

Trade union bureaucracy strangles French oil strike

Alex Lantier
30 October 2010

Port workers at France's main oil terminals and workers at the last striking refineries voted to return to work yesterday, halting an oil strike against President Nicolas Sarkozy's pension cuts and his plans for cuts and partial privatisations in the oil sector.

The oil strike was the workers' most powerful weapon in a series of protests, including strikes and high school blockades, which have staggered the Sarkozy government over the last two weeks. Despite mass opposition to the pension cuts—65 percent supported further strikes against them in the latest polls, and another one-day protest is called for November 6—Sarkozy's pension cuts were passed by the parliament on Wednesday.

The unions are pressing workers to return to work after refusing to defend them against police strikebreaking. From the outset, they pursued a treacherous policy of appealing to Sarkozy to modify the cuts, allowing financial hardship and the absence of resolute leadership and a political perspective to defeat Sarkozy to wear down the strikers and force them back to work with nothing to show for their struggle.

Five striking refineries (Gonfreville, Dunkerque, Grandpuits, Feyzin and Donges) voted to return to work starting Friday morning. Speaking prior to the vote, General Confederation of Labour (CGT) union official Charles Foulard said, "We have a feeling that we are going towards a return to work. That's a fact".

The strike led to a massive oil shortage, and it will take roughly one week for production to return to normal. As of last night, 22 percent of France's gas stations were still out of fuel, according to the website zagaz.com.

Pascal Galéoté, a leading CGT official at the Marseille ports, said, "We are getting into a configuration to rapidly get back to work". He noted

that there was still a strike call by port and dock unions for this weekend. However, he added, "We will see how we will put that into effect".

The CGT statement gave no details on negotiations or whether employers had made any concessions on workplace issues. Strikers were protesting not only Sarkozy's pension cuts, but plans for a 40 percent privatisation of petroleum terminals at the port. This would cause 220 agents to lose their public-sector status.

General Marseille Maritime Port (GPMM) management had no doubt that the unions would organize a rapid return to work. Yesterday, 80 ships were off the Marseille port waiting to be unloaded, including several dozen loaded with crude oil or refined products. A GPMM communiqué stated that ships "will be able to dock progressively starting at 8 p.m. today [Friday]. Loading or unloading of their cargo will follow".

At the Industrial Maritime Company of Le Havre, which supplies four refineries in northern France, CGT delegate Fabrice Modeste announced the vote to return to work. He added, "The guys are ready to go back for new strike action if the movement picks up again".

Jean-Louis Schilansky, president of the French Union of Petroleum Industries (UFIP), said the strikes would cost the French petroleum industry "hundreds of millions of euros". He claimed that this would represent a "gigantic" burden for the industry.

If Schilansky's figures are correct, however, this would represent relatively minor damage to French energy firms. The oil corporation Total alone made €2.47 billion in profits in the previous quarter, on quarterly revenues of €40.18 billion.

It appears that the strike will be seized upon to justify a major attack on oil workers. Two refineries,

Dunkerque and Reichstett, are already threatened with closure.

Oil workers interviewed by the press at the Feyzin refinery were angry at the government and at the unions. Thierry told *Le Monde*, “I did not support returning to work. I would have continued the strike one more week, until the day of action on November 6”.

Paul, a 54-year-old technician, said the Feyzin workers “hoped until the end”. He added, “Retirement is deliverance for us. I have been breathing dangerous chemicals since I was 18. Besides which, climbing columns that are 60 meters high, it’s too much at my age. We are governed by people who have never had to do the work we do”.

Feyzin’s CGT delegate, Michel Lavastrou, said “it was not easy” when he advocated returning to work. Paraphrasing Communist Party Chairman Maurice Thorez’s infamous call for an end to the 1936 French general strike (“One must know how to end a strike once satisfaction has been received”), he declared, “One must know how to end a strike, but it’s easier when satisfaction has been received. The return to work, under these conditions, will not be glorious”.

David Faure, the French Democratic Labour Confederation (CFDT) union representative on the refinery’s joint union-management committee, warned of rising anger among the workers: “People are only waiting for a signal from the unions to go into the streets. The next step will be the general strike. And at that point, the workers’ response will be violent”.

Aware of continuing mass anger at the cuts, the government and the unions are working to defuse popular opposition. Sarkozy issued a brief statement yesterday saying, “Many concerns, often legitimate ones, have been expressed”. He said he would “reflect” on how to respond. Of course, the pension cuts are to stay in place, decreasing social spending by an estimated €18 billion per year.

The CGT’s Foulard claimed the unions had “won the battle of ideas”, explaining, “The unions’ arguments about the possibility of having another reform...have been heard”. He added, “We were not so far away from our goal. We just needed a few more job sectors to enter into the struggle”.

This statement exemplifies the cynicism of the CGT leadership. The oil workers were defeated not by “other

job sectors” of the working class, who overwhelmingly supported strikes and opposed Sarkozy’s measures, but by the union bureaucracy. It refused to wage a political struggle to bring down the Sarkozy government, even after Sarkozy sent riot police to attack striking oil workers.

The defeat of the oil strike is a warning to the working class and a confirmation of the analysis of the *World Socialist Web Site*, which argued that workers had to organize a political strike to bring down Sarkozy and fight for a workers’ government. The WSWs consistently warned of the treachery of the unions and advocated the formation of rank-and-file committees of action to take the struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucrats.

Even under the most favourable political conditions, where workers have mass support and control a strategic sector of the economy, they cannot win a victory through the existing organizations.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact