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France, vanguard in the workers' struggle for wages



Sources: Rebellion

On October 18, the general strike called by CGT, FO, FSU and SUD-Solidaires, as well as French youth and student organizations. Workers in education, railways, chemical and aeronautics, nurseries, health and nursing homes were the most active sectors in the strike. Around 300,000 protesters took to the streets in 150 cities. There were a hundred blockades of high schools and other actions by high school students. The mobilization demanded wage increases, the defense of the right to strike and in support of the workers of the oil company TotalEnergies, who had been on strike since the end of September.

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Two days earlier, on Sunday 16, a demonstration with 140,000 participants walked the streets of Paris under the slogan "against expensive life and climate inaction". It was convened by the New People's, Ecological and Social Union (NUPES), a coalition led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, of France Insoumise together with the Socialist Party, Europe-Ecology-The Greens (EELV) and the Communist Party. It also had the support of the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA), various environmental and solidarity associations and some student union federations.

The September 29 strike and the refinery strike

The precedent to the strike of October 18 must be sought in the national strike day of September 29, for a minimum wage of 2,000 euros gross, wage increases based on inflation, the restoration of the sliding scale of wages and pensions and real wage equality between women and men. 250,000 protesters took to the streets. But a few days earlier, on September 20, the strike for wages had started in two refineries of Esso-ExxonMobil, and shortly after in those of Total Energies. The result was a sharp reduction in supplies and long queues at petrol stations.

The Macron government and its Prime Minister Élisabeth Borne, who has been opposing the establishment of new taxes on the superprofits of large companies, on Wednesday, October 12, began forcing striking workers to return to work under threat of fines and prison sentences by establishing minimum services. The unions responded with legal demands against these repressive measures against the right to strike. Although these measures have allowed some gas stations to open, they provoked anger.

The multinationals Esso-ExxonMobil and Total Énergies used the two unions that were not participating in the strike to sign an agreement: the CFDT and the corporatist CFE-CGC, which are the majority in the Total Energie whole, but not among the refineries that were on strike. In Esso-ExxonMobil the agreement was signed on October 10 with a salary increase of 5.5% (plus one point of bonuses) and in Total Energies, the agreement is 5% for all salaries on October 14 (plus two points in bonuses).

At the two Esso Exxon Mobil refineries, workers voted to suspend their strike on Friday, October 14, after 24 days of strike. But Total Energie's strike assemblies rejected the

agreements and voted to continue the strike: in three refineries until October 20, in the other 2 until October 27.

The strikers are demanding a 10% wage increase, with the aim of offsetting inflation (5.6% year-on-year in September), plus a redistribution of superprofits. Total Énergies has generated a profit of more than 18.8 billion euros in the first half of 2022 and 5.7 billion in the second. The remuneration of its chairman and chief executive Patrick Pouyanné has risen 52% this year, adding to workers' outrage.

On the eve of the general strike of October 18, the Minister of Economy and Finance, Bruno Le Maire, added fuel to the fire by stating that the current social movement was "unacceptable" and "illegitimate" and called for "freeing fuel tanks and refineries", in a clear call for repression. CGT Secretary General Philippe Martinez replied, "The government has underestimated the anger in the refineries, but also the general anger of the country."

Macron on the tightrope

The trade union leaderships CGT, Solidaires, FSU and FO have called a day of mobilization for October 27 and a strike for November 10. To the defense of wages they join other demands: reducing VAT on basic necessities, the increase in pensions and unemployment benefits with inflation, the lowering of rents and prices of fuel and energy, with an increase in taxes on energy companies, support for public transport. Without having resolved the refinery conflict, rail transport is expected to come into struggle, while new strikes begin in the companies of the aeronautical sector of Occitania and in nuclear power plants.

Macron fears a social explosion, motivated by the sharp fall in the purchasing power of workers. With inflation remaining at 5.6%, the Ministry of Labor acknowledged that the average monthly salary "had increased by 3.1% for the services sector, 3.0% for industry and 2.6% for construction."

The government is in a parliamentary minority with 250 parliamentarians (with its two partners) out of 577. That is why Macron wants to resort to an express route to approve the

budgets of the 23rd. Meanwhile, there is a dispute to be the reference of the opposition between the extreme right of Marine Le Pen (RN) that reached 89 deputies in June, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon of FI (75 deputies), who says he is "drawing the construction of a new Popular Front that will exercise power in the country when the time comes", together with the PS (31).

After the budget, Macron wants to impose a reform against unemployment benefits, and another of pensions to increase them from 62 to 65 years. Measure that in 2019 was stopped by the workers' and popular mobilization. It should be remembered that the fight against Sarkozy's attempt to raise the pension age in 2010 mobilised several million workers eight times and played a decisive role in the loss of Sarkozy's 2012 elections.

Workers' mobilization against inflation spreads across Europe

France is at the forefront of the struggles to safeguard the purchasing power of wages, but it is throughout Europe where mobilizations with the same demand are growing. Before the summer in air transport in France and Germany, also among workers in German ports on the North Sea. In Great Britain it was the railways and the docks of Felixstowe, in greater port of cargo. Also on the London Underground, or the garbage collectors in Edinburgh. On the **Dutch State Railways (NS)**. The long strike of the refineries in France and the general strike represent a leap forward. In Italy and Portugal there were mass demonstrations. In Spain, thousands marched in defense of pensions and salaries in Madrid on October 15. In Greece he is preparing for a general strike in November.

The defense of the purchasing power of salaries and pensions is essential. Unite the struggles and the general strike in each country, with European days of struggle. Inflation in the European Union (EU) was 10.9%. In Great Britain, 10.1%. The rise in prices has been associated not with an excess of demand but with the realization of astronomical profits of large companies. We must stop a transfer of money directly from the pockets of the working class and the popular sectors to the companies. We must demand the sliding scale of wages and pensions, indexing them to the increase in inflation. We must demand government intervention on the prices of basic necessities, including housing and basic supplies, and the nationalization under workers' control of energy companies and banks.

Josep Lluís del Alcázar. Internationalist struggle

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