

How France's unions aided police strike-breaking at Grandpuits refinery

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This October, workers mounted a powerful strike wave against French President Nicolas Sarkozy's unpopular pension cuts, which includes raising the minimum retirement age from 60 to 62 and the full pension age from 65 to 67. France was paralysed by workers' occupations of strategic sectors such as oil refineries and ports, which caused fuel shortages across France. Social opposition to the cuts broadened, with one poll at that time showing 70 percent support for continuing the strikes.

Ultimately, the movement was strangled by the unions, which were hostile to a strike against the social cuts that they had helped prepare together with Sarkozy. They isolated the oil strikes and made no attempt to mobilise broader layers of the working class against police repression of striking workers. Emerging reports on the October oil strike show, however, that union officials also directly helped police break workers' occupations of the oil refineries.

Strike action extended to all French refineries starting from October 12. The industrial action, along with the strike at Marseille's Fos-Lavera oil port, forced all the country's refineries to shut production altogether, causing massive supply disruptions and panic buying at gasoline stations across France. As a result, more than one quarter of France's gas stations ran out of fuel. It was as the Sarkozy government faced this crisis situation that the unions intervened to help police break the strike at the Grandpuits refinery.

Grandpuits is a refinery site of French oil firm Total, which controls 6 of France's 12 refineries. The site, which produces 5.7 millions tons of refined petroleum products per year, is critical for supplying fuel to the capital and the main Paris airports at Orly and Roissy-Charles de Gaulle.

As nationwide industrial action over pension cuts

crippled fuel production and paralyzed French economy, the French government ordered police to clear the occupied refineries and forced striking workers to return to work. Police strike-breakers also attacked the oil depots at Fos in southern France, and at Donges, Le Mans and La Rochelle.

Given the difficulties of supply petrol stations, particularly in the Paris region, the local authorities in Seine-et-Marne had ordered to requisition Grandpuits refinery, forcing workers to end their strike. The requisition order said: "Continuing the strike threatens to lead to serious disturbances of public order (shortages, riots)." The order threatened workers who defied the requisition order with a sentence of six months' imprisonment and a €10,000 fine.

In the early morning of October 22, police were deployed to unblock the refinery. According to an AFP report, "Four military police vans arrived around 3 a.m. and parked at the entry of one of the refineries, where the police indicated the names of the workers being requisitioned."

A General Confederation of Labor (CGT) delegate for Grandpuits contacted by the WSWs explained that Grandpuits workers occupying their workplace were joined by other workers and local residents. They formed a human chain at the entrance to the refinery to stop the requisitioned workers from going in. Scuffles broke out as police moved in to clear the entrance, however, and police attacked the pickets and cleared the site, injuring three workers.

The CGT representative downplayed the seriousness of the attack: "Three people got hit. But they weren't hit on purpose. There was one who fell on the ground and another who was already on the ground." In fact, the CGT delegate's own account made clear that the police charged the strikers on purpose.

He added: “One injured striker received 10 days’ medical leave, and the two strikers who were hospitalised were soon out of the hospital.”

A video taken on the day of police intervention at Grandpuits shows that, in fact, the unions worked closely with police to re-open the site and end the oil blockade. Shortly after the clashes, the trade unionists called for calm and then spoke with police, saying they wanted to secure the site and avoid any incidents. Requisitioned workers were told to restart the operation to supply fuel.

One scene shows a CGT spokesman telling the assembled pickets: “We will proceed, with a representative of management, to the requisition of workers to carry out manoeuvres allowing us to fill, among others, fuel trucks. These workers will work under duress, these workers will work when they want to strike.”

A scene from the same video shows a representative of Total management, guarded by CGT officials, reading out the names of the requisitioned workers. The camera cuts to the requisitioned workers making their way through the picket, as the CGT official asks the strikers to make way.

The video shows unions staging cynical and ineffectual protests. The refinery’s CFDT and CGT officials are seen declaring that basic democratic rights have been trampled underfoot. CGT-Total leader Charles Foulard calls for a minute’s silence for the death of democracy, and, to the sound of the last post, a coffin is solemnly borne off and incinerated. The CGT leads the singing of the *Marseillaise*, the French national anthem.

This policy was pursued by the national CGT leadership as well as local CGT delegates. After police raided Grandpuits, the CGT issued a statement declaring that it would mount only “symbolic actions” against the police strike-breaking the Grandpuits occupation. That is, there would be no attempt to mobilise the working class to defend the workers at Grandpuits.

This allowed the state to proceed against the workers, with complete contempt for the law and basic democratic rights. Workers challenged the requisition order in court, and the court ruled in favor of striking

workers. The next day, local authorities ordered the requisition of the refinery again.

That the unions intended to mount no challenge to police strike-breaking is clear from their behaviour not only at Grandpuits, but also at the refinery at Fos, where Sarkozy had sent CRS riot police to break a workers’ blockade one week before. The Fos oil depot is a strategic site for storing oil products near Marseille, in southern France. (See “How riot police broke the occupation of the Marseille oil depots”)

The isolation of the Fos oil depot strike by the unions encouraged the Sarkozy government to expand its strike-breaking operations and repression to other refineries, such as Grandpuits.

Having helped the state smash strikes and resupply petrol stations, the unions advised the ruling class on how to end the entire oil strike.

Le Journal du Dimanche reported: “The unions have estimated that breaking the blockades by force will help resupply gas stations, but they also warned that a return to normalcy will depend on ending the strike movement at the oil terminals at Fos-Lavéra and Le Havre.”

The unions got nothing for the workers in exchange for selling out their strike, either on the national level—where Sarkozy passed his cuts—or at individual workplaces such as Grandpuits. When the WSWS asked under what condition the unions called on workers to return to work at Grandpuits, the CGT representative bluntly said: “There were no conditions. That is to say, at a certain point any movement must stop.”



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