

# French government, unions seek to limit strikes against pension cuts

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Government officials struggled yesterday to limit ongoing strikes against President Nicolas Sarkozy's pension "reform." With repeated police raids on oil blockades and high school protests halted due to the All Saints Week holiday, ministers are seeking to demoralize the workers, declaring strikes to be over.

They are being aided by the unions, which have isolated strikes in the oil and transport sectors and at French ports.

The government is seeking to capitalize on the Senate's recent passage of the pension bill, which aims to cut annual payments to workers by an estimated €18 billion. The measure was passed over massive popular opposition.

On France3 television Sunday, Labor Minister Eric Woerth arrogantly declared, "There's no point to striking today. After the law was voted, it's the law and it must be respected."

Press reports yesterday focused principally on votes to return to work at three refineries: Fos-sur-Mer, Port-Jérôme-Gravenchon and Reichstett. Until now, all 12 of France's refineries have been on strike. The refinery workers, together with port workers, oil depot workers and truckers, have blocked fuel supplies, causing severe gasoline and diesel shortages across the country.

The government is mobilizing riot police to break up blockades at facilities around France. The French Union of Petroleum Industries (UFIP) claimed that all blockades of oil depots had been stopped, apart from the nine oil depots located inside struck refineries. Police raids broke two blockades at oil depots in the Drôme region of southeastern France, one in Savoy and another in Saint-Pierre-des-Corps, near Tours in the Center region.

French and Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT) union officials warned that truckers might continue mounting blockades regardless. However, unions at the national level are organizing no industrial action against police strikebreaking.

Despite Woerth's declarations that the strike movement

has been defeated, the work stoppages continue to powerfully impact the economy. The government is still struggling to resupply gas stations. One in three stations in France was out of fuel yesterday, according to government figures. Ecology Minister Jean-Louis Borloo said he had set an objective of having 80 percent of stations "able to function" today.

The worst problems were reported in western France and in Paris. However, police authorities in the Rhône department around Lyon in the southeast reported that 87 of 250 stations were totally out of fuel, and that two-thirds of gas stations had supply problems.

Strikes are continuing at French ports, including critical oil facilities in Marseille and Le Havre. The number of undocked ships off Marseille port and oil terminals continues to increase: 76 ships and 4 barges yesterday versus 73 ships and 4 barges the day before.

Municipal workers continued to strike yesterday, with garbage workers blockading the main Ivry-sur-Seine waste treatment facility near Paris, and bus drivers and transport workers were on strike in numerous cities.

Eight universities remain blockaded, and university student unions have called for a national strike day together with high school students on November 4, the end of the high school vacation. A national youth protest is to take place tomorrow.

Polls cited by business daily *Les Echos* show that 61 percent of the population supports continued strike action against the cuts.

The absence of revolutionary perspective is the critical weakness facing the strike movement. The workers are objectively locked in a struggle against the state and the entire ruling class. However, the unions and their political allies on the "left"—the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the New Anti-Capitalist Party—are determined to contain the movement at the level of a protest on the false premise that the government can be pressured to drop the

pension “reform” or significantly modify it.

It is necessary to broaden the movement and unite the entire working class in a conscious political struggle to bring down Sarkozy and establish a workers’ government. A new leadership must be built to fight for this perspective.

It is bitterly opposed by the trade unions and their “left” supporters.

Bernard Thibault, head of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT), told France5 TV: “Opening negotiations with the government about the future of pensions remains the unions’ objective.”

This capitulatory posture amounts to a green light for the state to break the strikes in the various industries one by one. Other leading CGT officials are making defeatist statements in an attempt to wind down the struggles. A CGT official at ESSO, Laurent Delaunay, said: “We have lost a battle, but not the essential point: the chance to express ourselves against this reform.”

CGT-Total official Charles Foulard explained: “We know the refineries count for a lot in this movement, but we don’t want to be the only ones acting in France.” He said that the refineries “did not see themselves as the spearhead” of the struggle.

The ruling class, however, has identified refinery workers as the prime political target and will move ruthlessly against them. The government previously announced plans to close two refineries, Dunkirk and Reichstett, in a sector with substantial overcapacity due to the global economic slump. France’s 12 refineries can refine 97 million tons of petroleum, but last year they only refined 74 million tons, a 13 percent drop from 2008.

The attack on refinery workers is only part of plans for a broad attack on the living standards of the working class. The pension cuts will be passed together with an austerity budget and cuts in Social Security. According to *Le Monde*, “these three texts, prepared in spring as over-indebted Europe faced the aftermath of the Greek debt crisis” are all to be discussed today in the National Assembly.

Governments across Europe are competing to drive down wages and social spending, boosting profits and competitiveness. This treatment is coming to France, *Le Monde* explained: “All France’s economic and financial policy takes place under the eyes of the financial markets, who are watching for the slightest misstep. Resolute action of Germany and, now, of Great Britain to cut their deficits deepens the pressure. If France gave the slightest sign of weakness, it would be sanctioned, with the

immediate effect of increasing the cost of servicing its debt.”

What is being prepared is an assault on the working class far beyond what Sarkozy has so far mounted. The cuts in Britain amount to £81 billion, leading to an estimated loss of one million jobs evenly divided between the public and private sectors. (See: “British government announces unprecedented social cuts”)

The perspective of pressuring Sarkozy, advocated by the CGT and its allies among the so-called “left” parties, is bankrupt. Workers in France and throughout Europe face a struggle to expropriate an international financial aristocracy that threatens it with social ruin, and in whose interests the Sarkozy government rules.

*Le Monde* added that Sarkozy—now at record lows in the polls, with a 29 percent approval rating—will keep fighting to “reconquer” the right-wing electorate, a struggle he began with an appeal “to the extremes with the law-and-order offensive this summer.”

That is to say, the fascistic law-and-order measures and ethnic targeting of the Roma this summer are part of a long-term strategy to create a poisonous political atmosphere in which to carry out unprecedented attacks on the working class.

Last week, deputy Christian Vanneste of Sarkozy’s UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) party confirmed to *Le Figaro* that he advocated electoral alliances between the UMP and the neo-fascist National Front (FN). He had previously proposed this in an interview on the far-right *Radio Courtoisie*.

He cited the example of Italian premier Silvio Berlusconi, who has ruled in coalition with neo-fascists of the National Alliance led by Gianfranco Fini.

This highlights the importance of the *World Socialist Web Site*’s call for workers to form independent committees of action to extend the strikes and prepare for a general strike to bring down the Sarkozy government.



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