demands with Sarkozy.

Speaking to *Le Monde*, CGT Secretary Bernard Thibault issued a mealy-mouthed criticism of the CRS strikebreaking operation in Fos, complaining that it hindered the working out of a deal between the union and the government. The attack on

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the workers was not “a method to get us out of the impasse over pension cuts,” Thibault said. Stressing that the CGT’s goal was not to stop economic activity, he added, “The goal of this mobilization is to obtain discussions of another future for our pensions.”

This position is entirely capitulatory, since Sarkozy has made clear that he will not back down. At a cabinet meeting on October 13, he provocatively promised he would “make cuts until the last minute of my term in office.”

The most important provisions of his pension “reform”—increasing the retirement age and lengthening the pay-in period—have already been passed. Moreover, Sarkozy’s decision to send the CRS against the Fos workers underscores that he is not interested in negotiating compromises, but rather in smashing workers’ actions that threaten his ability to impose the cuts.

The *World Socialist Web Site* proposes that workers fighting Sarkozy’s cuts form committees of action independent of the unions. The purpose of these committees will be to broaden the struggle to every section of the working population as well as to students and youth, to appeal for solidarity action by workers across Europe and internationally, and to build up a movement for a general strike against the government.

The aim of this political mobilization of the working class cannot be the replacement of Sarkozy by another bourgeois government headed by the Socialist Party and supported by its pseudo-left allies such as the Communist Party and the New Anti-Capitalist Party, but rather the establishment of a genuine workers’ government committed to socialist policies.

The Socialist Party is a pro-business party whose policies are not fundamentally different from those of Sarkozy. Socialist Party Secretary Martine Aubry’s television speech Wednesday exemplified the party’s threadbare attempt to hide its support for pension cuts and social austerity behind a façade of opposition to Sarkozy.

Aubry demanded that Sarkozy “suspend” the Senate debate on the pension cuts and renegotiate the package with the trade unions. However, she repeated the Socialist Party’s support for “increasing the pay-in period.” As the pay-in period is to be lengthened to 41 years or longer, and workers’ apprenticeships or university education are not counted as part of the pay-in period, this change will in practice raise the retirement age far beyond the 60-year limit the Socialist Party claims to defend.

Le Parisien noted that 63 percent of the population does not believe Aubry’s promise to return the retirement age to 60. Earlier this year, she called for it to be increased to 61 or 62, the age recommended by Sarkozy.

The real attitude of the Socialist Party to the workers’ struggles is shown by Patrick Mennucci, a Socialist Party official in Marseille. He denounced striking Marseille port workers for “hiding sectional interests behind the very popular demand for keeping the retirement age at 60.”

The Socialist Party’s positions place it in opposition to popular sentiment in France. Illustrating the broad popular support that exists for the struggle against Sarkozy, high school students continued demonstrating around the country yesterday. According to the UNL high school students’ union, roughly 900 of France’s 4,302 high schools were on strike, with 550 of them blockaded. In cities across France, high school students organized protest marches, with over 1,000 students marching in Tours, Reims, Metz, Nantes, La Rochelle, Lyon, Orléans and Versailles. Students blocked railway lines in several cities, including Rennes, Reims and Agen.

Transport Minister Dominique Bussereau cancelled a trip to La Rochelle, where he was to speak to the Charentes-Maritimes departmental council, after hearing that youth had organized a demonstration in front of the council building.

The Alliance police trade union denounced “scenes of urban guerrilla warfare” and demanded harsher “means to intervene.” There were numerous reports of CRS troops firing tear gas on student marches, the police claimed to have arrested 264 “violent protestors” nationwide. However, the Paris police prefecture promised to abandon the use of rubber bullets after a Montreuil student was badly injured when police shot him in the face with a rubber bullet on Wednesday.

Hundreds of students gathered in front of Montreuil city hall to protest the police shooting.

In Paris, students marched on the Senate, where final elements of the pension “reform” are being debated, and on Matignon, the prime minister’s residence. There were also reports of several hundred student protesters entering the national library (Bibliothèque François Mitterrand).

Police reported having arrested 94 protesters in demonstrations in the Paris suburbs. They also reported that seven policemen were wounded, though the most seriously wounded officer was not hurt by protesters but by a truck driver who tried to ram protesters after becoming angry over being stuck in traffic.

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