

Breton food processing workers, businesses protest French eco-tax

Pierre Mabut, Alex Lantier
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Last Saturday saw a mass demonstration of over 20,000 people in the city of Quimper, in the region of Brittany in western France, against a new eco-tax on trucks. The tax would further undermine the competitiveness of local industry, which has already suffered mass layoffs in agriculture and food processing, totalling 10,000 in recent months.

Workers in Brittany face an onslaught against jobs and working conditions, in line with European Union (EU) austerity measures devastating the entire continent. The Gad abattoirs at Lampaul-Guimiliau have closed, costing 820 jobs. Similarly, the Doux industrial chicken company, Europe's leading chicken producer, is laying off thousands of workers, and Tilly-Sabco, France's second chicken producer, is laying off 1,000 workers.

Due to go into effect in 2014, the eco-tax—introduced by the previous right-wing government of President Nicolas Sarkozy, and designed to limit pollution by vehicles weighing over 3.5 tons—was suspended a week ago, amid a growing wave of street protests in Brittany. Protest organizers are demanding the outright “suppression” of the tax, however.

Polls found that the tax, which hits small and big transporters indifferently, faces 67 percent opposition in the public. Eco-tax revenues are supposed to go to finance rail and waterways infrastructure.

Workers facing layoffs and wage cuts attended the Quimper protest Saturday, as well as officials of employers' organizations, farmers, and shopkeepers. Many are supporters of the anti-eco-tax “Red Cap” protest movement, named after a 1675 anti-tax revolt by Breton peasants against arbitrary taxation for military expenditure by the French king.

The protestors in Quimper were met with tear gas and water cannon, leaving several people injured. The

Breton protests have led to repeated clashes between riot police and protesters; in a previous demonstration, a boy lost his hand to police violence.

Protesters in Quimper chanted slogans against President François Hollande, including “Hollande, resign,” and, beyond red bonnets, carried the regional Breton flag. The protest was organised by employers' organizations, trucking companies, the local District Federations of Agricultural Businesses (FDSEA), along with shopkeepers, as well as the Workers Force (FO) trade union.

The Socialist Party (PS) government reacted to the protests with anger and fear. On a visit to Moscow, Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault denounced a “spiral of violence” in Brittany.

The Quimper protest was heavily influenced by right-wing Breton nationalism. Carhaix mayor Christian Troadec, a leading figure in the autonomist Movement for Brittany and Progress (MBP), criticized the “social dumping” practiced in Europe. He accused Germany of “undermining the whole of Brittany's economy” by recruiting low-paid agricultural workers largely from Eastern Europe.

The neo-fascist National Front (FN) sent forces to attend the demonstration in Quimper, as did the pseudo-left New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), which was represented at the protest by its 2012 presidential candidate, Philippe Poutou.

The Breton protests represent the first major social protests since the PS took office last year and began implementing its austerity agenda. The fact that protests began under the leadership of Breton business federations and autonomist groups reflects the complicity of pseudo-left forces like the NPA in Hollande's austerity policies.

Having supported Hollande's election last year, the

NPA and the Left Front have mounted no action against PS austerity measures. They have suppressed mounting popular anger over deep job cuts and mass layoffs in industries across France, including the closure of the PSA auto plant at Aulnay, as well as pension cuts and reactionary changes to labour law.

The NPA issued a communiqué praising the “immense” protest in Quimper for “uniting principally workers, the downtrodden, small artisans, and farmers who are angry at layoffs and the social massacre they are suffering every day.”

This cynical formulation is designed to hide the fact that—beyond the workers and small businessmen who “principally” make up the protest—business groups and political forces like the MBP, which enjoys close ties to the PS, still exercise political control over the protests. The NPA seeks to obscure this fact because it is itself a political ally of the PS against the working class.

Workers cannot fight the onslaught of austerity measures like the eco-tax simply within the borders of Brittany, or under the control of political allies of the reactionary Hollande administration. The austerity policies of Hollande and of the EU can only be fought through the independent mobilization of the working class throughout France and internationally, including in Germany and Eastern Europe, in struggle against capitalism.

This mobilization can only be developed through a political struggle against the pseudo-left, Breton nationalist, and neo-fascistic forces that seek to divide the workers and derail class-based opposition to the PS. In this the NPA—like its forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League—plays a major role. It has historically supported petty-bourgeois nationalist and separatist movements including in Brittany, Corsica and the Basque Country, in an attempt to split the working class.

Several of the NPA’s political allies in the bourgeois “left” were, in fact, explicitly hostile to the Quimper protests. The Left Front of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, which is close to both the PS and the NPA, chose not to attend the protests in Quimper. Instead, it held a reactionary counter-demonstration against the Quimper protests in the town of Carhaix, aiming to defend the Hollande administration.

Mélenchon attacked demonstrators in Quimper as “simpletons” and “slaves protesting for the rights of

their masters”—slandering workers struggling against PS austerity measures as tools of Breton bosses.

The Carhaix protest gathered barely 1,000 union bureaucrats from unions including the Stalinist CGT (General Confederation of Labour) and the NPA-affiliated Solidaires union, as well as officials from the Green Party.



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