

French riot police sent to port of Marseilles

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On March 10, 2011, French riot police were sent into the port of Marseilles to break the blockade by workers of the SNCM (National Maritime Corsica-Mediterranean Company) who have been on strike since January 30.

The strikers are resisting a reduction of the service between Nice and Corsica, and the closure of the high-speed ship service linking the southern French city and the Mediterranean island (a French region). The workers had been blocking the entrance of the port since March 8.

The raid, during which CRS riot police arrested fifteen of the SNCM workers, according to the *préfet*, “took place peacefully”. *L’Express*, in an article headlined “Marseilles: the port unblocked but not the conflict at the SNCM”, cites the comment of Frederick Alpozzo, CGT representative at the SNCM: “Dozens of CRS invaded the port to bring the message of the state ... with an ample use of the baton and teargas”.

The seamen were arrested and handcuffed by the police. Dock workers in the ports of Marseilles and St. Louis struck until the SNCM workers were released at 5 pm, without being charged.

The SNCM is a maritime passenger company plying the route between mainland France and Corsica. It is 25 percent owned by the state, 9 percent by the workers and 66 percent by the Véolia group.

The chairman of the company’s board of directors, Gérard Couturier, explained the measures that management envisions: “To compensate for a reduced service from Nice, we have increased the service from Marseilles”. According to Couturier, the 2011 programme enables the company to maintain the activity with “a slightly increased service” than in 2010 for its nine ships.

The strikers are convinced that behind this lies a plan to break up the company and impose a redundancy plan, with the possible disengagement of the main

shareholder, Véolia.

The national CGT leadership has “firmly condemned the use of force” and “demands the opening of real negotiations”.

“We are confronting the dismemberment of the company”, said Alpozzo at a press conference. He denounced “the planned sale of the company’s ships and buildings for the benefit of the shareholders, which will cause an unprecedented social cataclysm in the coming weeks”. He said that the state shareholder and operating company should protect jobs and “the general interest”.

Alpozzo stated: “We want the responsible ministers and the Véolia shareholders round the table with the striking trade unionists to have transparency about the reduction of ships ... and to give us social and industrial guarantees for the future of SNCM and its workers”. He warned: “As long as we do not get that the strike will continue”. The SNCM workers plan to continue their strike.

However, the events at the port show clearly that the state is siding with the main shareholder and is not interested in negotiations with the workers on the defence of their jobs and working conditions.

The message from the government is that it will systematically repress all struggles by the working class in defence of its social gains.

The CGT’s perspective is not to mount a serious struggle against the persistent offensive of the government and the shareholder against the workers’ conditions. All the trade union wants is to engage in negotiations with the government and the bosses.

The CGT’s comments criticising the action of the CRS are merely a cynical attempt to delude the workers. Their apparent expressions of opposition have nothing to do with the real policy of the union during the struggles—which is to negotiate an agreement with the state, even if it means total defeat, if that is the

intention of the state.

Similarly, during the pension struggle on October 2010, the government, in difficulty because of the petrol shortage, sent the CRS into the refineries, such as Grandpuits near Paris, and to the petrol depots at Fos, part of the Marseilles port complex. The unions refused to organise the defense of the strikers, insisting that opposition by workers had only to be “symbolic”.



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