Workers strike at French retail giant Carrefour

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19 April 2011

On April 9, workers at French retail giant Carrefour's large hypermarket stores went on a one-day strike against low wages, job cuts and poor working condition.

Workers participated massively in the strike throughout France. Unions claimed that the movement had been unprecedented. It is reported that around 150 of Carrefour's 200 stores, which employ 65,000 employees, were affected by the strike.

There were reports of strikes called for pay increases in other industries, including automakers Renault and GM, and the electronics and defense firm Thales.

The large majority of the workers at Carrefour earn the minimum wage (SMIC), currently at 9 euros ($12.96) per hour. In March Carrefour announced that its profits increased by 11 percent in 2010 (382 million euros).

The strike came amid rising opposition to Executive Director Lars Olofsson's plans for attacks on Carrefour workers, including €2.1 billion in cost savings. They provide for "suppressing shopping-aisle leaders and the organization of work in four teams. Stocking will thus begin at 2 a.m. instead of 4 a.m. as now."

The implementation of the plan announced in mid-2009 is to be completed late 2012. Carrefour has sacked 10,000 employees in the last 5 years.

The strike was called by the unions: FGTA-FO (General Federation of Agriculture, Food, Tobacco, and Annexed Services) which represents most Carrefour workers, the CGT (General Confederation of Labor), the CFDT (French and Democratic Labor Confederation), and the CGC (General Confederation of Managers).

According to the unions, many stores reported 85 to 100 percent of workers as on strike. The FGTA-FO secretary said, "Over 30 sites were completely blocked, with workers preventing access to the supermarkets. Even when they were not totally blocked, the rate of strikes varied between 30 and 85 percent." He added that stores in the north, Brittany, and the center regions of the country were the most affected.

According to AFP correspondents, "Strikers sometimes built barricades from shopping carts to block access to supermarkets or parking lot, only letting by pedestrians to whom they distributed leaflets."

Le Parisien reported that in Ivry-sur-Seine in the Paris suburbs, "roughly 100 workers protested in front of the establishment, warning clients that they would face long lines at checkout counters that were manned by managers."

The large participation of the workers in the one-day strike underscores the growing anger in the working class over deteriorating living standards, brutal social cuts being forced on workers across Europe, and the rising cost of living.

French consumer prices rose 0.9 percent in March from February and were up to 2.2 percent on the year because of rising prices for oil and food, according to the national statistics office, Insee. Over the past 12 months, prices for basic commodities have increased sharply, which include a rise of 0.8 percent in food prices, a 15.3 percent increase in energy, and gasoline prices continue to rise, a 17.4 percent increase. It is reported that gasoline prices could reach €2 per liter.

Sharply rising prices for basic necessities are affecting millions of workers, as wages stagnate. As a result, workers' purchasing power continues to

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deteriorate.

Workers participating in the one-day strike expressed their anger over low wages and poor working conditions. David, an employee with 15 years' work experience stocking products for Carrefour, told *Le Parisien,* "I earn €1100 net for 35 hours of work per week. My friend does not work. Once we have paid €500 in rent and our expenses, nothing is left."

On April 13, Carrefour met with the union to resume wage negotiations. Unions declared that there were satisfied with the measures. After the meeting with the unions, Jean-Luc Masset, human resources director of Carrefour, promised "a raise of 2 percent in wages starting March1, a one-time net bonus of €200, and a 10 percent reduction on purchases in the store, as opposed to 7 percent today."

These measures are, however, a meager concession aiming to temporarily defuse workers' anger. A wage increase of 2 percent—in the face of rising inflation and President Nicolas Sarkozy's ruthless cuts in social spending—will do nothing to lift workers out of a situation where they are always under pressure to make ends meet.

Having acknowledged huge support in the working class to fight back against social cuts and low wages, the unions called off the strike immediately at Carrefour. They are aware of rising mass struggles throughout the world, in particular the mass uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East. They remember last year's oil strike, which had massive popular support, though the unions insisted there should only be "symbolic" resistance to police strike-breaking.

In justifying the acceptance of Carrefour's proposals, CFDT representative Serge Corfa said, "Some stopped the strike after a few hours. It was planned that way, the goal was not to make the enterprise lose money, but to show that there is a deep malaise among the workers."

This exposes the bankrupt perspective of the unions: they do not want to struggle against big business and the political establishment. Incapable of defending even the most basic interests of the working class, they have negotiated deep social cuts with President Nicolas Sarkozy and sold out repeated strikes against them.

Corfa's statement deserves further analysis: what was the purpose of calling a strike if there was no intention of putting financial pressure on the corporation? It allowed management to gauge and defuse social discontent in the work force, as Corfa noted. Especially under conditions where the workers will receive no substantial, long-term benefit from the strike, the role of the union becomes quite clear.

They called the one-day strike to monitor and defuse workers' discontent under condition of rising social and economic crisis, in France and internationally. This strike also coincides with the renewed decline of the government's popularity, and growing mass protests in the Middle East and the United States. And also, they called this strike at the moment France has engaged in war against Libya in order to advance its imperialist interests in North Africa.

For workers, any genuine struggle in defense of jobs, decent wages and social needs requires a political break from the unions and their defenders among pseudo-left parties like the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA), which are the servants of French ruling elite. Against the capitalist onslaught, the working class must adopt an international strategy—building its own independent organizations, fighting with a revolutionary socialist perspective in overthrowing the bourgeoisie and establishing a workers' government.

In the present context, any real struggle would lead to serious political confrontation with the Sarkozy administration—which is committed to an offensive against the workers on behalf of financial markets and big business—and its allies in the union bureaucracy. This is precisely the reason why the unions called off the Carrefour strike.

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