

French chemical industry unions back contract violating minimum wage laws

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On Friday, it emerged that the French Democratic Labor Federation (CFDT) union had approved a base contract for chemical industries letting employers pay workers less than the minimum wage. This is another application of the Socialist Party's (PS) labor law and the labor decrees of former Economy Minister and current French President Emmanuel Macron, backed by the European Union. It makes clear that their policy is to trample on basic social rights won by the working class over generations of struggle in the 20th century.

The Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT), the French Managers Confederation (CFE) and Workers Force (FO) issued a statement Friday reporting that the CFDT had signed an industry-wide contract on December 21 for a 1.1 percent wage increase paid in two increments. It would set the lowest hourly salary at 9.82€ on January 1 and then 9.86€ on April 1. Both are less than the 2018 minimum wage (SMIC) of 9.88€, set by a 1.24 percent increase approved on December 15, before the CFDT signed the chemical contract.

Using the PS labor law and the Macron decrees, the state, the oil bosses and the CFDT are concocting a pseudo-legal framework to ram through drastic cuts to workers' wages and conditions. Since 2009, the cumulative impact of EU wage and pension cuts in Greece has been to slash incomes by 40 percent. Now, similar attacks are being prepared against workers in Europe's largest economies.

According to the CGT-CFE-FO statement, the CFDT contract will “integrate into the calculation of the minimum wage bonuses paid for seniority and working conditions (work at night, on Sundays and holidays, etc).” Up to now, such bonuses, representing up to 35 percent of total pay, were paid on top of a base salary at least equal to the SMIC minimum wage. But with the

new contract, bosses can count those bonuses as part of the sub-SMIC wage agreed to by the CFDT, paving the way for wage cuts of 35 percent or more.

This announcement came only days after reports that automaker PSA Peugeot-Citroën plans to use a provision of Macron's labor decrees to impose union-approved mass job cuts at its French plants, while it slashes thousands of jobs at its Opel-Vauxhall subsidiaries in Germany and Britain. The goal is to move PSA onto a largely temp workforce paid at the minimum wage or less.

These measures are a warning to the working class across Europe and internationally. The only way to defend wages and jobs is to reject the pseudo-legal framework erected by the EU and the ruling class, and various bought-and-paid-for union bureaucracies. As anger rises in France against the “president of the rich,” workers face the task of organizing independently of the trade unions for a political struggle against the illegitimate measures imposed by companies and national states.

The experience of the French labor law shows that such struggles will bring the working class into an irreconcilable conflict with the state, with revolutionary implications. The PS imposed the labor law in 2016, in the face of over 70 percent popular opposition, by using the state of emergency to mount vicious police repression of mass protests against the law. Backed by petty-bourgeois parties like the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) and Unsubmissive France (LFI), the CGT capitulated in the face of PS threats to ban its protests and called off further action against the law.

Then Macron—elected by default in a run-off pitting him against neo-fascist candidate Marine Le Pen, and whose parliamentary majority emerged from elections in which less than half of French voters

participated—imposed decrees preparing a historic assault on the working class. Now, having handed over trillions of euros to the banks and the financial aristocracy since the 2008 crash, French and European authorities aim to pauperize broad sections of the working class.

Such policies have not a shred of democratic legitimacy. Since the September German elections produced a hung parliament, European officials have been promising that a Paris-Berlin axis will oversee a new dawn for Europe. Martin Schulz, the defeated candidate of the Social Democratic Party (SPD)—which worked with the PS, the Italian Democratic Party and others to formulate the French labor law—said last month that he was fighting for a “European framework for a minimum wage.”

In fact, the CFDT chemical industry contract shows how the PS and Macron, together with social democratic parties across Europe, conspired behind the backs of the people to eliminate the minimum wage with the stroke of a pen.

The French chemical contract uses two key provisions of the PS labor law and Macron decrees: first, industries and firms can obtain exceptions to the national Labor Code; second, employers can impose a contract if they can obtain the agreement of unions representing 30 percent of the workers. So, with just over 33 percent of the chemical industry workforce, the CFDT approved a contract granting an exception to Article 141 of the Labor Code. That is the article that mandates the SMIC minimum wage in France.

Similar end runs around minimum wage laws are doubtless being prepared by firms and industries across France and beyond.

Workers can place no confidence in the CGT, FO or other union bureaucracies critical of the CFDT contract to organize opposition to the chemical industry contract. The PS labor law and Macron decrees provide a juridical expression to their common evolution into organs of the state, financed by the employers, which have lost their working class base and instead serve to plan and provide pseudo-legal sanctions for attacks on their own members.

Their criticisms of the CFDT are factional maneuvers primarily designed to shield them from rising social anger in the working class, while they pursue a nationalist policy of trying to boost French

competitiveness on the world market at workers' expense.

All of them are hostile to mobilizing the working class politically against the historically regressive policies of Macron and the EU. As it joins FO in criticizing the CFDT chemical contract, the CGT is provocatively denouncing a rail strike against job cuts called by FO in southern France as a “populist” gimmick that is “counterproductive because it aims to foment hatred against the rail workers.” As for FO, much of its leadership, including FO chief Jean-Claude Mailly, openly endorsed Macron's decrees last autumn.

The only way forward is the construction of independent workers' organizations and committees in workplaces and working class neighborhoods to discuss and mobilize opposition to the various attacks emerging from Macron's decrees and approved by the unions. A key element of their work would be to coordinate their struggles internationally with those of workers facing similar job and wage cuts across Europe.

This raises the the urgent necessity of building a new leadership in the working class: sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in every country, fighting austerity and dictatorship. The ICFI will fight to promote the growth of independent workers' organizations and link them to an international socialist movement to take state power and replace the bankrupt EU with the United Socialist States of Europe.



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