

Striking French refinery workers speak out against inflation

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A team of WSWs reporters visited workers at the Grandpuits refinery who had just gone on strike last week amid the nationwide French refinery strike, demanding a 10 percent raise. Workers stressed their anger at inflation and their desire to build a broader rally of workers' struggles in the face of the war and economic crisis.

Florian, a Total employee, said, "Like all workers in France, we feel the impact of inflation. The cost of filling a shopping trolley, filling a gas tank, all prices are going up, and we feel it at the end of the month. We are more careful about how we consume, how we travel less. We are really careful to cut spending on everything; that's the case for everyone right now."

Franck, an employee of a Total subcontractor working at the Grandpuits site, added, "Life is hard. The price of diesel, the price of fuel oil, everything is going up. For the moment, we don't feel an impact on our work, but we can already see the impact on diesel and fuel oil costs. At the store we are careful, we buy a lot less stuff, only the necessities, what we need to make it to the end of the month."

Alexis, also a Total employee, stressed that the crisis is revealing the fall of workers' purchasing power that has taken place over years and even decades. He said, "Inflation is at 7 percent, we would like to get a raise. The salaries, they don't keep up. ... Every year we get a little raise, but it bears no relation to what inflation really is."

The Grandpuits employees questioned the glaring inequality between the huge profits monopolized by management and shareholders and the intense economic pressure on the workers.

"We work at Total, which is making huge profits right now," said Florian, who added, "It's something that's beyond our understanding, when you see that last

year for COVID I think they paid 8 billion in dividends to shareholders, and we had to fight to get a small percentage of an annual raise. It's hard for us to understand, because we feel like all the profits are going to the shareholders, and we, the employees, are treated like the fifth wheel."

The workers rejected official attempts to blame inflation on Russian military operations in Ukraine, which have led to an extremely dangerous, all-out war between US-NATO and Russia. Alexis said, "Ukraine is a convenient excuse for inflation. We see prices rise for products in supermarkets that are made in France, so I don't see the connection with the war in Ukraine. It's the government that's doing this."

The workers also pointed to the role of economic and social disruption due to the official handling of the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed 2 million people in Europe.

Florian said, "My humble opinion is that it was a disaster. There were no masks, no protective equipment for the health care workers. We saw that the hospitals were saturated very quickly. This proves that everything has been badly managed for years. What still sticks in my throat is the story they told us that the 'masks are useless.' But you don't need to be a doctor to know that a mask always helps when you're sick; so there's no point in telling us on TV that masks are useless. I thought that was ridiculous."

While acknowledging that the trade union stewards at the Grandpuits site are very active, the workers emphasized the difficulties posed by the immobility of the national union bureaucracies. While the French unions have huge budgets of about €4 billion annually, these sums are swallowed up by the bureaucracy and do not in any way go to helping finance strikes. While top union officials negotiate with Macron, the "president of

the rich”, they stifle workers’ anger.

“If people want to go out and protest, they lose wages, so it’s complicated,” Alexis said, while Florian said of the current strike: “Everyone is fighting a bit in their own corner. ... It’s true that when there’s a movement, it’s at the level either of an individual workplace or corporation. The big protests where truckers and farmers joined in with us are no longer happening.”

Franck explained why it is difficult for him to go on strike. “Of course, we all want to get a raise, but unfortunately in life we can’t all go on strike all the time. There are some who can afford it and some who can’t. With the loans I have had to take out, if I don’t work for three or four days, that’s it, I’m sunk financially.”

He emphasized the distrust of the union bureaucracies which is shared by broad layers of workers in France and internationally. “Now the unions, they are not the unions of earlier times. Now the bosses and the unions see each other, and we don’t know what they say to each other. And then they say we should go back to work, and we go back. ... That’s how it is, it’s no longer the unions of the time of our great-grandparents who fought to defend the workers; they are looking out for Number One. At the restaurant they get a little envelope from the bosses. That’s how it is.”

Florian described the communication and collaboration between management and union officials during strike struggles as follows: “Management arranges to give so-and-so a crumb, so that they drop the movement. When you do that with several of them, after a while the movement will disintegrate, and then there’s always one who’s left all alone and will have to stop the strike. ... It’s more the employer who has power over us today than we who have power over the employer.”

WSWS reporters replied that workers could break the diktat of the national union bureaucracies over the class struggle by building rank-and-file committees to unify workers across national borders against the policies of capitalist states and multinational corporations. The Total workers reacted with interest and enthusiasm.

Florian said, “We should change the whole system. As you say, Total is international. Between a country in Africa and a European country or a country in Asia, we won’t have the same demands, we won’t have the

same needs. The whole system would have to be changed to unify everyone. That’s what they should do. ... That would be the best, a big general strike.”

Alexis said, “One day it’s going to have to come to that. If we keep waiting for the government to start helping the workers, we will never get there. With everything that’s going on right now, the pension cuts, it’s up to us to move.”



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