

France orders striking fuel refinery employees back to work

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A worker stands in front of the ExxonMobil oil refinery in Port-Jerome-sur-Seine, France

Paris, October 13 (RHC) -- France's government announced it will order workers at an ExxonMobil fuel depot back to their posts in an attempt to secure petrol supplies following weeks-long strikes that have led to shortages and a rise in social tensions.

The energy ministry said on Wednesday that its requisition of staff at Normandy's Gravenchon-Port Jerome depot run by oil giant ExxonMobil's Esso France business "will begin today." The state has the power to requisition refineries and force workers back to their jobs in an emergency, with those who

refuse risking fines or jail time.

Workers belonging to the hardline General Confederation of Labour (CGT) union had remained on strike at the Gravenchon-Port Jerome plant, situated in northern France, despite an agreement between management and other unions over pay.

The CGT said it would challenge the requisition notifications in court once it had received them. The developments came after nationwide industrial action demanding large pay rises for workers paralysed a number of refineries owned by ExxonMobil and fellow oil giant TotalEnergies, creating supply shortfalls that were further exacerbated by panic-buying.

Government ministers had initially urged a negotiated resolution to the crisis, but more recently threatened direct intervention to get supplies flowing again after long queues formed in front of petrol stations over the past few days. Rationing has been introduced in some regions, including the Alpes-Maritimes, Var and Vaucluse departments in the south.

France is currently confronting a cost-of-living crisis and soaring inflation. Meanwhile, energy firms have recorded bumper profits, causing widespread anger and leading to calls for the companies to face a windfall tax. Those demands have been consistently refused by President Emmanuel Macron's centrist government.

The standoff could add impetus to a march planned by left-wing political parties on Sunday against Macron's administration. "I hope this is the spark that begins a general strike," leading Greens party politician, Sandrine Rousseau, told franceinfo radio early on Wednesday.

The CGT has called for support for its action from workers in other sectors and there were signs on Wednesday of a possible wider dispute between the government and France's trade unions emerging.

A representative of France's National Federation of Mines and Energy (FNME) trade union told the Reuters news agency that some workers at EDF's nuclear plants had resumed their own strike over salaries, delaying maintenance work on at least five reactors, including the Bugey facility.

Viginie Neumayer, the FNME representative, said the union had sent a message of support to the workers taking industrial action at the refineries owned by ExxonMobil and TotalEnergies. "The threat of requisition which is above all a sign of government feverishness has never demonstrated its effectiveness in getting out of this conflict," Neumayer said. She added the strikes at the EDF plants would not cause any reduction in power supply to active reactors.

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