

CGT union defends anti-worker reform of French ports

Anthony Torres
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After three years of negotiations, the CGT (General Confederation of Labor) union signed the new National Collective Agreement (CCNU), clearing the way to the implementation of port reform between May 3 and May 15. With this the CGT carried on the anti-worker policies it has pursued in collaboration with the government of President Nicolas Sarkozy.

The French ports suffered from under-investment over the last 30 years, as investors demanded a greater attack on the workers' social conditions so their investments would be more profitable. The bourgeoisie had already attacked the working conditions of the dockers, whose jobs were privatised in 1993. The reform of the ports that has just been signed constitutes a broader attack against port workers.

It means a partial privatisation of the ports and an attack on port workers' pensions. It means the transfer to the private sector of publicly-owned machines, of the crane operators, and the maintenance workers of the GPMM (Great Maritime Port of Marseille). Since March 9, the CGT Ports Federation has accepted local negotiations.

At the start of the negotiations in 2008, the CGT said it wanted the port workers to be able to retire five years before the official retirement age set at 60 due to strenuous working conditions. Ultimately the government agreed that workers could retire 3 years before the official retirement age, with a fourth year being negotiable locally. However, this is based on the minimum retirement age of 62 fixed by the national pension reform imposed by Sarkozy in 2010. Dockworkers with 18 years seniority will thus be able to retire only at 58 or 59—three or four years later than promised before.

The CGT Ports Federation cynically organised strikes while the reform was being negotiated. However, their

aim was not to defend the port workers' conditions, but to promote this new reform prepared and now publicly defended by the union bureaucrats.

The Ports-and-Docks CGT federation at Fos-sur-Mer near Marseille published on its website *dockercgtfos* the speech given by Stéphane Stamatou, the CGT general secretary of the dockers and maintenance workers union. The aim of his speech was to convince workers to accept the port reform.

The speech is full of contradictions. It recognizes that the result of the reform was the attack on the conditions of the port workers and says that the CGT mobilised all its forces to reject this

“vicious law”. Further, he describes Sarkozy's government as “a sh*t government to act like that and pressurise us with those deadline constraints”.

Nevertheless Stamatou praised the reform as “the fruit of our struggle, it obliged the docking firms, the port management to negotiate a national framework agreement strongly guaranteeing to lessen the most harmful effects of the reform”. In other words, the CGT did not oppose the reform, but decided to help the bosses to make the modifications needed in order to force workers to accept it.

Later in the speech, he claimed that workers had no reason to fear the reform: “So if nothing changes in our heads, and we are still the same, why should we be afraid? Who of? What of?... Fear our own agreements, which we have strengthened in the CCNU, and the recognition of harsh working conditions, which not only speeds up hiring but lets our older workers retire early—all from July 1”. He then praised the ports reform as an “audacious and modern project”.

The CGT's support for the attacks on the port workers' social gains is an integral part of the CGT's betrayal of the strikes against Sarkozy's national

pension reform in September-November 2010.

The government was shaken by strikes by workers at the oil refineries and port pipeline workers, which cut off the supply of petrol throughout the country. At a time when the majority of the population supported a general strike against Sarkozy, the CGT let the government attack the strikers and send the CRS riot police to retake control of the refineries and petrol depots.

In addition to the blocking of the petrol depots, the port workers mounted rolling strikes, alternating between crane operators and maintenance workers on the one hand and dockers on the other. To get the port workers back to work, the government promised to offer them special retirement conditions. The ports and docks CGT union then withdrew the port workers from the national struggle, thus contributing to the break-up of the broader movement against pension reform.

In December the government reneged on its promises, and the CGT again called the port workers out on strike, but this time on their own. Having encouraged a sectional, each-man-for-himself attitude towards jobs and salaries, the CGT then isolated the port workers only to finally impose a socially regressive national agreement.

In his speech, Stamatiou spoke of the unity that had been built to fight port reform. This is just a cynical lie, hiding the unions' manoeuvres to divide the workers according to profession.

This struggle was affected by the CGT's splitting of the Great Maritime Port of Marseille crane operators and maintenance staff: on the one side the CGT section of the western docks (Fos, situated 50 kilometres from Marseille), which will be absorbed into the port and docks CGT section, and that of the eastern docks (Marseille), which projects a more critical position on the reform.

In addition Stamatiou, the Fos CGT general secretary, boasted that his port is going to steal trade from the port of Arles.

In this way the unions are helping to divide the workers and promote more competition between the ports, which will make them more profitable at the expense of the workers.

Pleased that the CGT will have two more full-time positions due to the reform, and that it is absorbing another union, Stamatiou insisted that the workers

should "not be stingy in enjoying" the reform. The CGT wants to get a reform passed to strengthen its positions, while attacking the workers' social gains and conditions by dividing them.

These events underline the fact that the trade unions are actively supporting the government's reforms, and that the struggles they organise while negotiating the austerity plans are cynical deceptions. The CGT has no intention of blocking attacks on workers' social gains. That is why it broke the struggle against pension reforms last year, then orchestrated the isolation of the port workers.

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