

Strikes grow as Macron postpones threat to crush French refinery strike

Our reporters

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As the French refinery strike enters a third week, with a third of gas stations facing shortages, other layers of workers are entering into struggle, protesting against inflation and pension cuts. Rail, transit, energy, health and education workers are set to participate in a one-day nationwide protest strike called by the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) tomorrow.

Significantly, workers in a number of private industries will join the strike, as will broader layers of public sector workers. Garbage collection workers in cities including Paris, Bordeaux, Toulouse and Rouen are set to strike. Industrial firms where workers will join the strike to protest below-inflation wage increases include automaker Stellantis, defense contractor Dassault, and airplane engine manufacturer Safran.

This movement is not a French but an international struggle against policies of inflation and war pursued by capitalist ruling classes internationally. In recent weeks, port and transport workers have gone on strike in Britain and South Africa, as did air traffic controllers across Africa, and teachers across Europe from Germany and Norway to Serbia, Kosovo and Greece. In the US, workers' anger is rising in the auto and rail industries, with the growing possibility of a national rail strike.

The French refinery strike has revealed anger throughout the working class to surging prices, especially after European sanctions imposed on Russian gas amid the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine. For broad layers of workers and youth struggling to make ends meet as European corporations make super-profits from a speculative run-up in energy prices, official attempts to blame inflation entirely on Russian President Vladimir Putin have no credibility. A mass movement in the working class against the Macron government, the banks and the NATO military alliance is looming.

The ruling class has clearly concluded that they face a serious crisis and that, in such an explosive situation, they

cannot simply crush the refinery strike by sending riot police to requisition all the strikers. Even if France's vast police-state apparatus could storm all the refineries, it would risk an uncontrollable eruption of social anger throughout the working class. Instead, they aim to first gradually divide, demoralize and wear down the struggle in order to ram through policies of inflation, austerity and war.

This is what emerged from Prime Minister Élisabeth Borne's televised address Sunday evening on the refinery strike and the growing internal crisis of her government.

"I confirm that the situation, over the weekend, has gotten worse. Roughly 30 percent of French gas stations face supply problems on at least one type of fuel," Borne said. She boasted that the government has "done its duty in terms of requisitions" and pledged to use the French state's strategic oil reserve to try to outlast the strike, declaring, "We have mobilized state stocks in order to resupply gas stations."

Borne warned that smashing the strike, however, was not immediately possible. "Requisitioning workers [to force them to work] is a tool that cannot be used in an everyday manner," she said.

Borne issued a meaningless request to the union bureaucracies and corporate management to open more contract negotiations. While she defended concessions contracts negotiated by the pro-Macron French Democratic Labor Confederation that impose deep real wage cuts on Exxon and Total refinery workers, Borne cynically implied that she was trying to raise workers' earnings, vaguely declaring: "Every enterprise which can do so should have wage talks and raise wages."

Borne raised the tenuous situation of her own government, which could fall less than a half-year after it took office. With Macron's Renaissance party no longer holding a majority since the May 2022 legislative elections, all the other parties in parliament have united to

vote down a number of provisions in an initial reading of Macron's proposed 2023 budget. There is also growing concern at deep popular opposition to plans for a new pension cut.

Borne proposed to ram through the cuts using the controversial, antidemocratic Amendment 49.3 of the French constitution, which forces the National Assembly to either accept the presidential administration's budget, or vote to dissolve itself and call new elections. "We will probably have to resort to amendment 49.3 ... but it will not be tomorrow," she said.

Borne is relying on the union bureaucracies and their political allies such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France (LFI) party to demobilize and divide the workers, allowing her to outlast the strike.

Yesterday, LFI and the broader New Popular Union (NUPES) of which LFI is a part called a rally in Paris protesting against inflation and high living costs. Significantly, the Stalinist CGT and French Communist Party, which is formally a part of the NUPES, both boycotted the event. 140,000 people attended the rally, according to LFI estimates, including a number of student youth opposed to Macron's social and military policies.

WSWS reporters attended the rally, distributed leaflets and interviewed workers and youth who were participating in the event.

Liliane, a supporter of the "yellow vest" protests against social inequality in 2018-2019, spoke of her anger at the Macron government. "I want France to change, I want it to become a state that serves its citizens, not the richest people. ... We are not in an ordinary state, but in a capitalist state and that has to change."

She also criticized official media coverage of the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine, which obscures NATO imperialist interests and blames the war and the economic crisis on Putin. "They try to make us believe that these are simply border issues or issues that Putin is crazy. Everything that is behind that, the economic interests, are never discussed."

WSWS journalists also spoke to Kamal, a logistics worker. "I'm protesting to defend purchasing power and against the policy of this government," Kamal said, denouncing a pension reform that would mean that his daughter could not retire before 75. "How many people are going to die, then, before they even get a right to enjoy their pension? So I am totally against the reform increasing the pension age at 65 [and requiring 40 years of pay-in to the pension system before getting a full pension]. ... We have worked all our lives; we have a right

to our retirement."

Kamal, a Mélenchon voter, said he was disturbed by the lack of organized opposition to the war in Ukraine. "When I hear Mr Macron come on TV to explain that he is giving €100 million to finance weapons to help Ukraine go fight Russia, and no one reacts, I find this astonishing. My neighbor, at the end of the month, she is counting every penny just to be able to eat ... And then France, the major powers always have plenty of money to try to go rule over people, and massacre people, which we do everywhere. But to help the working classes, the poor, there is never any."

Such comments constitute a devastating indictment of the policies of Mélenchon and LFI, which have aligned themselves on the promotion of the war in Ukraine by the CGT bureaucracy and the big-business Socialist Party inside the NUPES.

Mélenchon himself spoke at the rally, calling to form a "new Popular Front" with the various parties inside the NUPES and to the CGT bureaucracy. Such an alliance would be a political trap for the working class, aiming to subordinate it to the French union bureaucracies and state machine. Borne is relying precisely upon such forces to block an uncontrolled eruption of the class struggle against her government in France, and more broadly internationally.

The alternative to this discredited political establishment is the construction of rank-and-file committees in the working class, not only in France but internationally, in a struggle to unify workers against austerity and the rapidly mounting escalation of the NATO-Russia war into a third world war.



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