

Anger mounts after Paris tries to crush general strike in Mayotte

By Alex Lantier
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Strikes erupted afresh on the Indian Ocean island of Mayotte and the return to school was delayed on Monday, after French military police tried and failed at 4 a.m. on Sunday to crush strike pickets outside the port at Longoni. Police used the trade unions' calls to temporarily halt the general strike for a cooling-off period to launch a surprise attack and attempt to smash the strike. This has failed, and anger against state repression is spreading across the impoverished island.

French Overseas Territories Minister Annick Girardin has reportedly decided to travel to the island, supposedly for negotiations. However, Mayotte media are reporting that strikers oppose talks with Girardin, and panic is mounting among union officials as the strike rapidly develops into a confrontation between the workers and the French state.

The island's trade union alliance was compelled to admit Girardin's visit "is clearly not welcome." It added that strikers would only be satisfied by the visit of an official whose promises the government would feel obliged to keep, like the president or prime minister.

While almost totally blacked out in French media, strikes have spread rapidly since February 20 following assaults in the island's badly overcrowded schools and amid rising anger over the failure of Mayotte's incorporation into France in 2011 as an overseas department to improve social conditions.

The poverty rate stands at 84 percent, and little has been done to assist refugees arriving from the nearby Comores. The population has quadrupled over the last 30 years, and students are able to spend only half a day in school and are forced to work on their teachers' desks due to the lack of space.

Strikers' demands include, according to *France Info-Mayotte*, "ending overcrowding in the schools and

making the entire area a priority zone for education. Strikers are also demanding a 'limit on the number of unaccompanied minors' in Mayotte, and that these refugees could also be taken to cities in metropolitan France." Strikers also call for better health and social services.

The failure by the police to crush the strike with a sneak attack, exploiting the demobilisation of the struggle by the trade unions, has escalated the conflict. Hundreds of strikers came to repel the police attack on port workers, and the pickets are now refusing to let anyone through, after having initially obeyed union orders to allow both medical and transport vehicles to cross picket lines. Trees have been cut down to block major roads, and trade union officials warned *Le Monde* that workers at a nearby gas station are also stockpiling explosive materials.

Strikers' demands for jobs and social services, and for immigrants to be allowed into France place them in a political struggle against President Emmanuel Macron's government. Macron is determined to slash social benefits in order to offer tax cuts to the rich and funnel €300 billion into the military over the next five years. He is preparing for large-scale wars between the great powers in which Mayotte, strategically located in the Indian Ocean, could well be involved.

His government has also presented a law drastically attacking the right to asylum, and he will bitterly oppose any moves to welcome Comoreans in France.

The critical question is unifying workers in Mayotte and the overseas territories together with workers in metropolitan France against Macron's right-wing agenda of militarism, austerity, and attacks on democratic rights and immigrants.

Workers in France and across Europe must take the police assault on workers at Longoni as a very serious

warning. After French police ruthlessly attacked protests against the regressive labour law in 2016, and Spanish police assaulted voters to try to suppress the Catalan independence referendum last year, it is clear that the main purpose of the police-state build-up in Europe is political repression. Strikers in France now routinely face requisition orders and attempts by police or military agencies to force them back to work.

Together with their allies like the Unsubmissive France (LFI) movement and the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), the unions are again proving their reactionary character. They are all participating in negotiating Macron's labour decrees, privatisations of the railways and in the public service, and plans to reinforce the French military. And as they help formulate Macron's right-wing agenda, they are looking on in silence at the police assault on workers in the overseas territories who are opposing Macron.

The way forward for workers is to take the struggle in Mayotte out of the hands of the unions and their political allies, setting up their own organisations of struggle independent of the unions, and mobilising broader political opposition among workers in Europe, where strike activity is on the rise.

The role of the union bureaucracies in Mayotte is not fundamentally different than that of the national confederations. They are issuing bankrupt pleas to Macron to avoid an all-out confrontation. Saïd Hachim of the French Democratic Labour Confederation (CFDT) warned, "If we lose control here, the entire island will explode, the situation could become uncontrollable."

Significantly, they have sought to frame their demands in terms of call for law-and-order, allowing the state and the French media to cynically portray the deployment of police to the island to crush the strike as an attempt to respond to strikers' demands.

The unions' "table of demands" addressed to the government makes "insecurity" the main issue in the strike, declaring, "Insecurity is a growing problem that no longer has to be proven. ... Its magnitude, which already defies comprehension, seems to be only comparable to its barbarism."

This rhetoric was echoed in the official French media yesterday, which is pushing aggressively for a police build-up on the island that would in fact only facilitate a crackdown. *Le Monde* declared, "It is first

of all insecurity that is at the beginning of the movement," warning that "delinquency and violence have attained dramatic levels."

This is a political fraud. Strikers are demanding not the right to be assaulted by even more police, but solutions to the enormous social problems in Mayotte. School violence and insecurity are but one expression of basic social problems—unemployment, poverty, the lack of a future, and the danger of war—that afflict not only Mayotte but the entire region, as well as France itself.

The allies of the workers in Mayotte in this struggle are their class brothers and sisters in France, mobilised in struggle against the repressive agenda of Macron and the European Union.

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