

CGT bureaucracy works to strangle French refinery strike

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21 October 2022

As a powerful refinery strike to demand wage increases in the face of inflation causes fuel shortages across France, the Stalinist General Confederation of Labour Work (CGT) union bureaucracy is seeking to strangle the refinery strike.

The French unions' capitulation to Macron during the strike vindicates the WSWs's analysis of the role of the union bureaucracies. The only way forward is a political insurrection of the workers against the national trade union bureaucracies and their political allies. Workers must build rank-and-file committees to oppose repression, austerity and war, build links with the independent rank-and-file organizations built by their class brothers and sisters around the world.

Three weeks after the start of the conflict, workers at two TotalEnergies sites, Flandres in Mardyck near Dunkirk and La Mède in the south, have decided to suspend the strike. Earlier Thursday, the end of the strike was voted at the Donges refinery. The strike has been extended at two other Total sites, at Gonfreville (refinery and depot) and at the Feyzin depot in the Rhône.

The justifications for stopping the strike at these TotalEnergies refineries are unclear. It appears the workers did not obtain anything above the sell-out agreement signed by the French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT) union, i.e., a 7 per cent pay rise (5 percent guaranteed for non-managers) and bonuses ranging from €3,000 to €6,000 and retroactive to 1 November 2022. When it was signed CGT workers rejected this agreement, forcing the union to continue the strike.

In launching their strike, workers at TotalEnergies followed workers at ExxonMobil's two refineries in France, who were striking for 10 percent pay rises. When workers in those two firms went on strike, a third

of gas stations were facing a major disruption of availability of at least one type of fuel, according to France's Energy Ministry.

Under the pretext of a contract agreement with the CFDT for a pay rise below inflation, French Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne had four strikers requisitioned from the Exxon refinery in Port Jérôme-Gravenchon, near Le Havre. In response to Borne's threats, workers at the Donges refinery and maintenance workers at five nuclear reactors walked out. The government later requisitioned workers from the Feyzin depots, further attacking the struggling refinery workers.

The Macron government's actions constitute a frontal attack on the democratic right to strike. The state aims to crush all strike action against inflation, which threatens to escalate into a direct challenge to Macron's agenda of austerity and war. Nevertheless, the trade union organizations have done nothing to mobilize workers against the brutal repression that threatens the entire working class. Instead, the CGT bureaucracy preferred to try to lull workers to sleep by downplaying the requisitions of the refinery workers.

The union's leadership has privately continued its long-standing policy of "social dialogue" with French President Emmanuel Macron and his ministers, preparing its own betrayal of the rank and file. After visiting the Port Jérôme site on October 12 night to "support" the striking workers, the only action announced by CGT leader Philippe Martinez was a legal appeal against the requisition orders. Martinez said: "I don't think that requisitioning strikers is the best way to have a dialogue."

Tuesday's cross-industry demonstration, for the trade union leadership, was meant to serve as a pressure valve for workers to let off steam and prepare a capitulation to Macron. After the demonstration, CGT

officials announced the end of the strike at the Donges refinery, saying: “Today, the important thing was to come out of this strike movement cleanly, in cohesion, with a welded collective.” They cited the low participation in the CGT day of action on 18 October as justification: “The broadening we were hoping for was not there.”

In reality, the CGT bureaucracy is isolating and disarming the strikers. Despite the huge sums of money at their disposal, the French union bureaucracies refuse to organize a strike fund but instead ask workers and students to collect money for the strikers. As a result, workers are left under enormous financial pressure as soon as they go on strike.

Yet the impact of the refinery workers’ strike demonstrates the immense power of the working class. A mobilization of the CGT’s 700,000 strong membership, many of whom work in industries that are strategically vital to the French economy, could bring down the widely hated Macron government. However, the CGT apparatus is not hostile to Macron, but instead fears the acceleration of the international class struggle driven by rising inflation and the war between NATO and Russia.

The trade union bureaucracies and their pseudo-left political allies are the main mechanisms that allow Macron and his government to stay in power. Striking refinery workers have been joined by a strike of energy workers, who are blockading the maintenance and refurbishment of nuclear reactors to demand wage increases. By suppressing the struggle of the refinery workers, the CGT leadership is seeking to isolate and demoralize the energy workers and suppress strikes against Macron’s reactionary agenda.

Taking advantage of the demobilization of the working class by the union bureaucracies, Macron is accelerating his fiscal program of inflation, austerity and militarism. However, the struggle of the refinery workers shows that the working class is seeking to fight Macron and the EU, amid a wider struggle of the international working class against the capitalist ruling elites internationally.

Port and transport workers are in struggle in Britain and South Africa, air traffic controllers across Africa, teachers across Europe from Germany and Norway to Serbia, Kosovo and Greece. In the US, labour anger is rising to fever pitch in the auto and rail industries.

The campaign of US auto worker Will Lehman for president of the United Auto Workers union, calling for the dissolution of the bureaucracy and a seizure of power by the rank and file, demonstrates the growing influence that calls for a rebellion against the bureaucracy has among workers. An insurrection against the union bureaucracies in Europe is the first step of a working class counter-offensive against inflation, austerity and war.



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