

France: national strike and mass protest against privatisation

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Some 80 percent of Electricité de France (EDF) and Gaz de France (GDF) employees took national strike action and demonstrated in Paris on October 3 against plans by the Gaullist government of Jean-Pierre Raffarin to privatise the state-owned companies.

The Paris demonstration, which was between sixty and eighty thousand strong, saw Air France employees opposing privatisation demonstrating alongside the EDF and GDF workers, rail employees, Paris transport (RATP) workers, postal service members, France Télécom workers and various consumer groups and other protest organisations.

The newspaper *Libération* reported: “Representatives of the left, the Communist or Socialist parties, kept a low profile on the demonstration. Henri Emmanuelli and Jean-Luc Mélenchon [of the Socialist Party] tucked themselves into the main body of the CGT [Stalinist trade union federation] contingent. Along the march they received more gibes than applause: ‘Where were you these last three years’, shouted a worker in EDF blue. ‘We were waiting for you to oppose [Finance Minister in the Plural Left government Laurent] Fabius’ plans.’”

Communist Party National Secretary Marie-Georges Buffet expressed his support for “workers from my constituency and from other places, all those who are defending their conditions and fighting against privatisation”. But her party stayed in Lionel Jospin’s Plural Left coalition government as it implemented its pro-free market policies.

Union leaders such as Marc Blondel of Force Ouvrière (FO) and Bernard Thibault of the Confédération du Travail (CGT) were at pains to reject any suggestion that the mobilisation represented the “third round of the elections”—i.e., the assertion of the interests of the working class whatever the results of elections—and thus rejected any questioning of the legitimacy of the government and a president who received barely 20 percent of the popular vote in the first round.

An article entitled “Neither social third round, nor aftershock of December 1995” written by Olivier Franchon in the Communist Party daily *l’Humanité*, tried in vain to exorcise the ghost which haunts the Raffarin government and the trade union bureaucracy. Franchon, a CGT engineer from EDF, had in mind the humiliation suffered by the Juppé government that year by the mass strike of three million public sector employees

in defence of pension rights, the nationalised industries and the social services and led by the railway workers.

Juppé was rescued by the trade union leaders, in close collaboration with the parties that went on to form the Plural Left government, who refused to call for the government’s overthrow. The memory of this strike remains vivid in the minds of French workers. A GDF worker on last week’s demonstration in Paris said, “This isn’t a demo of the whole public sector. That’s for later, if Raffarin is really stupid.”

The government rejected such comparisons. “We are serene, no way in a tensed up mood as in 1995. It’s not the same context,” Raffarin declared, saying that he intends to give priority to consultation and to take time over his reforms so as “not to bring society to a standstill”.

Talks between gas and electrical workers’ representatives and Treasury ministers Francis Mer and Nicole Fontaine took place just before the demonstration so union leaders could report back to their members. The government affirmed its “will to perpetuate the present pension scheme”, while “opening up a minor part of GDF-EDF capital when market conditions permit.”

The next day, according to *Le Monde*, those attending the European Union council in Luxembourg were astonished when the French Industry Minister Nicole Fontaine said she was “prepared to discuss the principle of a total freeing up of the gas and electricity market even for individual consumers and the date for its application.”

Her only proviso was that extension to private consumers was dependent on “the success of the opening up to companies which would take place in 2004.” *Le Monde*’s correspondent commented: “Some of her colleagues could not hide their amazement at hearing this declaration the very next day after the Paris demonstration for the defence of the public sector”, which she had characterised as “a welcome support” on the eve of her negotiations in Luxembourg. *Le Monde* noted that the trade unions “were generally pleased with Madame Fontaine’s position: ‘it’s a step in the right direction’ as since 2000 ‘we’ve been asking for an accounting by the end of 2003 of the real extent of opening up to the market, at each stage of liberalisation’.”

The EDF, which has been aggressively engaged in the

acquisition of power companies abroad under the management of Plural Left government appointee François Roussey and with a large commitment in crisis torn Argentina, has run into financial trouble. France Télécom has run up a staggering 70 billion euros debt acquiring assets whose values have now collapsed.

The railways, according to *Libération*, are next in the firing line. “The secretary of state deplored the less than inspiring accounts of the enterprise, calling on its chairman (Louis Gallois) to ‘draw the consequences’. But on a question as sensitive as that of the SNCF, which had set light to the powder keg in 1995, nothing will be done without consulting the Elysée,” it reported.

In the same way that Britain’s Blair government implemented the program of his conservative predecessors, so Jospin continued that of his rightwing predecessors Chirac, Balladur and Juppé. Over two years the Jospin government raised 210 billion francs in state sector sell-offs, equalling the combined amount of his predecessors (Balladur 114 billion in three years, Juppé 40 billion in 18 months and Chirac 72 billion in two years).

Jospin wrote to power workers during the 1995 election campaign against Chirac claiming that he would “defend the public services...We must put a stop to to this free market offensive which wants to reduce all activity to the the laws of the market”. Jospin’s letter stated categorically: “I will not allow EDF and GDF to be privatised”. In order to cover up their duplicity the Plural Left called their creeping privatisation of public utilities “opening up to capital” and claimed it was not the same as privatisation.

The fantastic share options looted by top bosses and the record profits and tax handouts to businesses were accompanied by the closure of Renault’s Vilvorde plant, sackings and closures at Michelin, Moulinex, Lu, Danone and the huge recourse to cheap casual labour (about one million workers without rights in the public sector). There was an exponential rise in part time and short term contracts in the private sector and the divisive workplace-by-workplace application of the 35-hour week, which enabled management to undermine long-established rights and protections. Throughout the boom years coinciding with Jospin’s administration, the number of those living below the poverty line did not fall below 5.5 million.

Two moments stand out in Jospin’s administration: the television interview when he declared he could do nothing for the Michelin workers due to be sacked because he could not act against the laws of the market. And, again on television during the 2002 presidential campaign, when he said: “I am socialist by conviction, but the programme which I am presenting to the country is not a socialist programme. It is a synthesis of what is necessary today, that is modernity. One must be in step with one’s time.”

The parties of the left were hostile to any assessment of how

their record opened the way for the fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen’s success in getting to the second round of the presidential elections and their own humiliation at the polls. They turned the anti-Le Pen movement into a pro-Chirac election campaign, thus opening the way for the legislative triumph of his hand-picked Raffarin government.

Today, the Plural Left parties, which make no challenge to the legitimacy of Chirac/Raffarin, can barely show their face at meetings to defend pensions, the public sector and social services. Marc Blondel of the FO union federation asked with false naïveté on France Inter radio on the morning of the demonstration, “Why do they want to open up the capital of EDF to the private sector when EDF is able, in its current legal form, of supplying electricity? The government is acting out of pure ideology.” The Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire issued a pamphlet for the demonstration which took the same tack, “But everything’s happening as if the government were deaf and blind, subject only to the logic of their religion of profit,” as if anything else could be expected of the rightwing.

At the recent *fête de l’Humanité*, the Communist Party’s main annual social and fund-raising event, the party set up an anti-privatisation coordination committee which called for a social movement “able to draw in, in collaboration, the private sector”. A spokesperson declared that the problem of the Plural Left was that it “had not managed to take up the challenge of the privatisations, to free itself from both the financial markets and statism”.

The lesson from recent events in France is that only through a complete break from the market system and a struggle based on the independent interests of the working class on an international and socialist perspective is it possible to provide a way forward for workers as they prepare to do battle with the Raffarin government. This was the sense of the intervention of the WSWS in the French elections with its call for an active boycott against both Chirac and Le Pen in the second round of the presidential ballot.



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