

Confrontation builds between French workers and Sarkozy

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Strike action continued yesterday in France against President Nicolas Sarkozy's pension cuts, with truckers joining energy workers on strike amid a looming gasoline shortage and reports of increasing police violence against student protests.

Workers and students are protesting Sarkozy's planned two-year increase in the retirement age, with a corresponding increase in the pay-in period, contained in a pension "reform" bill passed by lawmakers despite overwhelming popular opposition. Polls show 71 percent of the population support strike activity against the cuts.

The expansion of the strikes and protests, far from being spearheaded by the unions, is being carried out overwhelmingly at the initiative of the workers themselves. In the face of this rising confrontation, prominent union officials are indicating that, once the bill is passed by the Senate, they will scale back or seek to end the strikes and protests.

The Senate pushed back the final vote on the bill by one day yesterday, to Thursday. From the coastal resort town of Deauville, where he was meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Russian President Dmitri Medvedev, Sarkozy issued a statement saying the cuts were "essential" and that France would "put them into action."

The three government heads discussed European-Russian relations and financial penalties for euro zone countries whose budget deficits exceed limits set by the European Union.

On television Sunday night, Prime Minister François Fillon declared he "would not allow the French economy to suffocate due to a blockage of the supply of gas."

Ports and all twelve of France's refineries are on strike, and oil depots and tanker trucking are also hit by strikes and occupations of workplaces. Roughly 2,500 of France's 12,500 gas stations have completely run out of supplies, according to industry figures, including 1,500 stations operated by major retailers like Carrefour and Leclerc and 1,000 independently-owned stations. Certain regions are particularly hard hit, with 80 percent of gas stations closed in the Essonne region near Paris. The figures are similar in parts of Normandy, and supplies in Brittany are hitting "very frightening" lows, according to the UIP (Union of Importers of Petroleum) industry group.

Blockages or occupations of oil depots continued at

Reichstett, Dunkirk, Caen and Saint-Pierre-des Corps. Blockages were lifted at Port-la-Nouvelle and Brest, with police intervening to demand the blockages be lifted at Frontignan and Ouistreham. However, workers at Frontignan went back on strike after the blockade was broken.

Truckers have gone on strike, blockading depots and slowing traffic on major highways, including the A1 connecting Paris and Lille and A6 south of Paris. Workers intervened to halt the collection of tolls on several highways in "free toll-booth operations," and several smaller highways were blocked.

Strikes are also spreading in mass transportation. Air France workers will strike today and tomorrow, possibly blocking airports; air traffic controllers are also going on strike. The General Directorate of Civilian Aviation (DGAC) has instructed airlines to cut their flying schedules by 30 percent nationwide, and 50 percent at Orly airport. Strikes are in their eighth consecutive day at the SNCF rail system, with roughly one in two trains expected today. The strikes may spread to armored car firms such as Brink's and Loomis.

High school protests continue throughout the country and have increased since last week. The UNL (National Union of High School Students) reported Monday that roughly 950 of France's 4,302 high schools were on strike, with 600 high schools blockaded. The UNEF (National Union of French University Students) announced that students were meeting in general assemblies at their universities, with twelve universities calling for strikes and five for blockades.

High school students are using their cell phones to coordinate protest actions. Ecology Minister Jean-Louis Borloo explained: "It's a phenomenon we have not seen before, the phenomenon of blockading via SMS."

Student protests were reported in all of France's major cities. Protest demonstrations in Lyon, Nice, Mulhouse and Lille led to confrontations with police, who fired tear gas. Police claimed to have arrested 290 people in confrontations with high school students around France.

High school blockades and confrontations with police spread throughout the Paris area. Over half of the 64 high schools in the working class Seine-St-Denis suburbs in the north were blockaded.

Students in Paris proper demonstrated before City Hall and

blocked traffic on the Champs-Élysées. Police fired rubber bullets and tear gas in a standoff with students at the Joliot-Curie high school in the western suburb of Nanterre, and reported facing students throwing Molotov cocktails at the Jacques Prévert technical high school in Combs-la-Ville, east of Paris.

Major corporations are demanding the breaking of the blockades to avert a total gasoline shortage. Michel-Edouard Leclerc, owner of Leclerc, told *Le Parisien*: “at the current rate of fueling, there will be no more gasoline by the end of the week, unless we find a way out of this conflict.” Carrefour issued a statement warning that “the risk of shortage is real” and calling on the government to “unblock” oil depots.

The top levels of government are preparing for a confrontation with strikers. Interior Minister Brice Hortefeux announced yesterday afternoon the creation of an emergency Inter-Ministerial Crisis Group to ensure the supply of oil. This was decided after meetings at the Elysée presidential palace attended by Fillon, Hortefeux, Borloo, Labor Minister Eric Woerth and National Education Minister Luc Chatel.

At the Grandpuits refinery east of Paris, police “requisitioned” thirty workers—that is, forced them to stop striking under threat of arrest. Workers declared themselves to be “extremely angry” about this, and are refusing to fully operate the site or deliver supplies to all their clients.

A CGT (General Confederation of Labor) unionist on the site explained: “We are willing to help supply hospitals or public services, but it is out of the question to lift the blockade to refuel [oil firm] Total’s stations so they make money.” CGT officials described the situation at Grandpuits as “a state of siege,” noting that they feared a police intervention to break the strike.

The CRS (Republican Security Companies) riot police have already intervened to break workers’ occupations of several refineries, including the strategic depot at Fos last Friday.

The political establishment hopes that, after the vote for the law on Thursday, the trade unions will convince workers to abandon opposition to the law. *Le Figaro* cited an “expert in social relations” who commented: “All the leaders [of the trade unions] know that Nicolas Sarkozy will never give in, and they are trying to find a way to get out of the conflict without too much damage.”

Speaking of the upcoming vote on the law in the Senate, CFE-CGC (French Confederation of Managers-General Confederation of Managers) union secretary Carole Couvert explained, “If the trade union alliance decides for new demonstrations after the Senate vote, they will be without us.” Leading CFDT (French and Democratic Confederation of Labor) union official Marcel Grignard agreed that “we will be in a new configuration” after the Senate vote.

Referring to the French Communist Party’s sellout of the May-June 1936 general strike, *Le Figaro* commented: “Maurice Thorez admitted after the social movement of 1936

that ‘One must know how to end a strike.’... The saying of the former chief of the French Communist Party now resonates with all the leaders of the trade unions today.”

CGT leader Bernard Thibault has emphasized that he does not want to blockade the country and simply wants to renegotiate the cuts. *Le Figaro* commented: “[Thibault] wants to prove something to his activist base, which is leading the continuing strikes and is angry with him for not calling a general strike. He must also avoid blowing up his relationship with [CFDT Secretary] François Chérèque who, according to one expert, ‘considers that it is dangerous to continue but does not know how to get out of this without appearing to be a traitor.’”

The positions of Chérèque and Thibault are in all essentials those of the official “left.” Thus Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the student leader during the 1968 general strike and now a leading Green party official, explained his strategy for ending the strikes and working out an electoral coalition for the 2012 presidential election. This perspective is shared by the petty-bourgeois New Anti-Capitalist Party. (See: “How the NPA disorients the struggle against Sarkozy’s cuts”).

Cohn-Bendit explained: “The government will hold firm. If you call for a general strike, you’re saying that you will hold until the government resigns... [It would be] more rational for the trade unions to organize meetings with the left to elaborate alternative cuts so that the left can come in 2012 and say: ‘If we win, this is how we will reform the unjust cuts of the current government.’”

This is an important illustration of the class gulf separating the working class from various “left” traitors. They oppose calls for a general strike because—despite its weakness and massive unpopularity—they do not want to bring down the Sarkozy government. Rather, they hope to manipulate the strikes so that they can replace Sarkozy and carry out a slightly modified version of his cuts against the working class.



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