

French refinery strikes defy Macron's policy of inflation and war

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Fuel shortages are emerging across France after strikes in Total and Exxon refineries began on September 27. This sets the stage for a confrontation between refinery workers, on the one hand, and President Emmanuel Macron's government backed by the NATO alliance.

Refinery workers are demanding a 10 percent raise, pointing to inflation and the tens of billions of euros in super-profits realized by their employers. Total refineries at Gonfreville-l'Orcher, La Mède, Feyzin, Donges and Grandpuits are affected, as are Exxon refineries at Notre Dame-de-Gravenchon and Fos. While strike actions at Donges and Grandpuits halted this weekend, it has continued in the other refineries.

Over 70 percent of refinery workers are participating in the strike, according to trade union figures. Striking workers at the Feyzin refinery emphasized the broad impact of the strike in their comments to the press: "There is no exit or entry of products in our entire refinery. This means 200 to 250 trucks per day, without counting barges and train cars, that are no longer entering or leaving the refinery."

Gas stations have started to run dry in the Marseille area, as well as around Lille and Dunkirk in the north of France, and now in the Lyon area as well. On Wednesday, assemblies of strikers voted to continue the action at Gonfreville-l'Orcher, France's largest refinery, as well as at Notre-Dame-de-Gravenchon.

In Fos, a shop steward told the WSWs that the unions were impelled to strike by anger at inflation among the workers: "It's sad, our company earns €409 million in just one semester, but it is incapable of defending the purchasing power of its employees. That is why there was such anger among the workers that we had to go out on strike. ... Everywhere in France, whether one works in refineries or small businesses, transnational

corporations or the public sector, everyone is up against it. So it's critical for everyone ... to get back purchasing power as prices skyrocket."

Citing workers' anger at Macron's discussion of new pension cuts amid the NATO war on Russia in Ukraine, the steward added: "Inflation had already started in 2021, but then the war in Ukraine was a catalyst for an out-of-control eruption of inflation and especially of energy prices. Just like the COVID crisis, the Ukraine crisis is also a crisis of capitalism."

The Total and Exxon workers have taken up a struggle against the inflationary policy of the financial aristocracy to attack the workers not simply in one or other workplace or industry, but as an entire class not only in France but internationally. The banks and capitalist states of the European Union (EU) are all trying to make workers bear the full brunt of the crisis by slashing their purchasing power.

The strike is bringing the refinery workers into direct conflict not only with Macron, but with the financial markets and the NATO alliance that is using Europe as a base for war with Russia. To wage such a struggle, control of the strike has to be taken out of the hands of the national union bureaucracies that negotiate with Macron and supporting his war policy.

The wage struggle at Total reveals that the bureaucracies' have already completely failed to defend the most basic interests of the workers. The banks reacted to the NATO war with Russia by speculating on energy, massively driving up prices and boosting oil companies' profits. Raiding the wallets of workers across Europe and the world as they paid their utilities or filled their gas tanks, the five largest companies of the industry (Exxon, Chevron, Shell, BP and Total) made €60 billion in profits in just the second semester of 2022.

This summer, Total CEO Patrick Pouyanné announced plans to pay out a staggering \$15 billion in profits to Total shareholders in 2022. As the strike began, Pouyanné announced that a further \$2.62 billion would be paid back in dividends to the shareholders.

Yet Total has only granted a 3.5 percent raise for its employees in France, though inflation is already around 7 percent in France, and over 10 percent in Europe as a whole. That amounts to a 3.5 percent cut in real wages.

As if to display his contempt for Total workers, Pouyanné also granted himself a whopping 52 percent raise, bringing his yearly salary to €5.9 million. This is 167 times the median yearly salary of a Total worker in France.

The way forward in this struggle is for workers to rebel against the union bureaucracies, smash their stranglehold over workers' struggles, and appeal for a far broader mobilization of the working class against inflation. The struggle is not only against Pouyanné, but against Macron and, ultimately, the entire NATO alliance that is putting Europe on a war footing. Only a broader mobilization will suffice once gas stations run dry and the Macron government moves to force workers back to work.

It is necessary to draw the lessons of the powerful 2010 refinery workers strike against then-French President Nicolas Sarkozy's pension cuts. Facing a complete breakdown of gas supplies that would have shut down the economy, the Sarkozy government devised a multi-pronged strategy to break the strike. It imported refined petroleum, cut deals with various union bureaucrats, issued a requisition order to refinery workers to force them to work, and sent riot police to beat workers who defied the order and physically compel them to return to work.

Isolated by the other union federations, the refinery workers were compelled to accept defeat, even though Sarkozy's pension cuts were overwhelmingly unpopular.

The warning must be made: the ongoing great-power war in Europe and the escalating economic collapse will make Macron even more aggressive in attacking the workers. French union federations have supported the NATO war against Russia, and they will prove even more craven in isolating and betraying strikes that threaten NATO's war agenda in Europe.

Breaking the grip of national union federations over

the class struggle, in France and beyond, requires building a powerful movement from below, based on rank-and-file committees.

The struggle of Total and Exxon workers in France is part of an international wave of struggles against inflation and war. Transit and port strikes are shaking Britain and South Africa. Teachers strikes are unfolding in Lebanon, Germany, Greece, Norway, Kosova, Hungary and Serbia. In the United States, the cockpit of world imperialism, rail workers' anger is mounting at contracts adopted by the White House and the union bureaucracy behind their backs—creating conditions for a powerful US rail strike.

In France itself, the recent wildcat strike at Stellantis-Hordain and its subcontractors across northern France testifies to the explosive mood among workers.

For strikers in France, the time is ripe to form their own rank-and-file committees, independent of the national union bureaucracies, and build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. Only such bodies can unify the opposition to inflation and war among workers worldwide, coordinate actions and counter attacks on workers' rights and overthrow the national union bureaucracies' sabotage of a political mobilization of the working class.

The campaign of US autoworker Will Lehman for United Auto Workers (UAW) union president, calling to disband the bureaucracy and return power to the rank and file, shows the powerful support such initiatives are winning among workers internationally. They can create conditions for the French refinery strike to initiate a counteroffensive of the European working class against inflation, austerity and war.



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