Révolution Permanente covers French union bureaucracy's betrayal of refinery strike

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Since September 27, workers in TotalEnergies and Exxonmobil refineries in France have launched strikes which dramatically cut the supply of petrol and diesel to gas stations across the country. To suppress the struggle, the Macron government has pursued a dual policy of "social dialogue" with the union bureaucracies, while requisitioning strikers to force them back on the job.

On October 11, the government's first effort to end the strike came with through a sell-out agreement with the leaders of the French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT) union. This deal offered workers a 5.5 percent wage increase, which with inflation of 7 percent is a 1.5 percent real wage cut. The following day, the government served its first requisition orders against refinery workers.

As the WSWS and SEP have stressed since the beginning of the strike, the crucial issue for striking workers is to break the suffocating grip of the union bureaucracies over their struggle by forming their own independent rank-and-file committees. Indeed, Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union leader Philippe Martinez has been in constant communication with the government since the strike began. He is working to cut his own rotten deal through "social dialogue" between the unions, the corporations and the government.

In contrast, the pseudo-left Rvolution Permanente (RP) website, published by the French Morenoite Revolutionary Communist Current (CCR), has promoted illusions in the French union bureaucracies' intentions to struggle. While after their sellout contract agreement, the Morenoites denounce CFDT and CGE-CGC as "pseudo-unions" and rail against Martinez's policy of "social dialogue," they sow illusions that the bureaucracy can be pressured into pursuing a more militant policy.

After Macron's requisition of striking workers, RP's candidate for the 2022 French presidential election, Anasse Kazib, tweeted: "The unions cannot let strikers be lifted off the picket line like this." He demanded that the CGT leadership, "call for strikes in all sectors for wages, the workers will respond."

The CGT leadership did nothing of the sort. Instead, Philippe Martinez called for a single "interprofessional day of mobilisation" on October 18. There will be two further demonstrations of this kind on October 27 and November 10. However, these mobilisations do not lay ground for a wider social struggle; they simply act as a pressure valve to allow the rank and file to let off stream, while the bureaucracy engages in "social dialogue" with the government and company bosses behind the backs of the rank and file.

Nonetheless, in an article published on October 14, RP promoted the union's demonstration as a genuine opportunity to build the strike, stating "it is possible to build links on 18 October for a strategic strike."

Of course, such links do need to be built, above all between workers internationally. To suggest that this will happen under the auspices of the CGT's national "day of mobilisation" is to go against the experiences of union betrayal of the working class across a whole historical epoch.

Of course, the bureaucracy-coordinated "day of mobilisation" did nothing to develop the strike.

After the event, in an article published on October 20, RP stated, "Let's face it, the mobilisation of 18 October was half-hearted" and "far below the expectations and enthusiasm created by the refiners' strike." They criticized "the absence of serious preparation of an 'all together' fight on the part of the trade union leaderships."

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But what lessons were workers meant to take from this? According to RP, workers must organise “general assemblies to exchange between colleagues” and propose “a programme and a strategy that are up to the task” of making the union bureaucracies fight. However, general assemblies already take place amongst workers, including in workplaces where the strike was prematurely ended. Crucially, however, these remained under the control of the CGT bureaucracy. Expanding such assemblies without fighting for a break from the union bureaucracy is a dead-end for the working class.

As for the necessary strategy, the same article goes on to suggest that the rank and file have already successfully pressured the union leadership to fight Macron, stating: “the refiners’ strike forced the CGT, which was engaged in a policy of consultation with the government on pensions and unemployment insurance, to break off negotiations.”

This false perspective was exposed just hours later, when the strikes at the La Mède and Donges refineries and the Flandres fuel depot were shut down. How can one blame workers for failing to match the “expectations and enthusiasm” RP expects when such days of mobilisation invariably lead to fresh deceptions and betrayals by the bureaucracy?

The refinery workers’ struggle against inflation brings them into struggle against the forces driving it: the NATO-provoked war in Ukraine and the massive bank bailouts during the pandemic. However, the CGT, CDFT and other unions support NATO’s efforts to escalate the conflict and signed off on the multi trillion-euro bailouts handed to the corporations in spring 2020.

In France, the funding for the salaries and privileges of union bureaucrats is directly tied to the level of profits made by the major corporations. Tied financially to the ruling elite and its policy of war, the bureaucracy cannot be “pressured” leftward. Workers must carry out a ruthless political and organisational break with it.

Workers have nothing to negotiate with Macron, nor anything to gain from the union bureaucracy’s policy of “social dialogue,” which will only lead to wage cuts and expanded attacks on the right to strike. A class gulf separates the refinery workers, who are rebelling against inflation, and the CGT bureaucrats, whose primary aim is to negotiate a deal with the government and companies to retain its privileges.

Its criticisms of the union leadership notwithstanding, RP remains hostile to an independent mobilisation of the working class. Its efforts to prevent a rank-and-file revolt against the union bureaucracies is the product of its base amongst those very forces. Some of RP’s prominent members are minor CGT officials, looking to improve their position within the the bureaucracy and secure the privileges that flow from such positions.

Against the pseudo-left’s efforts to keep workers tied to the reactionary union bureaucracies, the SEP calls for workers in refineries and all industries in France to form independent rank-and-file committees in their workplaces, to democratically organise their struggle outside of the control of pro-company bureaucrats. Workers and youth who support this perspective can contact the SEP today.

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