

Police arrest Air France strikers who confronted bosses over mass layoffs

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On Monday, French police arrested six Air France (AF) workers, accusing them of attacking and tearing off the shirts of two Air France managers on October 5, when angry workers stormed the works council (CCE) meeting. At the CCE meeting, AF managers and trade unions were preparing new cost-cutting measures at Air France, involving 2,900 layoffs and pay cuts.

Five workers were arrested early Monday morning at their homes in the Paris area and are now in police custody. The sixth worker was arrested later and taken into custody. Police claimed that they were arrested based on witness testimony and video of the October 5 incident.

The strikers are mainly warehouse workers in the Air France Cargo division and are reportedly members of General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union.

Ten complaints were filed against the workers after the incident. AF management reportedly sent the first notification of sanctions to them, accusing them of “obstructing a works council meeting” and “causing damage.” The workers face an unusually severe sentence of up to five years in jail if prosecutors recommend the maximum penalty for assaulting the AF executives. AF is also threatening to fire them.

The arrest of the strikers is a deliberate act of political intimidation aimed at the working class as whole, as anger rises in France against big business and the Socialist Party (PS) government, which are imposing massive cuts to jobs and social spending.

Workers at factories and workplaces across France last week were discussing the confrontation and expressing broad sympathy with the workers and anger at the AF managers who are callously slashing thousands of jobs.

A poll by Ifop for *Sud Ouest* newspaper found that 54 percent of French people were sympathetic to the AF

workers’ anger.

By arresting the AF workers, the bosses, the PS and its political and trade union allies are making clear that they will brook no opposition from the working class and are seeking to block the emergence of solidarity protests. They see the protest as an intolerable attack on their right to negotiate and impose mass sackings, which is all the more unforgivable in that it has broad popular support.

The PS has threatened AF strikers with heavy sanctions. Prime Minister Manuel Valls said he was “scandalised,” while Transport Minister Alain Vidalies declared that the strikers’ actions “must be punished.”

The real political criminals are not workers who broke up the CCE meeting, but the PS government, big business and the unions, which are overseeing reactionary austerity measures and the destruction of untold thousands of jobs.

Tensions between workers on the one hand and the AF management and trade unions apparatus on the other have become explosive. The unions have helped AF slash almost 15,000 jobs of the total AF workforce of 63,000 in 2012, while selling out last year’s powerful pilots strike—which they shut down just as the company was running out of cash and was on the verge of having to accede to pilots’ demands.

Now, AF and the unions are preparing a further 5,000 job cuts beyond the current cuts, according to a “Plan C” document leaked to *Le Canard Enchaîné* last week. According to *Le Parisien*, AF management is ready to consider another form of restructuring along the lines of one agreed with pilots at its Dutch arm, KLM.

The defence of the six arrested AF strikers, like the defence of jobs more broadly at Air France and across other industries, falls to the working class.

The defence of jobs, social and democratic rights is

bound up with the broad mobilisation of the working class in a political struggle against the PS, the trade unions, and above all against the European capitalist class. It can only be carried out independently of and in opposition to the various political allies and satellites of the PS.

The criticisms of the arrest of the strikers by allies of the PS such as the Left Party (PG) and the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF), as well as the CGT union, reek of bad faith.

“They could have just summoned them to show up in court, they would not have fled. They are not thugs. The danger is that this will be the spark that sets off an explosion,” complained a CGT delegate at Charles de Gaulle airport, André Villanueva.

PCF leader Pierre Laurent said that the AF workers were “treated like criminals, arrested at their homes in front of their families in the early hours of the morning.”

Left Party (PG) leader Jean Luc Mélenchon told BFM TV, “It is a crying shame. These are not thugs, they are just people who came to the defence of their jobs.... I am willing to go to prison with these workers, or even to take their place in prison.”

In fact, no one would expect Mélenchon, the former senator and PS minister, to join striking workers in jail, and no one should expect the PCF, the PG, or the CGT to carry out any action in support of the strikers against the PS.

The class character of these organisations, which for decades have worked in the periphery of the PS, was demonstrated graphically during the October 5 confrontation at the CCE, when CGT negotiators unsuccessfully tried to defend AF management from angry strikers. The workers rapidly thrust them aside, however.

Their pose of opposition to the arrest of the workers is motivated only by their deep fear over rising social anger in the working class, and that a social explosion of workers’ struggles against the PS government could rapidly escape their control.



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