

French bourgeois “left” manipulates fight against Fralib factory closure

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28 May 2012

For more than a year, the workers at Fralib have participated in a succession of legal procedures led by the CGT (General Confederation of Labour) and CFE/CGC (French Confederation of Supervisory Staff) trade unions against the management of the Unilever multinational group, whose only consequence has been to postpone the closure of the site.

The Fralib factory, a subsidiary of the Unilever group, located in Gémenos (about 30 kilometers from Marseille), is the only factory in France to produce the Lipton tea brand and the Elephant brand of herbal teas.

After the election of the Socialist Party’s François Hollande to the post of French President, the closure of the site is being prepared in order to relocate production to Poland, even though the factory is profitable.

On April 20, the Marseille County Court declared the “third [regulatory social] plan to preserve jobs” [PSE - redundancy plan] proposed by the Fralib management to be meeting “the legal requirements”. Nevertheless, as *Le Monde* and *Mediapart* revealed, a letter containing observations by the civil servants at Direccte (formerly the Ministry of Labour) noted irregularities in the third PSE which could have helped boost the case of the workers at the April 20 Labour Court hearing.

On May 14, the judge for interim ruling at the County Court ordered the expulsion of Fralib workers who were once again occupying the factory from May 11 to protest against the legal decision. The expulsion is due to take effect June 1.

The trade unions reacted by indicating that they would appeal against this “politically biased ruling”. The union bureaucrats continue to tell workers that the defense of jobs in the courts or through state intervention is possible. This is a false perspective, which aims to block the development of a wider political struggle of all the working class across Europe

by pushing workers to rely on the decisions of the courts.

In fact, the court rulings on layoffs are more and more unfavourable to workers—in the case of Fralib but also more broadly. (See: “Court decision gives French employers green light for mass layoffs”)

As regards the delayed date for the expulsion, Olivier Leberquier, the CGT union delegate reckons “that a fifteen-day delay is linked to the election of François Hollande”. The CGT wants workers to believe that the arrival of Hollande to the presidency will leave some hope for the non-closure of the Gémenos site. François Hollande had promised “a round table with the state, the workers and local government bodies to put pressure on Unilever”.

After having supported Hollande for president, the CGT now tries to use the Fralib workers to support the Socialist Party in the parliamentary elections. (See: “The CGT comes out for bourgeois “left” in French presidential elections”)

The trade union bureaucracy’s agenda and that of the “left” like the NPA (New Anti-capitalist Party) is to convince people that it is possible to pressure government, preferably a “left” one, to preserve jobs and social gains. This policy has each time ended in bitter disillusionment for the working class.

The *Le Monde* article titled “At Gémenos, the Fralib workers want to believe in ‘the Hollande effect’” states: “In February, François Chérèque, secretary of the CFDT union (French Democratic Workers Federation), called for government intervention with various companies so that they postpone their plans for layoffs until after the elections”. The court has therefore put off the Fralib closure, thus avoiding unwelcome media coverage of mass layoffs that could have destabilized the traditional political parties during

the presidential campaign, a decision the representatives of the bourgeois elite could not have wished for more.

Now that François Hollande has been elected, the justice system turns on the workers. The unions and left political parties were well aware of this political mechanism before the presidential elections. They channelled the workers' discontent in order to get François Hollande and his program installed—that is, to make French industry competitive at the expense of workers, cynically using the struggle at the Fralib factory.

The conflict between Unilever and the Fralib workers was given media coverage and was taken over by the so-called “far left” parties and the PS, with an eye on the presidential elections. Jean-Luc Mélenchon started his 2012 presidential election campaign with a visit to the Lipton tea workers. Since the PS primary elections to select a presidential candidate, Hollande has visited Gémenos five times as have Philippe Poutou and Olivier Besancenot for the NPA.

The interventions of these political personalities have consisted in calling workers to rally behind the CGT and its nationalist slogan, “The Elephant is French, in Provence it must stay”.

In September, the NPA in the article “Fralib: welcome home”, congratulated itself on the court ruling, which was subsequently overturned, that pronounced legal a project to take over the factory by the workers: “This first victory gives us all the more hope. To continue the struggle and take possession of their means of production, the workers decided to accept the plan for redeployment. Contrary to what the management claims, this is not a defeat but a strategy of the workers for winning.”

This commentary is profoundly dishonest. The NPA knew that the government wanted to postpone the factory closure until after the elections, and that the political demobilization carried out by the CGT would leave the justice system free to order the layoffs after the election. This reflects the hostility of the unions and the NPA to any unity of the working class to defend its gains by a political struggle against the bourgeoisie.

The Hollande government is preparing to impose austerity after the parliamentary elections in June, planning for mass layoffs. The workers, at Fralib and elsewhere, can expect nothing from the justice system

nor from the petit-bourgeois “left” parties, and can only count on a wider political struggle to mobilize all the working class against austerity in France and in Europe.



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