

As police attack refinery strikers

French Senate votes pension cuts over mass opposition

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The French Senate voted 177-153 yesterday to approve President Nicolas Sarkozy's pension cuts in the face of overwhelming popular opposition and continuing strikes. The government at the same time stepped up the use of the police to smash strikes in the oil sector, which have caused severe fuel shortages, carrying out a massive police raid on an occupied refinery at Grandpuits, near Paris.

Police vans arrived at Grandpuits at 3 a.m. yesterday and demanded to “requisition” strikers—that is, force them back to work. At 4:30 a.m., 50 striking workers joined their colleagues at the refinery.

By around 7 a.m., a “citizen’s picket” of 80 people, including workers from other factories and nearby residents, had formed to block the requisition. At 9 a.m., police charged the site. Three workers were wounded in the scuffle, according to CGT union sources.

Michel Guillot, the regional police chief for the Seine-et-Marne area, came in person to requisition the entire staff of the refinery and, in the name of “national defense,” force workers to re-supply oil firm Total’s gas stations in the area.

Charles Foulard, an official of the Total oil section of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT), denounced police for preventing “the exercise of the constitutionally protected right to strike” and pointed out that “national defense” did not legally apply, as France is neither in a state of war nor of siege. However, the CGT, which is politically linked to the French Communist Party (PCF), issued a statement declaring it would mount only “symbolic actions” against the breaking of the Grandpuits occupation.

Olivier Besancenot, spokesman for the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA), issued a brief statement, saying, “To defend striking workers and the right to strike, I propose to all the leading officials of political parties, of political associations, and of unions to react together against this indefensible aggression against the laboring people and their rights.”

This is a cynical ploy. The CGT, the Socialist Party (PS) and the other organizations have made it clear that they will not mount any serious response to the police repression. Besancenot’s statement is in keeping with the NPA’s role in promoting illusions in the CGT and the PS and the politically disorienting notion that protest action by itself will be sufficient to shift the Sarkozy government

and the ruling class as a whole.

Sarkozy brought debate on the bill to a close by using the power granted to the government under Article 44, part 3 of the Constitution, which allows the government to bypass the amendment process and force a reading of a bill in the Senate, followed by a vote. Dozens of police vans ringed the Senate while it voted.

The ruling conservative UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) and the Centrist Union, a Senate faction controlled by the right-wing MoDem (Democratic Movement) of François Bayrou, voted for the bill. Senators from the bourgeois “left” Socialist Party and the French Communist Party voted against.

A Mixed Parity Commission (CMP) composed of seven senators and seven deputies from the National Assembly will now work to reconcile the bill voted today with the version passed by the National Assembly in September. Once the CMP finishes its work, final votes will take place in both houses of parliament. This is expected on October 27.

As voted by the Senate, the law increases the minimum retirement age to 62 and the minimum age to receive a full pension to 67. It increases the minimum pay-in period from 40.5 to 41 years, with further increases allowed if life expectancy continues to increase.

The bill increases the contribution by public sector workers from 7.85 to 10.55 percent of pay, the level now in force in the private sector. It allows workers with a “physical incapacitation rate” of 20 percent or more to retire, but only at 60 and only if a worker can prove that the incapacitation was work-related.

In a concession to free-market demands from the Centrist Union, UMP senators added a provision to consider a “points” retirement system in 2013. Under such a plan, the government would be allowed to decide the value of each point a worker earned during his working life, decreasing the value of points and hence workers’ pensions if life expectancy increased. This would allow the government to impose sweeping cuts in benefits by executive fiat.

PS Secretary Martine Aubry criticized the government’s actions as “permanent rule by force,” describing Sarkozy as “holding the Senate and democracy in contempt.”

In fact, this description applies no less to the PS than to Sarkozy. While it has campaigned to formally leave the retirement age at

60, the PS supports “reform” provisions that would in practice force people to work longer before retiring with benefits.

Aubry declared last week on France2 television that she supported increasing the pay-in period to 41.5 or 42 years, and the PS voted for provisions in the current bill to increase the pay-in period. When PS spokesman Benoît Hamon said he “would prefer” a situation where workers paid into national pension plans for only 40 years, this led to bitter recriminations inside the PS.

Speaking to France Inter, Manuel Valls, a leading figure in the Socialist Party, denounced the party leadership for making any criticisms of Sarkozy’s pension bill. He called the increased pay-in period “inevitable” and said, “There is a language on the left that consists in believing that being of the left is just a question of slogans, ideas of the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s.” He added, “If we win in 2012, it must be with the language of truth.”

The government is desperate to bring the oil strikes to a close. Ecology and Energy Minister Jean-Louis Borloo said yesterday that roughly 2,500 of France’s 12,300 gas stations are completely out of fuel. He admitted that there would be only “slow improvement.” However, the police raid on Grandpuits would “noticeably improve the situation” in the Paris metropolitan area, he said, and ruled out rationing of gasoline.

The French ruling class is mobilizing support from around Europe. Jean-Louis Schilansky of the UFIP (French Union of Petroleum Industries) said that “large quantities of fuel” had “been imported to deal with the closure of the refineries.” He added, “Imports have come from all over Europe. It’s the entire European system we are mobilizing to resupply the French market.”

In a further attack on the oil sector yesterday, a judge approved oil firm Total’s plan to shut down its Dunkirk refinery.

The Senate vote and the police attacks on strikers provide further proof that, in mounting mass strikes against Sarkozy’s cuts, workers and students face a political struggle against the government and the entire ruling class. This struggle can be successful only if it is waged independently of the unions and the so-called “left” parties. The former are working to weaken and close down the strike movement and the latter are principally concerned with preventing the strikes and protests from escaping the unions’ control.

The unions have signaled their desire to wind down the movement by taking no action to defend oil workers from police attack or respond to such attacks by extending strike action to other sectors of the economy. Their central demand all along has been for the government to negotiate the terms of the pension cuts with them, rather than a clear and principled rejection of the cuts.

There can be little doubt that Sarkozy has had back-door consultations with the union leaders, including the head of the CGT, Bernard Thibault, and that the union tops have given assurances that they will not respond to an intensification of police attacks on striking oil workers.

The unions have emerged as the critical line of defense of Sarkozy and the French ruling elite, under conditions where workers are striving to extend the struggle in the direction of a general strike, thousands of high school and university students are mobilizing behind them, the general public is solidly behind the strikes, and Sarkozy is hated and despised by a large majority of

the French people.

A BVA-Canal+ poll published yesterday indicated that 69 percent of the population supports continuing strike action against the cuts, despite the Senate vote. Previous polls indicated that six in ten supported calls for a general strike against Sarkozy’s policies. In recent weeks, demonstrations against the cuts have repeatedly mobilized over 3 million protestors, and high school and university students have blockaded their institutions in protest.

But by declaring Thursday that it would wait until October 28 (the day after the final vote on the bill) before mounting its next action, the all-trade-union alliance has given a green light for the government to go on the offensive against strikers. Sarkozy will seek to break up strikes while he counts on next week’s All-Saints Week vacation to deflate the student protests.

These events underscore the political significance of the *World Socialist Web Site*’s call for workers to form committees of action, independent of the unions and the “left” parties. These committees, as genuinely democratic organs of struggle, would lead the fight for a general strike with the goal of removing the Sarkozy government and replacing it with a workers’ government.

This perspective of the independent mass industrial and political action of the working class is diametrically opposed to that of the Stalinist PCF and the middle-class pseudo-left organizations, such as the NPA, which seek to derail the resistance of the working class and channel it behind the election in 2012 of yet another reactionary Socialist Party government.

The most critical aspect of the situation is the absence of independent political leadership in the working class. Tens of millions of workers want to respond to scenes of police violence against strikers with a general strike, and oppose a vicious law voted by the parliament in defiance of the popular will. The task of building committees of action and a revolutionary leadership in the working class is now central to defeating the attack on the living standards and democratic rights of the working class.



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