

Amid French state of emergency, Sodexo sacks 19 workers for striking

By Kumaran Ira
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Multinational food and facilities management company Sodexo has sacked 19 delivery drivers providing meals in school canteens in Marseille in southern France. The sacked workers have filed a case against Sodexo before the labour courts, denouncing the dismissal as unlawful as it was made on the sole grounds that they were on strike.

The majority of sacked workers were not union members, according to press reports. They were dismissed without compensation since they defied the Memorandum of Understanding signed between Sodexo and the trade unions that brought a strike to end at the end of November. Sodexo claimed that their strike was serious misconduct, as they had “made no demands” and that their behavior amounted to “abandoning their duties.”

One worker told Europe1 radio, “I struck for two days and I found myself unemployed, just before the holidays. I would not have done that if I had known. I am 50, and I do not know what will become of me. I am disgusted.”

“It is scandalous, after 38 years of loyal services and work. I do not understand, it is a nightmare,” added another worker.

The dismissal of Sodexo workers is a warning to the working class. It occurs amid a three-month state of emergency imposed by the Socialist Party (PS) government of President François Hollande after the November 13 terror attacks. The PS has banned and cracked down on protests, carried out mass arrests, and prepared a constitutional amendment to extend the state of emergency indefinitely and allow police to search and detain anyone police view as a potential threat to public order.

The sudden sacking of Sodexo workers makes clear that the working class is in the cross-hairs of the assault

on democratic rights waged by the PS government. In the name of fighting against terrorism, it is moving to scrap constitutionally-protected rights, including the right to strike, and to suppress broad social anger and disaffection with war in the working class through police terror.

Steve Doudet, the lawyer representing the laid-off workers, recalled that the right to strike is up to each worker and that their dismissal is illegal.

Doudet said, “I have never seen an employer react so brutally. It is a return to the 19th century. These sackings justified by a so-called abandoning of duties are nothing but a clumsy subterfuge to cover up an attack on the right to strike.”

He added, “Today, the workers have no salaries and are on the verge of losing their jobs. It is dramatic.”

The decision to sack 19 strikers is a signal sent by the bosses and the PS government: the ruling class intends to use the state of emergency to tear up basic social rights and to deal ruthlessly with anyone who mobilizes in struggle against the assault on jobs and social conditions in Europe.

It follows the Medef employers’ organisation’s calls for employers to work with police to spy upon their workers and report to the authorities anyone who makes statements or actions in their work places that suggest they have been “radicalised.”

After the PS announced the state of emergency, backed by the Left Front, the WSWS warned: “Under the cover of fighting ISIS, the French state is giving itself absolute powers against anyone it calls a threat to ‘security and public order.’ This vague, all-embracing category has long been used against the constitutionally-protected right to strike and protest—as in the Socialist Party’s decision last year to ban protests against the Israeli state’s war in Gaza.”

This analysis has been vindicated with the sacking of workers at Sodexo. As the PS and the entire ruling class seek to impose unprecedented social austerity and slash wages, they are exploiting the November 13 attacks to claim draconian, extra-constitutional powers to suppress social anger and opposition in the working class.

The ruling class can proceed with this onslaught only because it enjoys the support of the entire political establishment, including the pseudo-left groups like the Left Front and the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) and the trade union bureaucracy. These organizations, which called for the election of the PS in 2012, have done everything in their power to block a mobilization of the working class against the PS' authoritarian measures. They are complicit in the drive to scrap what remains of the social rights won by the working class in the aftermath of World War II.

The moves to sack Sodexo workers comes after Air France sacked five workers for tearing the shirts of two top managers during a job protest in October. This event, which enjoyed broad support among workers across France and Europe, provoked consternation and panic in ruling circles, which saw in this a sign of rising opposition to the austerity measures and mass layoffs they have pursued since the 2008 global economic crisis.

The trade unions are not calling for any broader mobilization to oppose the sacking of the Sodexo workers. They have issued a bankrupt appeal to Sodexo management, asking them to reconsider the decision and to rehire the sacked workers. The Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) threatened "a boycott of Sodexo enterprises, beginning with Christmas dinners and gift certificates."

The CGT's threat is cynical and empty. Like Sodexo, its attitude to workers who defied the unions and continued the strike even after the unions called off the strike is one of hostility and fear.

Sodexo employs about 380,000 workers in 80 countries around the world. It is infamous for systematically violating workers' social rights, paying low wages, and imposing poor working conditions.

After making a net profit of €700 million in 2014-2015, Sodexo has announced that it will slash over a thousand jobs worldwide. Sodexo CEO Michel Landel said, "We must adjust our cost structure.

Between 1,200 and 1,500 jobs will be cut worldwide over the next 18 months."

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