

An exchange on the strike-breaking role of the trade unions at a French refinery

28 December 2010

The WSWS received the following letter on “How France’s unions aided police strike-breaking at Grandpuits refinery.” It is followed by a reply by Alex Lantier.

How can you write such stupidities? You should know that the national movement and in particular that of the French refineries was initiated everywhere by the CGT [General Confederation of Labor, France’s largest trade union]. I am a CGT delegate in a refinery (I will remain anonymous, I do not want my name to be used for your ends, which are inspired only by hatred and slander), and I will not tell you that it’s the CGT which called the strike in the refineries.

It is the workers who decide to start or stop a strike movement, not the unions. We accompany them and we send their demands upwards, that is our role. Obviously, the CGT’s goal was to make Sarkozy give in by going as far as possible. The workers, after 18 days of strikes, decided not to go any further, fearing, among other things, losing too much of their wages and making things difficult for their families before the holidays that are so dear to their children. The pride of having struggled for 18 days was very great.

Through the refinery workers (who were far from being the only workers on strike), it is the entire French people who showed the government that the French people are not sheep. Without the CGT, this social movement would not have had the same size.

It’s certainly not your little group, which claims to be socialist but which in fact hides a grouping of fascists, that brought something to this national movement. So instead of writing and publishing your stupidities, I recommend that you go take a walk and meet French people. You are so far removed from the reality that this walk will finally free your minds from the dictatorship you suffer each day inside your sect. To those who would get the message, greetings from a

CGT official!

—CGT

cgt@cgt.fr

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Normally the *World Socialist Web Site* might not answer an anonymous email like the previous letter, which crudely denounces the WSWS’s report of union collusion with police strike-breaking at a French oil refinery. However, this email—sent from an official CGT email address—raises a subject of concern to the entire working class. By slandering the WSWS as a fascist organization, the writer is issuing a barely veiled threat that working class opposition to union sell-outs will be met with violence.

This is more than a hypothetical possibility, as recent events in Europe have shown. The army has been used, with various degrees of explicit support from the unions, to break strikes in both Greece and Spain.

Whoever he is, the writer has absorbed the jargon and attitudes of the CGT bureaucracy, which cynically “sends [workers’] demands upwards” to President Nicolas Sarkozy, along a sociopolitical ladder that it never questions. These demands are then ignored, while the CGT and Sarkozy negotiate more social cuts.

The letter’s contradictory statements—that the strikes were “initiated everywhere” by the CGT, but that “it is the workers who decide to start or stop a strike movement”—are thoroughly dishonest. It is well established that the CGT called strikes due to mass working class opposition to social cuts, and then proceeded to negotiate with Sarkozy and insist there would be only “symbolic” opposition (that is, no real opposition) to police strike-breaking. That is, the CGT tried to disarm the workers, not to “go as far as possible,” as the letter claims.

To Trotskyist criticism of CGT sell-outs, however, the letter responds with slanders of the WSWS as a

“fascist grouping”—that is, a group that will stop at no act of physical violence to break workers’ struggles, and which workers must be prepared to forcibly resist. That is, the letter-writer would consider the unions justified in attacking WSWS representatives, or workers acting on the WSWS’s perspectives. This is a justification for open thuggery against the working class.

There is a long and sordid history of such anti-Trotskyist slanders from the CGT and the French Communist Party (PCF), which has historically controlled the CGT leadership—going back to PCF Chairman Maurice Thorez’s denunciations of “trotsko-fascists” in the 1930s. These were used to justify attacks on and assassinations of Trotskyists in France. At the same time, in the USSR, Stalin was organizing the Moscow Trials that led to the liquidation of the revolutionary leadership of the Bolshevik Party and the launching of the Great Purges that killed hundreds of thousands, if not millions, in the USSR.

Whoever wrote this letter, he would have more truthfully acknowledged its political origins if he had signed it “Joseph Stalin.”

Alex Lantier



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