

1512 SOLIDARITY FOR FRENCH MINERS SPREADS ACROSS EUROPE.

by a French correspondent

PARIS - March 11. France's coal miners have been out on strike since March 1st. Other strikes have likewise been called, the miners in the east, the natural gas workers of Lacq. The miners' struggle, by far the most important, has aroused strong feelings of solidarity. In the mine areas not only the workers in other industries, but the mine engineers, * small businessmen, even the clergy, immediately supported the demands of the miners as justified. They were followed last week by 15 minute solidarity strikes throughout France. In addition, the gas and electricity workers stopped work for two hours in token of their sympathy and the railway workers are scheduled to follow up their sympathy with similar action. Expressions of solidarity are now spreading across the entire continent of Europe. Coal has become "hot cargo" and workers in other countries are refusing to handle deliveries for France.

The point of departure for the miners' movement was the demand to bring their wages back to the level lost through inflation. In recent years, faced with mounting prices, workers in private industry, above all the skilled layers, have been able to maintain their standard of living, primarily due to full employment and a scarcity of labour. But government workers and functionaries, employees of cities and public services (like the mines) haven't received sufficient of the wage increases to make up for the decline in the standard of living. The miners have felt this need particularly acutely. Right after the War, when there was urgent need for their labour, they made gains. Today with the decline of coal as a source of energy, they are working in a sick industry. Statistics show that since 1957 wages of the miners have fallen 11.5 % behind those of private industry.

After beating around the bush for a long time, the Government decided on a derisory increase of 2 % at the beginning of this year, and another increase at the end of 1963 which would have brought wages up a total of 5.77 %. Why such an attitude on the part of the Government? If one disregards the traditional red tape (and this has played a certain role), the main reason is that the Government wants to hold down inflation, setting an example by limiting wages. It also appears that at the end of February, the Government like the Unions themselves, had no clear idea what the reaction of the miners might be towards the limited increases that were granted. The CGT (General Confederation of Workers), to which most of the miners belong, did not call for more than a two-day work stoppage before taking a definitive decision. The other unions, the FO (Workers' Force), and the CFTC (French Confederation of Christian Workers), called for an unlimited strike. But the Government happened to give an impulse to the struggle as well as a political tone to it by deciding to "requisition" the miners; in other words to mobilise the miners on the job and force them to work like soldiers. In this way the Government dealt a blow at the right to strike.

It was not the first time the Government had acted in this way. However, up to now it has issued such an order only to small groups of workers (a couple of hundred or so) and the unions limited themselves to issuing some timid protests. Requisitioning the miners was a little too big a bite to swallow in this way. The first to go out on strike against the requisition were the miners of the Lorraine basin, which is second in importance among the coalfields, and where the Government could formerly have counted on a certain response. The Labour movement is weakest in the Lorraine basin. In the referendum last October and in the elections in November, de Gaulle got an 80 % "yes" vote in the Lorraine and candidates of the de Gaullist UNR (Union for the New Republic) displaced the former office holders belonging to the MRP (Popular

* For footnote see over.

.....Republican Movement). Once the Lorraine Basin went on strike success was then assured in the Nord and Pas de Calais areas, where Communists and Socialists are dominant and where in the elections of last November they aided each other. On the 11th day of the strike, the movement is continuing without sign of weakness. The only men going down the mines are the security teams which the strikers themselves organised to see that no damage occurs below while the pickets watch the gates above. Through Prime Minister Pompidou, the Government vainly pleaded with the miners in a "fire-side chat" March 9th over the radio and television to go back to work. Squads of the CRS (the French gendarmerie) have been sent into the strike regions, but they are being discreetly kept in their barracks for the time being.

It is the first big workers struggle since de Gaulle came to power in 1958. It also happens to be a struggle against the Government-as-Boss. It is pointless to debate whether the Government made an error, as a big sector of the press believes, in going as far as a "requisition" by a decree made out at Colombey-les-deux-Eglises (de Gaulle's home) and signed by the General himself. Error or not, the government power, after having put an end to the war in Algeria (and to do this it had to turn primarily against the extreme Right in France), naturally inclines now to turn against the workers. It is now committed to its requisition decree, and it is invoking the authority of the state; that is demanding a return to work before considering any new negotiations on wages. It is quite probable that at the present moment, the Government is not so much preoccupied over upping wages an additional small percentage as over the problem of enforcing the requisition order. The miners in France have a story of long and militant, if rare, strikes. The last big strike was one in 1947, notable for its battles with the CRS. After it was lost, the Trade Union split occurred that gave birth to the Force Ouvriere. This time the strike shows a power of united action among the unions such as has not been witnessed for a long time. Up to now the strike has developed in calm fashion in the tradition of the miners, with parades, rallies, music and the singing of the Internationale. The Government appears to be letting it proceed; it has received all kinds of appeals for an understanding, etc. Probably the situation will not crystallise for a while. But it is quite clear that the Government has not given up the thought of a test of force, while the Unions (all of them) although standing firm up to now on the right to strike, have been anxious to open negotiations.

In the present political situation in France, the main concern of the workers' movement is to assure the miners of complete solidarity, first of all in compelling the withdrawal of the requisition, secondly in putting the squeeze on for the wage hike. It was the government which in its way, brought the miners strike to a political level. But we have not reached the point where the miners and the working class have joined battle even objectively, against the de Gaullist regime as such. We are only at the first great confrontation between the workers and a regime of which they do not have a clear understanding, the traditional working-class parties having done nothing to clarify them on the subject.

The power of the workers on the level of economic demands is proving to be very great; the same cannot be said for the political level. But it is through such confrontations, with all they place at stake, that the political consciousness of the workers will be revived and developed.

* The mine engineers are highly qualified technicians who constitute the actual management of the nationalised mines. Their expressions of sympathy with the strikers, including the donation of two days' pay, is unprecedented.