French anti-globalisation protest calls for trade war measures against US

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At the end of June, tens of thousands of people gathered in the little town of Millau, in Southern France, for a carnival-style event convened as a protest against “trade globalisation, industrial farming and the power of multinational world companies”.

The carnival was organised to coincide with the two-day trial of 11 members of the “Confederation Paysanne”, a small farmers' trade union, who were involved in the dismantling of a McDonald's restaurant in Millau in August last year. Sheep farmer José Bové, a 47-year-old radical activist with a long history of environmental protests, led the attack on McDonald's.

An estimated 30,000 people attended the protest; most of whom watched the trial on a giant screen installed just 200 metres from the courtroom. A further 25,000 attended a free rock concert and “traditional French feast” later that evening.

The carnival attracted international attention. Dubbed “Seattle-on-the-Tarn”, in reference to the local river and the anti-globalisation protests at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) conference last year, the trial and accompanying demonstrations have been portrayed as a protest movement by France's “little people” against the vast transnational corporations. Even if some of those attending the event were genuinely opposed to capitalism, however, the political perspective on which the protest was based led in an entirely different direction.

The trial was depicted by much of the French and international media as a modern-day version of the battle between David and Goliath. In one corner stood the farmers, led by José Bové, representing all the victims of capitalism. In the other corner was the prosecution, representing McDonald's and similar global corporations. In court, defence lawyer Francois Roux pleaded, “Men are fighting deadly injustices created by our society,” for which they should be “honoured”.

Although the judge will not rule until September, it seems likely that the farmers will receive only a token sentence. The prosecution has requested that Bové receive a ten-month sentence, nine months suspended—despite previous convictions against him for similar anti-corporate attacks—and a maximum sentence of three months for the other defendants.

It is unusual for opponents of big business to be treated so gently. France's leading politicians have also feted Bové. The self-styled peasant leader won unofficial recognition from President Jacques Chirac, who went out of his way to talk to him at the “Salon de l'agriculture” (an annual presentation of agricultural products), and by Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, who invited him to dinner. In September 1999, Chirac publicly endorsed Bové and spoke against allowing “one single power” to “rule undivided over the planet's food markets”—an obvious slap at the United States.

Bové's popularity in ruling circles is explained by the fact that his protests are not directed against capitalism per se, but specifically against American capitalism. By his own admission, the dismantling of the McDonald's restaurant was prompted by the US government's decision to impose a 100 percent tax increase on a group of French products in retaliation for the European Union's ban on hormone-treated beef. One of the commodities subjected to this tax was Roquefort cheese, which Bové's farm helps to produce. In the past Bové has led actions to destroy genetically modified crops, something the French government itself recently ordered.

For several years France has been the most aggressive opponent of the US within Europe. In recent months, the trade war between Europe and America has

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intensified sharply in the sphere of agriculture. The US is the biggest exporter of food products worldwide and France is also a major exporter of foodstuffs. The defence of French “quality food” against US “junk food”—the slogan under which Bové's protest was organised—is in reality a defence of the biggest French agricultural exporters against their US rivals on the world market.

Bové's perspective is fundamentally the same as that advanced by the organisers of protests in Washington, Davos and Geneva in recent months. The political line of these demonstrations was also “anti-globalisation”. The organisers view the problems facing millions of people around the world as the only possible result of the integrated development of global trade and production, not the specific outcome of globalisation under conditions of private ownership of the means of production and the profit system.

Whilst attacking international organisations and bodies such as the WTO, the World Bank and the transnational companies, the protest leaders advance a perspective to defend the capitalist nation state.

The social class on which Bové has built his anti-globalisation protests is not the working class, but small farmers. He has helped to create an international organisation, “Via Campesina” (Peasant Road), which he describes as a “peasant international”.

As with many of those on trial with him, Bové's political activities extend back to the radical protests of the late 1960s and 70s. Several of the defendants made their political debut in the “Larzac” movement, which originated in an opposition by small peasants of the Larzac area (near Millau) to the extension of a military camp at their expense. This conflict lasted for over a decade from the mid-1970s.

The objective of the “Via Campesina” is to gain concessions for small farmers within the present economic system. Bové argues that by putting pressure on governments and institutions at a national and international level they can be forced to consult “various organisations” and take heed of existing “social movements,” i.e., the small farmers.

Bové's rhetoric against globalisation is directed along narrow nationalist channels. He complains that various national peculiarities are being steamrollered by the tyranny of a new “international imperialism”. Accordingly, “French culture” and sovereignty must be defended against McDonald's “culinary imperialism”. Even when Bové speaks of international action, he insists on it originating on the national soil.

It is this defence of the French nation state that has won Bové a broad audience in the political establishment. It encouraged Charles Pasqua, leader of the chauvinistic Rassemblement pour la France, to attend a debate at Montpellier University where the farmer was the main speaker.

The various middle class radical groups in France have also embraced his nationalist perspective. The Ligue Comuniste Revolutionaire (LCR), which is affiliated to the United Secretariat of the late Ernest Mandel, made Bové's campaign the main focus of their activity for months. Prior to the trial they gave over their newspaper to the political positions of Bové and his supporters. The LCR collaborated with the Greens, the Stalinist Communist Party and the trade unions to organise the demonstration in Millau and described it in euphoric terms as a historic milestone in the struggle against “global capitalism”. The Stalinists and the Greens, it should be noted, both participate in Jospin's Socialist Party-led coalition government, which is demolishing welfare provisions, privatising the health, education and pension systems and deregulating large sectors of the economy.

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