

How riot police broke the occupation of the Marseille oil depots

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The French government gave the order Friday morning, October 15, to send in the CRS riot police to unblock the Fos oil depot occupied by workers near Marseille in southern France. The workers were blocking the site to protest against President Nicolas Sarkozy's pension cuts and the partial privatisation of the French ports. The CGT (General Confederation of Labour) called upon workers not to show any resistance to the police.

The WSWs contacted two representatives of the local branches of the CGT in Martigues and Fos-sur-Mer to obtain more information.

The day before the police intervention, the unions had called for a mass picket to block the Fos-sur-Mer oil storage site. The unions present were the CGT, the CFDT (French Democratic Labour Federation) and Force ouvrière (Workers Power). In addition to port workers, rail, refinery, engineering and local government workers were also present.

The oil depots near Marseille are highly strategic installations for the storage of products such as high grade gasoline, diesel, methanol, domestic fuel and heavy fuel. Six million cubic meters of oil have been delivered here by tankers every year since 1969, or by pipeline from the nearby Berre l'Étang refineries.

The gasoline is stored in 40 very widely dispersed vats in order to avoid a general conflagration in case of an accident. It is then distributed by truck, train, sea as well as by pipeline.

The Marseille oil depot is at the heart of a network of more than 3,000 kilometres of oil pipelines that feed French refineries in Feyzin, near Lyon, the German MIRO refinery at Karlsruhe, the Swiss Petroplus refinery at Cressier, as well as the pipelines that ensure the supply of the French state's strategic stocks.

According to trade union witnesses, information in

the press—according to which 50 busloads of riot police were sent to unblock the Fos-sur-Mer site—is false. The security forces were, in fact, less numerous during the intervention at the site, which at that time was for all practical purposes no longer occupied by the CGT.

According to the Martigues CGT representative, “After the day of action to block the depot, the CGT left the site, and there were only 15 people left behind to do as they pleased”.

The Fos-sur-Mer union branch representative said, “Fifty buses, that's absurd. When I passed by an hour and a half after the CRS intervention there were only some 10 buses”.

The CRS did not need to intervene with force because there was no desire on the part of the CGT and the other unions to keep control over this strategic site to fight the government's attacks on the social gains of the working class. This was confirmed by the CGT representative at Martigue: “The aim of the blockage of the depot was not to hold it *ad vitam aeternam* [for all time]”.

This is a remarkable statement. The shortage of gasoline is beginning to make itself felt throughout the country, and that also poses problems for the oil supply of other countries like Switzerland and Germany. The threat of the paralysis of the French and European economy is one of the principal weapons of workers in the fight against the social attacks in France and across Europe.

Nevertheless, the CGT does not make the issue of the occupation of an important oil storage site a strategic question for the working class. It gives the impression of being combative, but that is not the case. In fact, the CGT general secretary, Bernard Thibault, has insisted on several occasions that he does not want to block the French economy, and that he is simply looking to

renegotiate the attacks on pensions and jobs being carried out by Sarkozy.

On the other hand, the occupation of a factory is an open challenge thrown down to the employers. The CGT works to prevent this from happening because it has no interest in workers engaging in a political conflict with the government. That is why the CGT abandoned the workers occupying the DPF, abandoning an important site to the CRS.

The two CGT representatives did not have the same view as to whether there was an attempt to mobilize the workers from the surrounding neighbourhoods after the CRS intervention. The Fos-sur-Mer representative said, “Yes, of course, the CGT, before and after the mobilisations, has been trying to mobilise all workers”.

The Martigues CGT representative explained that there was no need to mobilise workers, that it was not necessary to dwell on the CRS intervention. Commenting on the demands by the CGT following the CRS intervention, he said, “Things remain the same, the fight for an alternative reform, jobs and wages; the mobilisations will not stop after the vote on the pension reform in the Senate”.

He bases his argument on the experience of the CPE (First Job Contract for youth) in 2006. Dominique de Villepin, prime minister at the time, had passed the law on the CPE that gave young workers no job security. With the support of Nicolas Sarkozy, the unions got the CPE withdrawn. The unions and the “left” parties, including the LCR (Ligue communiste révolutionnaire/Revolutionary Communist League), saw this as an important victory for workers. And yet, this was a partial victory that rapidly gave way to a defeat: Sarkozy benefited in part from the prestige of this victory, helping him to become president in 2007, and to accelerate the attacks on the working class.

When the trade unionist says that the CGT is fighting for an alternative reform, this signifies that the CGT agrees with the principle of a government attack on pensions, but disagrees on certain details—such as the question of onerous working conditions, used to divide the working class by according privileges to certain layers of workers.

The CGT, favouring a new pension reform, is signalling that it does not want to lead an independent political struggle of workers to defend their social gains. The blocking of factories and demonstrations

will not be effective if the working class remains within the narrow perspective imposed by the unions, which defend the established order.

That is why the WSWs calls for the creation of committees of action and the defence of social gains, which will enable the extension of the industrial struggle, basing it on a political perspective that is socialist and internationalist. Contrary to the strategy proposed by the CGT, workers should create rank-and-file committees in the workplaces and neighbourhoods, and prepare to occupy the factories. As the state’s decision to break the occupation at the oil depots has demonstrated, the intensification of social struggles confronts the working class with a political fight to bring down the Sarkozy government and replace it with a workers government based on a socialist program.



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