

Interview with Force Ouvrière's Marc Blondel: portrait of a French trade union bureaucrat

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On February 18, reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Marc Blondel, general secretary of the CGT-FO (Confédération générale du travail/Force Ouvrière—General Labor Federation/Workers Power), generally known simply as FO, the third largest trade union federation in France.

FO has politically unsavory origins as a right-wing split-off from the Communist Party-dominated CGT union federation in 1948, partially financed and supported by Washington as part of its Cold War effort. Its first president was Léon Jouhaux, the veteran class collaborator of the French trade union movement. Jouhaux lived long enough to be denounced by Lenin as a social-patriotic traitor at the time of the First World War, to line up with Stalinists in the Popular Front era, during which he remained silent about the Moscow Trials, and end up as an ally of US imperialism.

According to estimates, FO's membership stands at slightly below 300,000, or perhaps 15 percent of the total number of trade union members in France (one estimate puts it lower, at merely 180,000). Union membership has traditionally been lower in France, where there has never been any type of dues check-off system or closed shop, than in other industrialized countries. Nonunion members have traditionally gone on strike in a particular enterprise when the union or unions called a walkout. Nonetheless, trade union membership has dropped to an all-time low in France, from over 23 percent of the workforce in 1973 to approximately 21 percent in 1978, 17 percent in 1983 and 11 percent in 1993. Today union membership stands at 8 percent.

FO represents primarily civil servants and employees at state-owned companies. The union has played a major role in setting up and operating the jointly managed vocational training and social protection organizations in such fields as health benefits, pensions and unemployment insurance. This explains, in part, the relative vigor with which Blondel and the FO leadership responded to the attempts in the mid-1990s by the government of Alain Juppé to reorganize these institutions and reduce the unions' role. These programs have been a major source of finances for FO.

Corruption is as pervasive in the French trade unions as elsewhere. Dominique Labbé, a political science professor at the University of Grenoble, estimates that members' dues account for no more than 25 percent of the unions' operating budgets—the rest comes from legal and illegal relations with various levels of government.

In January 2000, *Le Monde* published the results of a report prepared by the General Inspectorate of Social Affairs (IGAS), alleging that a jointly-managed pension fund, the CRI, was directly and indirectly funding the five trade unions that sit on its board (including FO). The IGAS charged that between 1995 and 1998, the unions, with the blessing of the employers' federation, MEDEF, collected 34.3 million francs (3.2 million

euros) in the form of salaries for full-time union officials. The French unions, according to the report, received financial support through a complex system of trading services or influence, secretly negotiated between the director general of the CRI and the highest levels of the various union bureaucracies.

The French media has reported that Blondel and FO agreed to reimburse the city of Paris 281,000 euros for payments illegally made by the city to 250 union officials between 1990 and 2001. The deal had been made secretly between Jacques Chirac (then mayor of Paris) and Blondel. The union agreed to the payment in exchange for the city dropping any legal action.

Under Blondel, who assumed leadership in 1989, FO attempted to take a more left course. It is widely rumored that the FO general secretary had long-term relations with the Parti des travailleurs (PT), formerly the OCI, led by Pierre Lambert. The pseudo-Trotskyist PT continues to exercise considerable influence in FO.

Something of a mythology has grown up around Blondel's role in the mass strikes of 1995. While FO took an uncharacteristically aggressive verbal stance against the Juppé government's attacks, Blondel was as instrumental as Louis Viannet (CGT) and Nicole Notat (CFDT—Confédération française démocratique du travail [French Democratic Labor Federation]) in bringing the mass movement under control and leaving the right-wing regime in power.

We spoke to Blondel in his office on the fifth floor of Force Ouvrière's headquarters on the Avenue du Maine in Paris. The FO general secretary's desk was piled high with papers and he described himself as a "paperivore."

We first asked Blondel about his attitude to a war against Iraq. He expressed opposition on several grounds, while acknowledging a debt to "American democracy" during the Second World War. "I am an internationalist and a pacifist," he said. He suggested that the US political system was not "the democracy they think it is," with its "millions of excluded." Blondel criticized America for attempting to play the gendarme all over the world. He observed that war was always based on the sacrifice of the working class. "So I demonstrated [on February 15]," he said.

Why was the US attacking Iraq? The union leader's comments on world affairs were superficial and right-wing in character. He seemed to take the US arguments at face value, simply arguing that America had responded "too rapidly" to the September 11 terrorist attacks and was making Iraq "a scapegoat." There was no reference in his comments to Iraq's oil riches or any geopolitical ambitions on the part of American imperialism.

While he criticized American policy, without ever making reference to the Bush administration or its political character, he aimed much of his fire at the Saddam Hussein regime. The FO general secretary pointed to

the fact that there were no free trade unions in Iraq or the rest of the Arab world. “One of my first concerns is free trade unions in the Arab world, and China,” he declared.

Blondel speaks like an anticommunist social democrat, which is what he is politically. The role of the Lambert tendency, which for years evaded the problem of Stalinism by orienting itself toward the French Socialist Party, comes into focus in this regard. The OCI-PT also was the political incubus for the former Socialist Party prime minister, Lionel Jospin, another staunch defender of the existing social order.

In a February 18 editorial in the weekly magazine of Force Ouvrière, Blondel explained why he participated in the February 15 demonstrations: “In this particular case, we were acting within the framework of the ICFTU [International Confederation of Free Trade Unions], and, parallel to that, the AFL-CIO.” His identification with the anticommunist ICFTU, founded in 1949 in opposition to the Stalinist-dominated World Federation of Trade Unions, and the arch-reactionary AFL-CIO, conduit for various CIA activities internationally, is revealing.

Blondel goes on in his editorial: “In the name of workers’ internationalism, we fought for this objective (free trade unions) during the time of Stalinism. We will not lack for energy against Arab or Chinese dictatorships.”

The conflict between France and the US over an Iraq war, reflecting the different interests of the two imperialist powers, has given an entire layer of the “left” (Socialist Party, French Communist Party, the Greens, the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, and others) another opportunity to align themselves with the chosen representative of the French bourgeoisie, President Jacques Chirac. In our conversation Blondel did not waste the opportunity to solidarize himself with French government policy.

“I congratulate Chirac. He has taken a courageous position in the UN,” Blondel told us. He went on to explain that his support for Chirac was an alliance of “circumstance.” He hastened to add that this did not translate into support for the French president’s economic and social policies. “But on this we agree,” he said.

As for the conflict between the US and Europe, Blondel clearly had not spent any time thinking about the matter. He never answered the question directly, telling us that “Europe is not unified,” and that most of the European countries are “monarchies, even if they are democratic.” He went on to note that most European nations were “based on religion,” and that only France and Portugal were “secular countries.” (This is also one of the obsessions of the PT group.)

The US has demanded that the UN support a war with Iraq, Blondel commented, but on this “there is a divergence.” He explained that he did not have complete confidence in the UN, which was nonetheless “indispensable,” but “it’s good that there is a divergence.” He continued, “Whether it’s the UN or some other organization, there must be an opposition to war.”

Turning to French politics, Blondel criticized the right for its opportunist, venal character. He complained that the “left” had no political structure, but they “are gaining credibility because of the (Jean-Pierre Raffarin) government’s right-wing policies.” The left parties (Socialist Party, Communist Party) had no “precise perspective or structure,” he said. There will be a swing (*alternance*) back to the left, which might form the next government, but what would it do? Since the collapse of the USSR, the left had no common ideas, no willingness to fight. He expressed no confidence in the so-called “far left.”

Throughout the conversation, Blondel expressed a deep pessimism about the future. He deplored the rise of communalism and ethnic-based politics. He expressed concern that the population might descend into “Jacquerie” (a reference to the indiscriminate violence of the peasant uprising of the fourteenth century). “The revolutionary initiative of the past” has gone, he said.

“I began as a miner,” he told us, and when doing a difficult job like that,

one does not identify oneself by ethnicity, but simply as a worker. “My best friend was a Pole, but he didn’t think of himself as a Pole, but as a miner, a worker.” Today it’s different, he asserted.

“I believe in the public service, I’m a collectivist,” he told us. But, he said, that flows against the current. He spoke against deregulation, privatization and the “Anglo-Saxon model.”

But what did he propose under the present circumstances? We asked him what he thought was the role of nationally based organizations in the face of the global character of capitalism and in light of the international antiwar demonstrations. His responses to this question were the most critical remarks in the entire conversation.

Blondel heaped scorn on the possibility of organizing the working class internationally (after describing himself earlier as an “internationalist”!). International organization “is utopian,” he said, “it’s literature (i.e., fantasy).” All serious organizations, he informed us, are nationally based.

To illustrate his point, he noted that many people had marched on February 15 against the war in Iraq, some of whom he disagreed with. He wasn’t happy to be marching with women in veils, Blondel said, because veils connote “submission,” but he and these women were both against the war, so they had marched together. (In passing, he noted the presence of ethnic associations and similar groups, as well as the absence of certain groups. “Why were there so few Asians on the march?” he wondered, pointing out that the march had taken place near the 13th arrondissement, a heavily Asian area.)

Blondel was apparently arguing that marching against imperialist war required a *lower* level of agreement and consciousness than participating in wages struggles. According to him, unions are the heart of the working class; working class struggle equals trade union struggle.

The explicit rejection of internationalism, the blindness to world economic and social realities, the quasi-chauvinist references to immigrants, the devotion to the most narrow economic issues—in all of this one sees the outlines of a portrait of the contemporary union bureaucrat, including the French “left” variety. Blondel sees himself, one feels, as the last of a dying breed of stalwart “workers’ leaders,” fighting the good fight against impossible odds and in the face of popular indifference.

There is something darkly comical about Blondel’s obtuseness. When we asked him about the conditions facing the French working class, he responded with a single word, “catastrophic.” He described how pensions, social security and “all the gains” of the working class were systematically under attack. Little by little, he said, they’re destroying everything.

You are not optimistic, we suggested. “No,” he replied firmly.

The unions today, Blondel told us, are reduced to self-defense. This is a kind of unionism that is far more difficult. I prefer unionism, he said, that brings something to people. Capitalism had changed, he commented. It is no longer the individual capitalists one faces, but finance capital, global capital.

So, in response to the conditions that he characterizes as “catastrophic,” in which workers face globally organized capital, what does Blondel propose? More of the same: nationally based trade unionism, the same policy that has so manifestly failed the working class in every part of the world.



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