Marseille strike hits Mediterranean shipping, oil supplies

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A strike against privatisation and pension cuts by dockers and terminal workers in the southern French port city of Marseille is blocking ships and energy supplies. The workers are fighting plans for pension cuts and a semi-privatisation of port facilities negotiated between employers, the CGT (General Confederation of Labour) union and local government officials.

Fifty-three ships, including 35 petrol tankers, are currently laid up off Marseille, waiting to be discharged. A major role is being played by the 224 oil terminal workers at Fos-Lavera Marseille, an international centre for transshipment and refining for crude oil imports. Their section of the port is slated to be opened to private-sector firms.

The strike is also halting French trade with North Africa. The Algerian newspaper *El Watan* wrote: "According to Marfret, a maritime transport firm, trade with the Maghreb is almost completely stopped. The third-largest shipper in the world, Marseille-based CMA-CGM, has said it would 'limit its stops at Marseille port en route to North Africa to one out of every five scheduled stops.' Algeria is the second largest client of the Marseille port."

Marseille port workers have been striking since July against the proposed changes in their status. The unions are maintaining long-standing divisions between the dockers and terminal workers; dockers strike on even-numbered days, while terminal workers strike on odd-numbered days. They also have been striking two days per month against President Nicolas Sarkozy's pension cuts, with dockers and terminal workers striking on different days.

Since the summer, CGT officials have also ceased opposing victimization of workers over the choice of protective clothing worn in unloading areas. Workers have been sent to disciplinary councils over the issue—a new development in the ports.

CGT officials at the port are arguing for workers to accept the proposed legal changes, if there are concessions on early retirement rules. Currently, the "reform" states that workers must have 20 years of physical work on the docks to claim an early retirement for onerous working conditions—a condition opposed by port workers.

CGT leader Bernard Thibault's recent statement made clear that the CGT has no intention of demanding a retraction of the cuts by using the threat of a blockade of the ports. He said: "The blocking of transport is not at all complicated; we know how to do that. But it is not our union strategy."

Nonetheless, the strike has already substantially disrupted oil supplies. Oil refineries at Marseille have been forced to reduce their operating rates. Six of the 12 French refineries have cut their output. Already the French Mediterranean island of Corsica has run dry of gasoline. Jean-Louis Schilansky, the spokesman for the French petro-chemical industry (UFIP), estimated that by October 20 in southeastern France, "We could have supply problems."

In Marseille, four of the six oil refineries could stop production this week. The oil terminals at Fos-Lavera supply six refineries in France. Four other refineries are supplied by the European oil pipeline running through Lyon and the Bas-Rhin region in eastern France. Taken together, these account for 40 percent of French refining capacity. As an emergency measure, the Environment and Energy Ministry has authorised fuel tankers to operate on Sundays throughout the French road network.

Gas oil futures on the Intercontinental exchange have risen 6 percent since the strike began. Spot gasoline prices in Europe have jumped 8 percent since the strike began on September 27.

According to Reuters, “Gasoline traders in the Mediterranean were struggling to meet long-term supply contracts to Africa and the Middle East.” Brent crude prices reached $85.29 a barrel and US crude went to $83.33 last week. A weak dollar, expectations of quantitative easing (that is, money-printing by the US Federal Reserve) and the shutdown of the Houston ship channel last week helped push oil prices to a five-month high.

The attitude of the port workers in Marseille is a sign of a rising working class anger and opposition to such austerity programs. The bill of law extending the minimum legal retirement age to 62 has been passed into law by the National Assembly and Senate.

Four thousand women school canteen workers in Marseille have been on strike for 10 days, closing over 200 canteens. They have a starting salary of €1000 a month, and have been lobbying parents to inform them of the paltry pension of €700 they will receive.

Check-out workers at Monoprix super markets in Marseille have been on strike since September 17 for a living wage. Half of workers are reduced to working part-time only.

Over 70 percent of those questioned in recent polls believe the fight against the cuts in pensions is just and should be deepened. The IFOP-Paris Match poll confirmed that in public support for the strikes: “There is no fall-off of support ... and that includes all categories except sympathizers of the UMP,” (Union for a Popular Movement) the ruling conservative party.