

Another day of action in France

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On June 19, France witnessed another day of action to protest the plans of President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin to reduce pension benefits and decentralise the education system. It was the eighth such day of protest in the public and private sector as a whole, and the twelfth in the education service since the end of the summer holidays last September. Most of the protests have taken place over the last two months.

June 19 could well be the last one. While workers were marching in Paris, Marseilles and many other French cities, parliament was busy voting on the various paragraphs of the pensions bill and trade union leaders who have organised the demonstrations openly admitted defeat.

Annick Coupé, spokesperson for the G10 (group of 10 federations of SUD trade unions) told the daily *Libération*: “The National Assembly is going ahead with the debate on the Fillon plan (François Fillon, minister of labour, is presenting the bill) and is determined to vote for it. Today’s day of action is not capable of preventing them from doing it. Nevertheless, there will still be many people in the street to say that our opposition to this plan remains undiminished.”

Coupé was articulating what had become increasingly clear since May 13, when the movement reached its high point. On that day, two million marchers and perhaps double that number of strikers walked out against the government’s plans. Opinion polls showed that 66 percent rejected the plans, which will diminish workers’ pensions by as much as 30 percent and begin the dismantling of the national education system, considered by the broad mass of the French people to be a symbol of democratic and egalitarian traditions.

After May 13 the trade union leaders did everything they could to exhaust the movement and render it harmless. While the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour), which is close to the

Socialist Party, supported the government’s plans from the beginning, the CGT (General Confederation of Labour), which has long-standing ties to the Communist Party, pursued a tactic of attrition against its own members. Rejecting the call for a general strike, it organised one-day protests once or twice every week—a tactic with which the government cope.

On June 10, the CGT, together with four education unions, participated in a round-table discussion with the government and struck a treacherous deal, effectively sabotaging the teachers’ strike. In return for a promise from the unions not to impede the baccalaureate examinations (which all graduating students must take to gain admission to the university system) the government conceded that 20,000 out of 110,000 non-teaching staff would not be “decentralised,” i.e., removed from the national education system and placed under the authority of local government.

This agreement deprived the education workers not only of an important means of exerting pressure, it also divided them. The 20,000 exempted from decentralisation are highly qualified and better-paid workers—school doctors, social workers and counsellors—while the other 90,000 are mainly low-paid manual workers.

The education workers were the backbone of the anti-government movement. Many had been on strike for more than a month, fighting simultaneously against the break-up of the national education system and the attack on pensions. Thus the June 10 deal provided the coup de grace to the pensions movement, revealing the hostility of the unions to any coordinated offensive against the government.

Much to the embarrassment of CGT leader Bernard Thibault, Minister of Labour François Fillon publicly recognised the role of the CGT in disarming the movement. As the paper *Le Monde* reported on June 17: “François Fillon made a point, in addition, of

paying tribute to the CGT and its secretary Bernard Thibault for his ‘responsible attitude’. Thus, by stressing ‘the responsible opposition’ on the part of the CGT ‘even in the tense moments’, the minister of labour acknowledged a debt of gratitude to the Montreuil-based confederation for having worked hard to prevent a generalisation of the movement, which was in danger of getting out of its control.”

President Chirac, who kept very much in the background during the conflict, came out with a major speech on June 12 in Toulouse, posturing, as *Le Monde* put it, “more than ever before as the impartial arbiter standing above the political and social quagmire.” There are “neither victors nor losers,” he pontificated, and was full of praise for the unions.

According to *Le Monde*: “Applause greeted his tribute to the teachers who ‘mobilised to enable the baccalaureate to take place throughout the nation.’ Having worried for several weeks [about possible strike action to block the exams], Mr. Chirac’s collaborators waited until they were certain that the baccalaureate examinations would take place without incident before formulating these words of praise.”

In the same speech, Chirac announced a new round of attacks, beginning in the autumn, on the Sécurité sociale, the national system of health care benefits.

Despite the betrayals by the unions, there was a large turnout on the June 19 demonstrations. They were smaller than previous ones, but much bigger than most observers had expected. Throughout France, 300,000 demonstrated and many thousands went on strike.

This reporter participated in the Paris demonstration, with 60,000 people marching from Montparnasse to the Medef [the employers’ federation] headquarters near the Eiffel tower in a broad column stretching as far as the eye could see down the long Paris boulevards.

The workers with whom the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke had few illusions about the likelihood of forcing the government to retreat. But they were in a mood of defiance and wanted to demonstrate their opposition to the government’s attacks.

The WSWS spoke to three school canteen workers—Thierry, Sébastien and Pascale—as they assembled for the demonstration outside the cinema Le Bretagne on the Boulevard Montparnasse. They told us they had been on strike since May 13 and had won nothing.

Asked their opinion of the Socialist and Communist parties, Thierry retorted: “Don’t mention them. I don’t want to think about them. If they were in power, things would be the same.”

Discussing what was needed to change the system, Liliane, a geography and history teacher, joined in the conversation, saying, “We need a revolutionary party.”

Françoise, another teacher, explained in detail how the unions had strangled the movement and led it toward defeat. But she was determined not to give in.



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