

French government attacks port workers

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A new strike has hit France's ports. During the struggle against the pension reform last September to October, the government had informally agreed to acknowledge the harsh working conditions of the port workers and accepted that they could retire early, thus putting an end to the port strike that had lasted for several weeks. At the end of December, the government went back on its decision.

This exposes the cynical character of the assurances given by the port unions during the wave of strikes of October-November 2010 against the austerity policies of the Sarkozy government.

At that time the port unions had encouraged the workers to end their struggle. This greatly helped the government end the protest movement, by claiming that they had won an agreement on their harsh conditions. These assurances turned out to be worthless.

After the CGT's aborting of the strikes against the pension reform in the refineries and the ports, the new junior minister for transport, Thierry Mariani, denied the existence of an agreement between the CGT and Jean-Louis Borloo, the minister responsible at the time for the reform of the ports.

The negotiations on the basis of the reform of the ports meant that the 6,000 port and dock workers could retire five years before the legal age of retirement, which was fixed then at 60. In fact, the secretary of state for transport agreed to acknowledge the strenuousness of the port workers' and dockers' jobs as part of the November 9, 2010 pension law. This means that the workers could leave only two years before the legal pensionable age, which is fixed currently at 62.

The CGT had called rolling strikes alternating between the dockers and the GPMM (Great Maritime Port of Marseille) workers from Friday till Monday and rotating strikes of one hour per shift. The CGT called off the strikes on February 10 to facilitate negotiations

with the government on February 17.

In Nantes-Saint-Nazaire, seven ships were blocked at the dock and twelve at sea. In Fos, the goods traffic was 80-90 percent blocked at the weekend, while in Marseille-East container traffic was 100 percent paralysed. In Le Havre, the second most important French port, the strike movement also continued, notably blocking container terminals.

At Marseille-West, after the announcement of the resumption of strikes by the CGT, 30 percent of dockers called in sick. This behaviour is due to their mistrust of the CGT which, during their recent experiences of conflicts, openly showed the complicity between the employers and the CGT.

As its current maneuvers suggest, the government never intended to grant the recognition of harsh conditions for the dockers. What it wanted to achieve, by collaborating with the CGT, was to get the port workers and dockers actively engaged in the struggle against the pension reform back to work, so as then to get the whole working class back to work.

At the end of October, at the height of the struggle against the Sarkozy government's pension reform, the strikes of the oil terminal workers—alternating strikes between the dockers and GPMM workers—combined with strikes and blockages at the refineries, threatened to paralyse the economy.

The government sent in the police to break the strike at the Grandpuits refinery and force the workers back to work. The police also intervened at the Fos oil depot. The unions did not call for the extension of the struggle to defend the workers repressed by the police.

The pensions movement ended some days after the law was passed in parliament and Bernard Thibault's announcement that he intended to organise only "symbolic" actions against the pension reform. Then on October 25, 2010, François Chérèque, national secretary of the CFDT (French Democratic

Confederation of Labour, close to the Socialist Party), announced on France 2 TV that he intended to negotiate with the employers on the question of youth and seniors contracts.

This shows that the promises used by the unions to detach the port workers from the September-October movement were a betrayal. In fact, the port union leaders point out even today that they were hostile establishing class solidarity between the struggles of the port workers and those of the entire working class.

Thus, in an article in *Le Figaro* January 22, CGT bureaucrat Serge Courouris commented: “They’ve been trying to entangle us in the pension issue, though our issue has been completely disconnected from it for two years.” The CGT was not therefore against the port and pension reforms; their claim for the recognition of harsh conditions of work on the ports is clearly seen as being outside the broader struggles of September-October 2010.

This was also bound up with breaking the solidarity of France’s port workers with port workers’ struggles internationally. The other European ports decided to unload the goods of boats initially bound for France, but to block the onward movement of the goods. However, the IDC (International Dockworkers Council, the European ports union) did everything it could to avoid a fight beyond the borders of France.

In its statements, the IDC openly declared it wanted to help the employers get anti-working class reforms: “In the IDC we strongly recommend the French government to recommence negotiations with national CGT ports federation and the employers to reach an agreement between the social partners. Social dialogue is the only way to reach agreements which will be favourable to all parties, particularly in the times of crisis that we are living through today.”

The IDC added that the Spanish “Coordinadora will do everything necessary to promote the dialogue, avoiding the risk of falling into a spiral of conflict which will prevent the long-awaited financial restoration. There are successful examples of social dialogue. The adoption of the Spanish ports reform and the new law in 2009, approved by the government, employers and the labour unions, can serve as a guide. The French port proposals are fair and as such must be accepted by their government.”

On February 18, the CGT and the government came

to an agreement on harsh conditions which differed from the one negotiated in November. The state concedes two years for harsh conditions, the employers will finance the third year, and the agreement on the fourth year must be previously signed in the course of 2011 on the basis of the official 62 year age of retirement. This would bring the age when dockers could leave work to 58 years, which is equivalent to a three-year increase in the age of retirement for port workers.

Dockers and port workers must break out of their isolation, deliberately orchestrated by the unions, and fight for the unity of the working class. The issues faced by dockers and port workers are the same as those of other sections of the working class and workers of all countries.



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