

# France: LyondellBasell unions betray Berre refinery strike

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17 October 2011

Eight hundred workers at southern France's petrochemical complex at Berre, which includes the LyondellBasell (LBI) refinery, voted to strike on September 29, two days after the refinery director, Jean Gadbois, announced the closure of the site. The strike ended on October 8. The Lyondell-Basell site at Fos-sur-Mer near Marseille and the Inéos site at Lavera struck work in support of the Berre workers.

The unions' aim in calling for a strike was not the defence of the jobs and the maintenance of activity at the Berre site; rather, it was to somewhat delay the closure of the refinery. The deal's end result will be mass sackings—which was the company's original aim.

At a mass meeting of 600 workers, the joint trade union committee called for a return to work until December. According to an AFP report, Rémy Patron, the managerial staff trade union (CFE-CGC) delegate and member of the joint trade union committee, said: "The management has given us a guarantee that there will be no redundancies before March 30, 2012.... Afterwards, the management will want to cut production and therefore the number of shifts, meaning a part of the workforce will be laid off, but the rest will remain to monitor and keep up the maintenance of the site."

The consequences of the 2008 economic crisis have been the intensification of competition in the oil sector markets, where demand and profit margins have diminished.

The LBI group based in Houston—worth \$30 billion, employing 16,000 workers and the number-three world chemicals firm—bought the refining activities of the Shell Pétrochimie Méditerranée site for €700 million. With the 2008 crisis, LyondellBasell put itself under the protection of US bankruptcy law. When the group came out of receivership in 2010, the company was

restructured. The closure of the site corresponds to Lyondell's aim is to reduce its costs of production and increase profits.

In a press statement announcing the site's closure, Berre General Manager Jean Gadbois said: "In spite of the efforts of workers and management, the refinery continues to face heavy losses and is unable to make itself profitable. We, therefore, have the intention of engaging a consultation procedure on the refinery's closure."

According to the expert mandated by the company trade union negotiating committee, the Berre site will be viable for the next five years; the overall site has produced €51 million in profits, though the refinery itself operates at a loss. The refinery closure entails the closure of the petro-chemical complex.

Keeping the Berre refinery open would require heavy investment; due to a mandatory inspection of the site that is planned for 2013, the project of installing a hydrocracker to allow the production of diesel for the European market was not retained. The group prefers to invest in the Middle East and Asia, where labour is cheaper.

The joint trade union committee has obtained word from the company that from January to December 2012, the site will be cleaned and secured "in order to find alternative solutions". The alternative that the workers are offered is the closure of the site in 2013, except if the site is taken over by possible new investors.

This seems unlikely, given that the strategic choice of industrialists is to invest in low-wage countries. The stated objective of LyondellBasell is to close sites with excess capacity, to produce refined products at the lowest costs.

The unions at LyondellBasell (CGT, CFDT, CFTC

and FO) organised the strike here and at other refineries in the region, claiming to pressure the state and show the viability of the site, alert the state to the fact that the refinery's closure would lead to the closure of the petrochemical complex.

This perspective could only lead to a defeat for the workers. The state and the management at LyondellBasell had decided on the site's closure, understanding fully that it would produce a social catastrophe in the region. The unions have isolated the struggle of Berre workers, who, deprived of any perspective to fight the policy of the state and of management, have been forced to end their strike and accept the principle of layoffs.

At Berre, as during the refinery strikes in October 2010 against the pension cuts of President Sarkozy, the joint trade union committee opposed any attempt to develop a political struggle against the government and mobilise all the working class against closure. The strike never seriously threatened the supply of refined petroleum. There was no attempt to mobilise workers' support in a national or international strike.

The CGT (General Confederation of Labour) and other unions oppose a perspective, which would lead to a political struggle by the workers. In 2010, a similar strike created serious shortages and mass sympathy actions among workers and high school students, nearly toppling the government.

The unions demonstrated their hostility to the refinery strikes in 2010, refusing to defend workers occupying the refineries against the attacks of CRS riot police seeking to break up their strike. The CGT offered no resistance to this strike-breaking, insisting that it would organise only "symbolic actions" in protest.

As long as workers put their fate in the hands of such organisations, it will go from defeat to defeat, politically disarmed by the unions working closely with the state and the capitalists.

The refinery workers are the victims of an international attack aiming to drastically reduce workers' living conditions. Auto workers at Peugeot are due to have their factories closed, and a cut of 23 percent in wages is projected at the Montupet foundry, of the Fonderies du Poitou. These attacks in France are part of the reality of the automobile restructuring in the US, the pillaging of Greece by the banks, and the destruction of jobs and social gains

across Europe.

The defence of jobs and social gains is objectively a revolutionary question, posing in each country the question of which class will rule. That is why the unions and petty bourgeois "left" parties, fully integrated into the state apparatus, can no longer defend workers' social gains and have become violently hostile to workers' interests.

That is why the only way for workers to go forward is to engage in a struggle independent of the unions, and to create rank-and-file action committees and a new party in a political struggle against the state and capitalist system.



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