

French government threatens to break nationwide refinery strike

Alex Lantier

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Yesterday, as gas stations increasingly ran dry across France, Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne announced in the National Assembly that her government will requisition strikers in Exxon refineries. The state is preparing to send riot police to break the strike, attack strikers on the picket lines, and physically force them to return to work.

A few hours before, Exxon workers at the Port-Jérôme-Gravenchon and Fos-sur-Mer refineries had voted to continue the strike. Yesterday, the last French refinery not on strike, the Total refinery at Donges, joined the movement. Workers at all of France's refineries are thus now on strike, demanding wage increases to counteract inflation, even as Exxon and Total both realize tens of billions of euros in profits due to soaring energy prices.

The walkouts in France come amid an international eruption of the class struggle, accelerated by the rapid rise of inflation. Port and transport workers are in struggle in Britain and South Africa, air traffic controllers across much of Africa, and teachers from Germany and Norway to Serbia, Kosovo and Greece. In the United States, rising anger among workers, notably in auto and the railways, holds open the possibility of a powerful nationwide US rail strike.

Borne's threat to crush the refinery strike is a warning to workers in France, but also internationally, that a massive escalation of the class struggle is underway. As the ruling elites squander trillions of euros on bank bailouts and on military spending amid a NATO-Russia war in Ukraine that threatens to escalate to nuclear war, capitalist governments across the world are also declaring war on the working class. Workers cannot fight back against inflation and war without an international strategy and a break with bankrupt national union bureaucracies.

To justify her requisition order, Borne hailed a contract negotiated between Exxon and the French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT). Pointing to the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT), she warned that

“some organizations want to continue the strike. We cannot accept it.”

Borne claimed the CFDT's approval of a contract meant the strike should end: “Social dialog is to advance once a majority is reached. These are not sweetheart contracts. Management is making real concessions. So I have ordered police prefects to prepare, as the law allows, a procedure to requisition personnel that is indispensable to the functioning of [Exxon] refineries.”

She also threatened workers in France's other refineries, run by Total: “I hope the unions will grab hold of this outstretched hand. ... If not, the government will act here as well to unblock the situation.” She then cited the infamous slogan of Maurice Thorez, the leader of the Stalinist French Communist Party, to justify his rejection of a struggle for workers' power during the 1936 French general strike: “One must know how to end a strike as soon as satisfaction is obtained.”

This is a cynical lie, as workers have not even obtained satisfaction of their wage demands. Inflation stands at 7 percent for 2022 and is projected at 10 to 15 percent in 2023 in France, yet the contract only proposes a 4.2 percent raise this year and 6.5 percent raise in 2023. Thus the CFDT's contract would impose far-reaching cuts to real wages for refinery workers, a strategy that the banks are in fact pursuing against workers in all industries across Europe.

This shows that the CFDT bureaucracy operates not as a union, but a reactionary scabbing organization complicit in the banks' impoverishing of its members. However, bitter experience of the class struggle also shows that supposedly “class struggle” union bureaucracies like the CGT offer no alternative for workers: they only sit on workers' militancy and work to block a mobilization of the workers against the danger of repression.

The CGT bureaucracy cynically seeks to echo rising anger among the rank-and-file. It has issued a statement

that declares: “The pseudo-unions have betrayed the strike in exchange for a few bonuses, but the CGT’s struggle to raise wages is continuing.” The CGT confederations in France’s two largest ports, Marseille and Le Havre, even declared their solidarity with the refinery strike and promised to be “in solidarity and active” if police repression began.

However, the role of the CGT bureaucracy is above all to demobilize and lull workers to sleep, while Borne and French President Emmanuel Macron desperately plot repression.

At Total’s La Mède refinery, CGT delegate Fabien Cros claimed he did not understand what Borne’s threat to requisition strikers and unblock the refineries meant. Cros said, “Unblock refineries? But we are not blockading the refineries, we are striking. Well, if they want to come in and make the machinery work themselves ... I do not understand the legal contours of this demand, which seems to be more addressed to Exxon for the time being than to ourselves.”

To understand Borne’s threat, one must recall the 2010 requisition of French refineries as they struck against President Nicolas Sarkozy’s pension cuts. As gas stations ran dry, Sarkozy broke the strike by combining deliveries of gas refined outside France, financial pressures on strikers to whom the unions paid no strike pay, divisions between union confederations, and finally direct police repression. Sarkozy requisitioned the refinery strikers, sending police to assault the picket lines, violating the constitutionally-protected right to strike and forcing workers back to work.

Today, the situation is even more explosive than it was in 2010. The European and world economy is staggering under the impact of inflation driven by vast bank bailouts to save the wealth of the possessing classes, and the disorganization of world industry by the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine. NATO and Moscow are both threatening to use nuclear weapons, which US President Biden has admitted could lead to “nuclear Armageddon.”

The Macron administration, knowing itself to be widely despised amid a mortal crisis of capitalism, is prepared to adopt even more reckless measures than in 2010, relying as always on the bankruptcy of the union bureaucracies. In 2010, the CGT refused to mount anything more than “playful” protests to symbolically oppose the police assault on the refineries. If today CGT bureaucrats speak of port-refinery solidarity, they are doing nothing to organize it, leaving the initiative in the hands of Macron and the cops.

Alexis, a Grandpuits refinery worker, ~~World~~ *Socialist Web Site* that the refinery had struck yesterday, with no fuel leaving the site. He also confirmed that last night, the union officials who organized this strike were silent on the danger of requisition. “For the time being, we have had no information on that,” he said.

The WSWS spoke to David, a Marseille port worker, who said that the port union bureaucracies had not made any concrete preparations for a refinery requisition, either. The port workers speak of the refinery strike, David said, “They say they are right to strike.” However, David added that the union bureaucrats are not taking any action to mobilize this instinctive support in defense of strikers facing requisition in the refineries.

“No one has told us anything. We receive a message if the unions hold a general assembly or a vote, and we have received nothing yet. There have been no assemblies,” he said, adding, “If there were any such discussions, it was probably at the level of the departmental union federation, maybe full time union officials met with full-time union officials at Exxon.”

The powerful, emerging movement of the working class can reverse the collapse of living standards and stop capitalism’s drive to nuclear war. However, this requires building committees of the rank-and-file, independent of the union bureaucracies, to break their deadening influence and prepare a fightback. The building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and the struggle against inflation and imperialist war provide the political axis along which the struggle to defend the refinery strike from Macron can be waged.



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