Oil workers mobilise against French labour law

Kumaran Ira
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Hundreds of gas stations in France were hit by fuel shortages over the weekend as truckers and oil workers blocked fuel depots and shut down refineries to protest the Socialist Party's (PS) unpopular and regressive labour law.

Oil workers at Total voted on Friday to shut down three refineries including Donges near Nantes, Feyzin near Lyon, and Gonfreville-Orcher in Normandy. Workers began to shut down oil production at Gonfreville-Orcher and Feyzin. Workers also blocked deliveries from Total's Grandpuits refinery to the Paris region, as well as oil depots in northern and western France, causing petrol shortages that could spread throughout the country if the strike continues.

French oil industry group UFIP (*Union Française des Industries Petrolières*) reported that 317 of Total's 2,200 petrol stations in France had run out of all or some fuels on Saturday. The north and west of France are the hardest hit: 54 percent of petrol stations in Brittany, 46 percent in Normandy, 43 percent in Pays de la Loire and 34 percent in Nord-Pas-de-Calais and Picardy face shortages.

Several departments in the north and the west have begun partially rationing fuel supplies, banning fuel sales in transportable containers. *La Voix du Nord* reported that stations supplying Lille were poised to run out of petrol over the weekend.

The PS government reacted to the strike with blustering threats and desperate attempts to crush the strike before it spreads to broader layers of workers. Visiting Israel yesterday, Prime Minister Manuel Valls insisted the labour law would be maintained and claimed there were no oil shortages in France, while bluntly warning that the PS would take all necessary measures to end the oil strikes, including deploying police to smash strikes.

“We are fully in control of the situation,” Valls blustered. “I think some refineries or fuel depots that were blockaded have been cleared or will be in the coming hours or days. Everyone can see the French government's determination to prevent shortages. Anyway, we have reserves to deal with shortages.”

In fact, despite Valls' boasting, the PS is in a desperate crisis. The widespread opposition to the labour law has escalated after President François Hollande’s government rammed the law through the National Assembly without a vote. The law—which allows unions and bosses to sign contracts violating the Labour Code, lengthens the work week, cuts pay, facilitates mass sackings and eliminates job security for new hires—is widely seen as an illegitimate attack on workers' social rights won through decades of struggle.

Faced with overwhelming popular opposition, the PS is relying on the treachery of the union bureaucracy, the Left Front and the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA). These long-time allies of the PS, who called for a PS vote in 2012, are desperate to block a political struggle of the working class against the PS government. Under far more explosive conditions, they are reprising their role in the 2010 oil strike against pension cuts: isolating strikers, allowing the police to smash blockades and try to restart production and prevent a fuel shortage from forcing the government to retreat.

Yesterday morning, the PS government ordered CRS riot police to smash blockades at two oil depots, the Rubis terminal and at Saint-Pol-sur-Mer in Dunkirk, blocked by members of the Stalinist General Confederation of Labour (CGT) union. Police also intervened to disperse blockades of oil depots in Brittany, including at Vern-sur-Seiche near Rennes, and in Lorient.

When CRS intervened to disperse blockades in

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Dunkirk, the CGT did not seek to mobilise broader sections of workers to defend the strikers, but lifted the blockades without challenge. Christelle Veignie, secretary of the local union, stated: “Everything happened peacefully, the CRS asked us to leave nicely. We didn't resist.”

While the main weapon the oil workers have is their ability to shut down oil production and cause fuel shortages when they go on strike, CGT-Oil federation leader Emmanuel Lepine stressed, “Our goal is not to create fuel shortages.”

The struggle against the PS' agenda of austerity and war must be organised independently of the unions and their political allies, through a ruthless political break with them. As long as workers' struggles remains under their control, these organisations will seek to divide, sabotage and sell out the successive struggles of the working class as they erupt.

Now, the trade unions have signaled their readiness to isolate and wind down strike action. On Friday, the FO (Force Ouvrière) union called truck drivers to suspend road blockades after the PS claimed it would maintain their overtime pay despite the provisions of new labor law.

Both the FO and CGT hailed the government decision. In a common communiqué, they wrote, “The government is making concessions on overtime. This is very good news for a profession that is suffering.”

In fact, the workers will win nothing except through a conscious struggle to mobilise the working class in a political struggle against austerity across Europe on a socialist and internationalist platform.

Austerity cannot be fought by a struggle conducted under the national straitjacket imposed by the unions and pseudo-left parties like the Left Front and the NPA. Despite their toothless criticisms of the PS, these forces do not oppose austerity. Their ally in Greece, Syriza, is in power, imposing austerity measures even more draconian than its right-wing conservative and social democratic predecessors, while attacking protesting workers and tear gassing immigrants.

While these forces seek to divide the workers along national lines, the draconian austerity policies being imposed in one country after another are planned and imposed jointly by governments across Europe. The French labour law, modelled on the Hartz IV law in Germany, aims to boost French competitiveness by imposing the type of deep attacks on the workers imposed in Germany a decade ago. When workers and youth began protesting the French labour law in March, social democratic politicians from across Europe met in Paris to support Hollande.

These included German Social Democratic Party (SPD) leader Sigmar Gabriel, Italian Prime Minister and Democratic Party (PD) Chairman Matteo Renzi and EU Commission Vice President Federica Mogherini.

To the extent that these forces and their pseudo-left allies are allowed to pass themselves off as “left,” this only strengthens the hand of far-right populist forces like the National Front (FN) of Marine Le Pen, running on a nationalist, anti-immigrant and anti-EU platform.

The PS government itself tacitly supported a protest against “anti-cop hatred” organised by the Alliance police union with FN support last week, which was attended by Eric Cocquerel of the Left Front.

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