

France: strikes, protests mount vs. austerity measures

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Truck drivers in France staged a nationwide strike November 24 and 25, erecting roadblocks on highways and intersections in various parts of the country. Union demands were for a pay increase, the standardization of the Christmas bonus, improved health insurance, a shortening of the workweek and bonuses for work experience.

French truckers' salaries are already drifting towards the minimum wage, and they fear that the admission of former Warsaw Pact countries into the European Union will allow trucking companies to dismiss them in favor of cheaper labor from the East.

The truckers' industrial action is the first in a series of strikes and demonstrations planned for the coming weeks, protesting austerity measures and the attack on public services and living standards spearheaded by the government of Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin. A mass demonstration in Paris on Tuesday included rail workers, postal workers, Air France personnel, France Télécom workers and Paris transit workers.

Strikes are already occurring in the public television sector, amongst drivers license examiners, and at France Inter airline. Farmers recently blockaded supermarkets to protest low prices for producers and price gouging of consumers by supermarket chains. A mass demonstration of public education workers is planned for December 8.

There is broad popular support for the truck drivers. According to a poll published in the *Journal du Dimanche*, 75 percent of the population thinks that truckers are "on the whole correct" in their decision to strike. Union officials said that workers were enthusiastic about launching the strike. There were reports of roadblocks spontaneously set up by workers Sunday night and of truckers using their own cars to erect roadblocks to evade union or company rules

regarding the use of trucks.

Newspapers spoke of a nightmare scenario for the government: working class action shutting down major commercial and strategic transportation lines and harming a shaky economy's Christmas season, while a large-scale demonstration brewed in Paris. Some journalists and politicians compared the emerging situation to November-December 1995, when the right-wing government of Alain Juppé, advancing a program of privatization and budget cuts similar to that of Raffarin, fell apart in the face of a massive strike wave in the public sector.

Despite broad public opposition to its program, the Raffarin government is under orders from French business circles and the European Commission to impose austerity measures. In August the government tried to hide the impact that its policies would have by reducing its tax and budget cuts from the levels announced in the aftermath of last spring's national elections. *Le Figaro* remarked at the time that opposition to Raffarin's program was so strong that he had to impose his "reforms" by stealth. The government has now abandoned this strategy.

The head of the majority conservative group in the National Assembly, Jacques Barrot, announced at the end of October that health insurance should "focus" on serious illnesses and leave more room for user fees. The satirical weekly *Le Canard Enchaîné* then revealed that the health minister, Jean-François Mattei, had asked a former manager of the Axa insurance company to prepare a report on a new balance between Social Security and private insurers.

The prime minister's web site currently announces, among other things, a passage to "fees per activity" and "increased flexibility in the constraints on public buying of services." These measures are correctly seen

as transitional to the privatization of the health care system.

The government is also launching an offensive against pensions. The minister for social affairs, François Fillon, announced that the “pre-retirement” system, which allows certain workers to retire before the age of 60, is “a disaster for our pension plans, especially now when workers will have to contribute longer.”

The civil service minister, Jean-Paul Delevoye, announced the abolition of the End-of-Career Leave—the “pre-retirement” of civil servants—without the usual consultations with the unions. The Senate’s reform projects include augmenting the size of employee contributions to pension plans and forcing workers to contribute several years more before receiving the full rate.

The government’s negotiations with the workers of the electricity and natural gas monopolies (Electricité de France/ Gaz de France—EDF/GDF) show civil servants what they can expect: reports mention an increase of roughly 50 percent in employee contributions to the EDF/GDF pension plan.

In an insulting gesture to workers, the majority conservative party (newly baptized Union for a Popular Majority—UMP) recently elected Juppé as its president in what was widely regarded as a rigged vote. President Jacques Chirac wanted to put him in a more important position after the right’s electoral victories, but Juppé’s immense unpopularity prevented him from doing so.

Juppé will probably have to face trial in two years in a lawsuit over the illegal financing of the previous right-wing party, Rassemblement pour la République (RPR). Even after rising substantially in the last few months, his approval rating, according to polling agencies, is below 35 percent.

Government spokesmen were careful to stress that although they refused to let truckers block strategic roads, they believed in “dialogue” and would not descend to vulgar “strike-breaking.” However, newspapers carried articles speculating on the use of similar measures to those employed against the 1992 truckers’ strike, when Pierre Bérégovoy of the Socialist Party government called out tanks, helicopters and heavy transport equipment to remove roadblocks. Government spokesmen mentioned the important “synergies” that officials hoped would come from the

new police organization, designed by Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy to facilitate large-scale police interventions.

Government agents evinced none of Raffarin’s supposed distaste for strikebreaking. Police entered trucks to threaten strikers with loss of their drivers licenses and phoned the trucking company bosses to ask them to fire strikers. Several roadblocks were formed with truckers’ cars, since trucking companies threatened to immediately fire any driver who used a company truck in a roadblock. There were reports of police and non-striking drivers beating strikers at roadblocks, as well as interventions by the CRS riot police. Several strikers were taken into custody and only released Monday evening.

The four union confederations with the smallest memberships amongst the truck drivers—CFTC (French Christian Workers’ Confederation), FO (Workers’ Power), CDC (Confederation of Cadre), and FNCR (National Federation of Drivers)—openly opposed the strike, signing an “accord on principles” with the employers under government auspices. The other unions—CFDT (French and Democratic Workers’ Confederation) and CGT (General Workers’ Confederation)—reportedly learned about the move from the media, a few hours before the strike was to be launched.

Not only does the emerging wave of protest express mass hostility to the right-wing government’s program, it also underscores the treacherous role of the official left, the unions and sections of the “far-left,” which responded to the electoral crisis of April-May 2002 by calling for a presidential vote for Chirac as the supposed democratic alternative to the neo-fascist Jean Marie Le Pen. Instead of ruling as a moderate, as the Socialist Party, Communist Party, etc., claimed he would, Chirac and his allies have embarked on a wide-ranging assault on living standards and democratic rights, responding to working class protest with strike-breaking.



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