

A policy to defend French workers' pensions and social gains

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The government of Jean-Pierre Raffarin in France has opened an attack on the pension system for public sector workers. On April 3 tens of thousands of public workers participated in a work stoppage and some 500,000 participated in demonstrations across the country. The following WSWs statement was distributed to demonstrations in Paris and Amiens.

Baron de Seillière, France's top boss, president of the Medef, the employers' association, has demanded of President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin that they should expend the same energy on imposing social reforms, in particular of the pensions, as they have been expending on diplomatic efforts to defend French imperialism's interests in relation to the war in Iraq.

This is not just a rhetorical device: French capitalism's war on the living standards, social gains and rights of workers is a crucial means of reducing labour costs and thus prosecuting the ever more bitter conflicts between France and the European Union and the United States over trade, markets, cash flows and the resources of the planet.

Rivalry over the share of the plunder of oil resources from the peoples of the Middle East, being played out at this very time on the battlefields of Iraq and in the corridors of the UN, is an inevitable extension onto the world arena of the process of the plunder of the social services and the social conquests taking place in every country in the world and most notably the United States.

While new funding is being provided by Nicolas Sarkozy and the rest of the government for the police and the military, Francis Mer, the finance minister, has cut or frozen funding for transport and road safety, for the handicapped and for education. The growing drive to militarise France and its European allies in the face of increasing US aggression can only bring greater pressure on the social services than before. The worldwide slogan of the school students on strike and demonstrating against the war expresses a profound aspiration: "Books not bombs."

The international nature of the offensive against workers' rights is pointed out in a Medef document in relation to pensions as part of a justification for attacks in France: the gruesome plea for a level playing field. In Britain the age of retirement has just been raised to 65 and the age of 70 is being mooted. In Finland and the US the legal age of retirement is due to rise by two years to 67. It is due to rise by three years in New Zealand and by five years in Japan, Korea, Spain and Italy.

The massive demonstrations France has seen since the summer holidays against the plans to privatise EDF-GDF, the public

electricity and gas companies, and against plans to ravage pension rights, the no vote of the gas and electricity workers to their unions' and bosses' proposals, thus finds itself in unison with the worldwide movement against the war and the resistance of the Iraqi people to the terrible destruction unleashed by the armed forces of the American and British governments, inheritors of Reagan and Thatcher.

Raffarin is nervous of a repeat of the mass movement which crippled the government of Alain Juppé in 1995 when he attempted to attack public sector workers' pensions and the welfare state and public corporations in general. However, the pressure of the Medef and the demands of the European Union for France to remain within the limits of a public deficit of no more than 3 percent mean that Raffarin will have to bite the bullet and come out fully into the open: pensions are due to be debated in parliament in July and the reform of pensions completed by August—in the middle of the holidays.

Workers should have absolutely no illusions that the "left" or the trade unions will put serious resistance to Raffarin's plans. Their lining up behind Chirac on the Iraq question is an ominous sign that they will—in the end—go along with his government. It reminds us of the time of the presidential elections one year ago, when—after the April 21 result of the first round—the entire left, including the "far left," campaigned for a vote for Chirac and rejected any independent mobilisation of the working class by boycotting the election. This provided Chirac with the majority he needed to set up the Raffarin government and start on his programme of accelerated attacks on workers' rights and conditions.

While it is correct and necessary for workers to vehemently oppose the American-British attack on Iraq as a criminal, imperialist enterprise, this must not in any way mean support for Chirac's foreign policy. Chirac and Raffarin, the representatives of the French bourgeoisie, follow their own imperialist agenda.

Those who support Chirac's foreign policy implicitly accept the logic flowing from it. Global competition, in particular with the United States, under conditions of extreme fragility of the world economy, and the build-up of French and European militarism as a counterweight to the United States, are driving the ruling elite to demand ever more savage inroads into workers' rights and conditions.

Support for Chirac's foreign policy is the position of the entire left, including the "far left."

CGT President Bernard Thibault's opening report to his trade

union confederation's national conference last week insisted on France and Europe's mission in the world: "The CGT approves of the position taken by the Head of State and French diplomacy. It is pleased that common agreement has occurred between France, Germany and Belgium."

Former socialist prime minister Laurent Fabius said in *Le Monde* (29 March 2003): "A second lesson of the war and its genesis is the need to strengthen the construction of a united Europe and to rapidly create a European defence force." In the same article Fabius proposes the turning of Iraq into a UN protectorate, as a means to prevent the untrammelled exploitation of that country's resources by the US and give the European corporations a share of the spoils of war.

And the LCR in a leaflet handed out on 15 March said: "We will see if Chirac goes the whole way in his opposition by using the veto." The PT is using the war to further its campaign to defend the unity of the Republic.

In fact, Raffarin's attacks on pensions and social gains are a continuation of the record of successive left and right governments attempting to adapt France to the requirements of global competition on the backs of the working class, beginning with the policies of the Mitterrand years of the '80s and '90s.

The job of the parties of the Plural Left, the Socialist Party, the Communist Party and the Greens, and the Trade Union bureaucracies, aided and abetted by the so-called Trotskyists of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, Lutte Ouvrière and the Parti des Travailleurs, has been to head off any revolt of the working class and the youth and to keep them in the framework of the Gaullist Fifth Republic.

Jospin explained his position very clearly a little before the 2002 presidential elections, as he had done before over the Michelin sackings, saying that you cannot oppose the laws of the market: "I am a socialist by conviction, but the programme I'm putting to the country is not a socialist programme. It is the synthesis of what is necessary today, that is modernity. You must adapt to your time."

Edouard Balladur's reform of the private sector pensions of 1993 followed up by Juppé's reform of 1996 after the trade unions had saved his skin by winding up the mass strikes of 1995 at the December summit, were virtually unopposed by the trade unions and left untouched by the Jospin government. Indeed the Charpin report, commissioned by Jospin, proposed the lengthening of the contribution period, thus clearing the way for Raffarin and the Medef.

In the March 2002 Barcelona meeting of the 15 members of the EU, Chirac and Jospin voted for the document formulating the objective of pushing back by five years the age when people actually retire. In line with this Raffarin is contemplating imposing a heavy penalty of a 3 percent loss of pension for every non-paid year so that people will be obliged to work out their time whatever their state of health or family situation.

The unions attempted to foist the plans for privatisation and the dismantling of the pension scheme on the EDF-GDF workers, which involved the raising contributions by more than 50 percent, from 7.58 percent to 12 percent of their salaries.

The lack of will on the part of the unions to defend the pensions has been revealed for all to see by the joint platform of all the main

union organisations for the demonstration of February 1 this year, which abandoned the call to limit the contributions period for the full pension to 37,5 annuities and even raised the figure of 40 annuities: an outright assault on the public sector workers by their own union leaderships.

These are the unmistakable signs that, yet again, all the trade unions will betray the upcoming struggle, just as they have done time and time again over the last 20 years. Every day their ties with the state are strengthened and those with workers weakened.

Raffarin and Seillière, with the help of the media, the trade union bureaucracy and the former Plural left, try to stampede people into accepting a big decrease in pension rights because of people's increased longevity and claiming that, without the measures they are proposing, the pensions system will collapse. In fact, what they wish to avoid is a larger part of the employers' profits being used to finance the pensions of the increasing number of people living to enjoy a good old age. The reformist opponents of the Raffarin programme peddle the illusion that it is just a question of pressurising the government to devote to pensions the extra 6 percent of the GDP required to maintain them at present levels.

The struggle against the destruction of pension rights and social gains must be based on an internationalist, socialist perspective.

The struggle against the attempts by different national capitalist elites to compete by destroying the living standards and rights of the working class can only be fought on an international basis against the profit system itself.

The power of the working class can only be developed if it is mobilised independently of the capitalist parties. The parties of the left have shown their incapacity to defend workers' rights or to oppose imperialist militarism.

The struggle against trade war and militarism demands the international unity of the working class. The working class needs to build its own political party and to struggle for power.

We invite you to regularly read the *World Socialist Web Site*, which fights for such an international perspective, and to contact us for more information on how to participate in building this movement.

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