

Amid state of emergency, French workers jailed for struggle to defend jobs

By Kumaran Ira
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On Tuesday, the French criminal court of Amiens in Northern France sentenced eight former Goodyear tire workers to two years in prison, including nine months without the possibility of parole. The workers were accused of taking two Goodyear executives hostage in January 2014 while on strike against the planned closure of their plant and loss of 1,173 jobs. The trade unions later cut a deal with management to end the strike and accept the plant closure.

The decision to prosecute workers for briefly taking executives hostage is unprecedented in France. Labour lawyer Stéphanie Stein said the ruling was “very rare,” adding, “There was clearly the intention to make an example of them, since boss-napping, which is a serious action, has increased in recent years.”

Since the outbreak of the 2008 economic crisis, boss-nappings have occurred during protests against mass layoffs in 2009 (Caterpillar, Molex, Scapa, 3M Healthcare, Sony), 2010 (La Poste), 2011 (Constellium, Still), 2012 (PSA Aulnay), and 2013 (Forgital). There were no prosecutions as a result of these actions.

The prosecutors’ decision to pursue the Goodyear case was all the more remarkable since the Goodyear executives themselves opted not to prosecute the workers who took them hostage, noting that there was no “behaviour that threatened our physical safety.”

Sociologist Jean-François Amadou noted that usually in such cases “management drops charges to calm things down.” He continued, “And that is what Goodyear did. What is stunning is that the ministry then decided to pursue the case, even though the people had lost their jobs.”

This provocative and reactionary ruling comes amid a three-month state of emergency imposed by the Socialist Party (PS) government of President François Hollande after the November 13 terror attacks in Paris.

It is a deliberate act of political intimidation, making clear that the state’s vast emergency powers are aimed squarely at the working class.

From a juridical standpoint, the emergency powers effectively transform France into a police state. The PS government can ban and crack down on protests, carry out arbitrary searches and seizures, and launch mass arrests. Hollande is preparing a constitutional amendment that could extend the state of emergency indefinitely and allow police to search and detain anyone they consider to be even a potential threat to public order.

The Goodyear workers, five of whom are members of the CGT (General Confederation of Labour) union, denounced the court ruling. Hassan Bourki said, “I expected it, but still the decision is extremely unfair. We will appeal. For a long time our confidence in the justice system has been broken.”

Another worker, Reynald Jurek, called the verdict “purely political.”

The state’s decision to punish Goodyear workers marks a profound shift in class relations in France and internationally. After nearly a decade of social austerity for workers and bank bailouts for the super-rich, during which tens of millions of workers across Europe lost their jobs, there is explosive social anger. Fearing a sudden eruption of class struggle outside the control of the union bureaucracy, along the lines of the 1968 French general strike, the ruling class is sending a signal that it intends to ruthlessly punish any and all protest.

While it has imposed the state of emergency in the name of the “war on terror,” the PS is simultaneously launching an offensive against core social rights of the working class, such as the right to strike, which is protected in the French Constitution.

The imprisonment of the Goodyear workers follows the arrest last October of Air France workers accused of storming an Air France works council meeting and assaulting managers who were threatening them with mass layoffs. The PS threatened the strikers with heavy sanctions, with Prime Minister Manuel Valls declaring that he was “scandalised.” Four workers were subsequently sacked by Air France.

In December, multinational food and facilities management company Sodexo sacked 19 workers in the Marseille area after they went on strike.

This assault on the right to strike points to the significance of the French ruling class’ normalisation of the far-right National Front (FN) and the PS’ turn to policies long associated with the FN, such as the deprivation of French nationality of those convicted of terror-related offences. Deprivation of nationality was most infamously applied to thousands of French Jews by the fascist Vichy dictatorship which collaborated with the Nazis during the German occupation of France in World War II. Later, Vichy deported the Jews to Nazi death camps across Europe.

The French capitalist class was compelled to inscribe basic social rights such as the right to strike in the post-World War II constitution as a pledge never to return to the crimes committed by Vichy. As it tears up its commitments to maintain basic social rights and turns to authoritarian forms of rule, driven by intractable financial and economic contradictions, the ruling class moves to legitimize the FN and adopt policies drawn from the legal arsenal of 20th Century fascism.

Despite their occasional, toothless criticisms of the PS, the unions and their political allies such as the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) and the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) offer no way forward for workers to struggle against dictatorship and the suppression of social rights. The current attacks on the working class point to the historic bankruptcy of their decades-long support for the PS, which is a reactionary party of finance capital.

CGT leader Philippe Martinez lamely declared, “The net effect of this decision, yet again, is to make trade union activity out to be a crime. It is part of an ever more tense social climate.”

For his part, André Chassaigne, a PCF deputy and leader of the Left Front parliamentary group in the

National Assembly, said: “When I learned of this ruling, I told myself that really the criminalization of trade union activity is taking on a magnitude one could never have anticipated.”

The positions of both the CGT and the Left Front reek of bad faith. They both fell in behind the drive to elect Hollande as president in 2012, and since his election, they have done everything in their power to block a mobilization of the working class against the PS’ reactionary austerity measures and authoritarian policies.

The unions isolated and sold out strikes at Goodyear, PSA and Air France and suppressed opposition in the working class to the tens of billions of euros in social cuts imposed by Hollande, while the Left Front voted in favour of the PS’ bill imposing a state of emergency.

The ruling against the Goodyear workers is intended not only to intimidate workers, but also to signal to the union bureaucracies that the ruling class will not tolerate any ill-considered symbolic protests. Judging from the CGT’s record over nearly four years of Hollande’s presidency, it will not be hard for the PS to keep the union bureaucracies in line.

Trying to keep opposition in the working class indefinitely bottled up is another matter, however. By moving to illegalize social protest in an attempt to impose its reactionary policies, the PS is leaving the working class no choice but to take the revolutionary roaddeveloping its struggles outside the normal trade union channels and independently of the PS and its political satellites.

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