

After the mass protests and strikes

What way forward for working people in France?

By WSWS Editorial Board
15 July 2003

Over the last two months, France has experienced the biggest strike and protest movement since 1995. Millions of public service employees, as well as those working in the private sector, participated in eight days of action, strikes and demonstrations. Since last autumn, there have been 12 days of action in education, with many teachers stopping work for weeks.

The protests were directed against the conservative government's pensions reforms—Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin and President Jacques Chirac envisage cutting pensions by up to 30 percent—and against the decentralisation of the national education system. This is regarded as a step towards privatisation and as an attack on the egalitarian and democratic values that are historically connected with the centralized education system in France.

The movement was characterised by an obvious contradiction.

On the one hand, it brought to light the extent of opposition to the government, which despite a big parliamentary majority is largely isolated. The rejection of the government's plans was more extensive than in 1995, when strikes and protests to defend the social security system paralysed the country for weeks. According to opinion polls, two out of three French voters reject the plans of Raffarin and his Minister for Social Affairs François Fillon. Many people were prepared to make significant sacrifices to fight these plans, as the teachers' strikes showed.

On the other hand, there was no trace of either a perspective or the type of determined leadership required to defeat the government. In the end, the protest movement achieved nothing. The government was forced to undertake some evasive manoeuvres, but then gradually put its plans into practice with the help of its parliamentary majority. The trade unions have confessed their impotence. "The National Assembly is continuing to debate Fillon's plans and is determined to hold a vote on them. The days of action cannot prevent them from doing this," confessed Annick Coupé, the spokeswoman of the group of 10 SUD trade unions on June 19 in the daily paper *Libération*.

The protest movement was defeated not through any lack of willingness to fight, but because of the absence of a consistent leadership and a viable perspective. The parties of the radical left tried subsequently to portray the defeat as a victory. "Those in government know that they lost the battle for consciousness," declared the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire on June 19. And a June 20 *Lutte Ouvrière* editorial maintained that the long duration of the protest movement and its support by the majority of wage earners represents "a dreadful discrediting of the government". But that is a sham, designed to prevent the drawing of a critical balance sheet of the results of this movement and to divert attention from their own responsibility.

To prepare the next round of the struggle, the methods and political tendencies that prevailed in the protest movement must be subjected to ruthless criticism. Otherwise, a far greater defeat is inevitable. The

government has already announced further attacks. After pensions and education, the next target is the social security system, which was at the heart of the 1995 struggle.

The experiences of the last two months have shown that the old forms of class struggle are exhausted and that a new perspective and a new party are necessary. Pressure from the streets and isolated strikes are not enough to force the government to retreat. What is necessary is a political struggle that forces the government to resign, replacing it with a government that represents the interests of the working population.

Not one of the many unions and political currents that were active in the recent protest movement measured up to this task. In one form or another, they all contributed to restrain or sabotage the movement.

In 1995, the conservative government of Alain Juppé reacted to the weeks of strikes and protests by partly withdrawing its plans. This did not stop the welfare cuts, however. One year later, Juppé was replaced by a coalition government under Lionel Jospin comprising the Parti Socialiste (PS), Parti Communiste Français (PCF) and the Greens. In the next five years, the hopes for a more socially oriented policy awakened during the election campaign were bitterly disappointed. The extent of the disappointment was seen in 2002, in the first round of the presidential elections: Jospin received fewer votes than the fascist candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen and did not go through to the second round. At the same time, the candidates of the radical left received over 10 percent of the vote.

The PS has never recovered from this blow. Jospin resigned and the party moved further to the right. Although the party hypocritically expressed solidarity with the strikers and celebrated CGT union leader Bernhard Thibault at the PS party congress in Dijon in May, it cannot disguise the fact that it fundamentally supports Raffarin's course. "As a socialistically oriented government, we would have come to a similar solution", admitted Michel Rocard, one of the party heavyweights.

The PS, far from demanding the withdrawal of the pension reform plans, is only calling for cosmetic changes. They unreservedly support a core element of the reforms—extending the period over which contributions are paid by public service workers from 37.5 to 40 years. In the final analysis, it was the PS that set the course for the present pension reforms. Together with President Chirac, Jospin personally signed a document last year at the European Union (EU) summit in Barcelona that obligates member states to extend the working life of every EU citizen by about five years.

The PCF, since its electoral debacle last year, is only a shadow of its former self. Outstripped in the presidential elections by the two candidates of the radical left, since then it has been tearing itself to pieces in internal struggles. Today, hardly anybody regards this party, which for decades celebrated Stalin and then provided every PS-led government with reliable support, as a credible alternative.

The trade unions reacted to the obvious bankruptcy of the PS and PCF by carefully avoiding any political conflict with the government. As nearly always in France, the unions were divided and split. The CFDT sabotaged the protest movement and reached an agreement with the government. The CGT, FO and SUD, as well as some of the smaller trade unions, called strikes and demonstrations. But from the outset, they also made clear that they did not place the government in question.

Jean Christophe Le Duigou, number two in the CGT, told French daily *Le Monde* on June 4, “We pursue a logic of demands and not the political goal of defeating the government... We are for a protest movement in the public and private sectors that can achieve victory by means of a trade union struggle.”

FO leader Marc Blondel expressed similar sentiments to the same newspaper on May 26. He said he has consciously employed the terms “reinforcement”, “universalising” and “coordination” for the further development of the strike. “I hesitate to use the term ‘general strike’, because, whether one wants to or not, it gives the impression of a rebellion and a political fight against the government.”

Calls for a general strike became increasingly loud after May 13, when the protest movement reached a high point. Two million participated in the demonstrations and nearly double that number in the strikes. According to opinion polls, 66 percent of the population rejected the government’s plans. But the trade union leaders refused to organise an indefinite general strike and instead pursued a tactic of attrition against their own members. Once or twice a week they called for one-day protests—a tactic with which the government could live happily. Teachers, some of whom had been on strike for weeks, remained isolated, and the combativeness of the movement was exhausted gradually.

On June 10, the CGT and four education unions delivered the fatal blow to the strike by school personnel. They sat down with the government at a “round table” and agreed that the strikes would not hit the forthcoming High School examinations. In return, the government promised to exclude 20,000 from some 110,000 non-teaching personnel from the decentralisation measures.

This agreement not only deprived the strikers of an important means of applying pressure on the government, but it also divided them. Those excluded from the decentralisation measures were predominantly better-off employees—school doctors, social workers and advisors—while the lower-paid manual workers remained affected. The June 10 deal showed that the trade unions reject any coordinated resistance against the government.

In the National Assembly, Employment Minister François Fillon, responsible for the pension reforms, even praised the role of the CGT in disarming the protest movement. In a June 17 editorial, *Le Monde* commented, “François Fillon paid tribute to the CGT and its secretary Bernard Thibault for his ‘conscientious attitude’. He stressed that even ‘in moments of strain’ the CGT had followed a ‘reasonable course of opposition’. The employment minister owes a debt of thanks to the trade union for endeavouring to prevent a general expansion of the protest movement, which ran the risk of getting out of control.”

Jacques Chirac also found words to acknowledge the trade unions. The president, who had stayed in the shadows during the protests, presented himself on June 12 as a non-partisan arbitrator. There are “neither winners nor losers”, he lectured, during a speech in Toulouse. Cynically, he praised the teachers for having fought so that “the High School exams could take place throughout the entire country”. *Le Monde* remarked, “Monsieur Chirac’s staff spent fearful weeks waiting until they were sure that the High School examinations would pass without incident, before they formulated these words of praise.”

The parties of the so-called “extreme left” merely offered a left cover for the trade unions. Given the discrediting of the “majority left” parties, they played an important role. In 2002, *Lutte Ouvrière* (Workers Fight),

the *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (Revolutionary Communist League) and the *Parti des Travailleurs* (Workers Party) had together received over 10 percent of the vote in the first round of the presidential elections. The media attentively pursued their statements and their members seemed to be in every locality. But instead of offering an alternative, they served as advocates for the trade union bureaucracy.

Lutte Ouvrière (LO) rejected the demand for a general strike. According to LO leader Arlette Laguiller, it costs nothing to proclaim this demand; “however, one is in the realm of illusions. Neither LO nor the LCR are able to proclaim anything.” Robert Barcia, alias Hardy, the founder of LO, was even more direct. He called the demand for a general strike “folly”. Instead of calling for a general strike (*grève générale*) LO called for the strike to be “generalised” (*généraliser la grève*). These semantics conceal an important political difference. LO avoided a conflict with the CGT and FO unions, which also rejected a general strike, because it would have led to a political confrontation with the government.

This organization’s radical phrasemongering covers its deep pessimism and opportunism. LO refuses to make any criticism of the official trade union apparatus and ascribes responsibility for the weaknesses of the protest movement to the workers themselves. The LO call to expand and generalise the strike brings to mind the despair of a shipwrecked sailor who tries to slake his thirst with seawater. The protest movement failed because it lacked a political perspective and a determined leadership. But LO refuses to fight for a bold political perspective, entrenching itself behind the trade unions that are strangling the protest movement, and justifying this by saying the movement is not yet broad enough and the workers are not yet mature enough. “We can proclaim nothing”, declares Laguiller. But it is not a matter of “proclaiming” something, but of formulating a political perspective and taking responsibility for it. This is precisely what LO rejects. “We are too weak, our influence is too small, the workers have not advanced far enough, we can’t effect anything”, is their constant refrain.

LO is leaving the political preparation of the next round of the conflict to the government: “If it continues its offensive against the workers, it will convince the workers that only the general opposition of the entire labour world can stay the arm that strikes at them.” What a deplorable avoidance of their own political responsibility!

In contrast to LO, the LCR placed the call for an “unlimited general strike” at the centre of its agitation. But the content of its line hardly differed from that of LO. Like LO, the LCR understood by a general strike a “generalisation of the strike”—a purely quantitative expansion of the protest movement. The organisation never stated that a general strike poses the question of power, and did nothing to prepare the working class for such a political struggle.

An LCR declaration of May 25 states, “The extent of the mobilisation shows that it is possible to stop the liberalisation offensive, which has afflicted our country for 20 years, through an unlimited general strike and force through the alternative, a society based on social solidarity, in which a contribution is demanded from profits, share options and financial income.”

Who should be “forced” to establish such a society? If one follows the arguments of the LCR, which carefully avoid the question of an alternative government, then they obviously mean the Raffarin government! The folly of such a conception is obvious. A general strike can only sharply pose the question of another type of society. It can be resolved only by a party that prepares the working class to take over political power.

Ironically, it was the rightwing weekly *L’Express* that recalled Trotsky’s statements about the general strike in “Whither France”. “For the proletariat, the general strike directly poses the question of conquering power,” *L’Express* quoted the founder the Fourth International in an article about LO and LCR. Although the magazine dramatically overstated

the influence of the two organizations on the strike, it concluded that, for their part, they do not threaten such a danger.

No one who closely followed the 2002 presidential elections can be surprised by the positions taken by the LCR and LO. Although the radical left candidates received 10.6 percent of the vote in the first round, (the successful candidate and election winner Jacques Chirac achieved only 19.4 percent) and millions spontaneously took to the streets against Le Pen, these organizations strictly rejected taking political responsibility for an independent political movement of the working class.

At that time, the World Socialist Web Site issued an open letter proposing the organization of an active boycott of the second round, in which Chirac and Le Pen faced each other. "Why a boycott? Because it is necessary to deny any legitimacy to this fraudulent election; because it is necessary to establish an independent political line for the working class; because an active and aggressive boycott would create the best conditions for the political struggles that will arise in the aftermath of the elections", we wrote.

We opposed the argument that said a vote for Chirac means defending democracy, and warned that the campaign for Chirac "represents an attempt to straitjacket the French working class politically in advance of struggles that must assume dimensions far beyond those of 1995. The result of a massive vote for Chirac would be to greatly enhance his political authority, as a quasi-Bonapartist figure. He would use this authority ruthlessly against the interests of the working class."

The LCR, LO and the PT flatly rejected an election boycott. In the end, the LCR joined a broad front stretching from the rightwing bourgeois camp and the PS to the PCF, and called for a vote for Chirac, who was then elected with 82 percent of the vote. The LCR thereby shares direct responsibility for the authority that President Chirac enjoys today.

After much hesitation, the LO eventually called for voters to cast a spoiled ballot, but remained completely passive. In an interview with the WSW, Arlette Laguiller rejected a campaign for an active boycott, arguing that the balance of power did not permit an active boycott. The PT simply ignored the election and refused to put forward a position.

In the meantime, the warnings made by the WSW have been confirmed. In the past year, Chirac has ruthlessly used his authority against the interests of the working class.

At the end of May, when the decline of the protest movement was already apparent, Arlette Laguiller wrote in a *Lutte Ouvrière* editorial: "If the strikes and demonstrations continue and intensify within the necessary time, the ministers, these lackeys of the big entrepreneurs and the rich, will be forced to swallow their hatred against the workers and pack up their plans."

What a pitiful mixture of phrasemongering, self-deception and reformist illusions! Laguiller acts as if we are still living in the 1970s. At that time, great strike movements were still in a position to wrest considerable concessions from big business and the government. But since then, the economic and political world situation has fundamentally changed. The globalization of production, commerce and the financial markets has undermined the policy of concessions and compromises.

Seventy years ago, Leon Trotsky wrote in *Whither France?*: "The policy of despoiling and suffocating the masses stems not from the caprices of the reaction but from the decomposition of the capitalist system. That is the fundamental fact which must be assimilated by every worker if he is not to be duped by hollow phrases. That is precisely why the democratic reformist parties are disintegrating and losing their forces one after another throughout Europe."

Today, these words again take on a burning actuality. The decline of reformism has progressed a long way. By the 1980s, the reformist parties and trade unions could no longer obtain any appreciable reforms. Workers' living standards stagnated. In the 1990s, the process of globalization and the collapse of the Soviet Union finally put an end to the

policy of social reconciliation. The consequence was a further turn to the right in the reformist camp. In Britain, New Labour took over the programme of Margaret Thatcher; in Italy, the Communist Party became left democrats; in Germany, the SPD-led government embarked upon a drastic austerity course; and in France, Jospin's promises of reform dissolved into thin air.

The Iraq war has intensified this development. It marks a turning point in world politics. The US administration made it unmistakably clear that it is no longer prepared to respect international law and the international institutions that have lent a certain stability to international relations since the Second World War. Washington's new foreign policy is based upon military power, intimidation, lies and political intrigues. This applies not only to the Middle East, Africa and Asia, but to Europe as well. America no longer regards Europe as a partner, but as a rival. It no longer strives to strengthen Europe and to unite it, but to weaken and divide it.

The Bush government is trying to hold the deep internal contradictions of American society in check with its aggressive foreign policy, by submitting the world to its power and transforming it based on the most ruthless market principles. In Washington's view, every form of social benefit, tax on incomes and profits, state economic control and environmental protection represents an unacceptable restriction of the "freedom" to plunder the world.

The European governments react to this by intensifying their attacks on the broad mass of the population. In order to keep pace with global US competition, they attack pensions, social security benefits, wages and democratic rights. In order not to fall behind when it comes to exploiting the raw materials and markets of other countries they are increasing their spending on armaments in order to be able to mount their own international military operations. This has eliminated any room for social concessions and compromises and is the fundamental reason for the bankruptcy of the trade unions and the decline of all the reformist parties.

The experience in France has confirmed that it is impossible to defend social and political achievements of the working class without openly calling into question the rule of the bourgeoisie and their control of society. The class struggle, which in recent decades has predominantly followed a syndicalist course, must once again take political form. The most urgent task is the construction of a new party that opposes the influence of the old outmoded organizations and that fights for the development of an independent political mass movement of the working class. It is upon this that the outcome of future confrontations with the government will depend.

The LCR and LO speculate endlessly about the "balance of power", issuing meaningless platitudes. The LO consoled itself after the protest movement died down with the words: "As long as the embers remain alive, the fire can flicker up again and ignite the flames." However, the balance of power is not a static but a dynamic factor. Its most important element is the revolutionary party. It contributes substantially to developing the political consciousness of the working class and to strengthening its self-assurance—presupposing it confronts the facts and does not become intoxicated with hollow clichés.

The construction of a new workers' party is a difficult task, which cannot be effected overnight. But it is indispensable. Only if this necessity is confronted can it become a reality. A bold perspective, which proceeds from the changed world situation and which draws from it the necessary conclusions, will find increasing resonance among the masses of working people. The recent protest movement in France, like the worldwide opposition to the Iraq war, has shown that millions of people no longer feel they are represented by the old, fossilised organisations.

The following questions must be placed at the centre of a bold perspective:

** For a socialist Europe*

The idea that pensions, or any other social question, can be resolved

within the borders of France is absurd. This is demonstrated by the fact that similar attacks are taking place in all the European countries, whether governed by conservative parties or social democracy. The European working class must unite and defend its social achievements collectively.

The single European market and currency and the coming expansion eastward have given Europe a high degree of economic integration. That is a progressive development. But the European Union and its institutions are dominated by the strongest economic interests. While capital can move freely, the working class is split by serious differences in wages and living standards, discrimination against immigrants as well as the suppression of democratic rights.

The extreme right reacts by calling for a return to “national sovereignty”. The answer of the working class points in the opposite direction: It must unite European-wide in a single party and fight for a united Europe that is based upon social equality and democracy—for the United Socialist States of Europe.

** For equality and democracy*

The defence of democratic rights and the social and political equality of all people are central components of the fight for a socialist Europe.

In particular, the millions of refugees and immigrants who live on the continent must be defended. They form a significant part of the working class and will play an important role in its struggles. The witch-hunting of immigrants and the division of the working class on grounds of religion, skin colour, ethnic origin, as well as into East and West, serves to suppress the peoples of Europe and keep them in check.

** Against imperialism and war*

The fight for a socialist Europe and opposition to imperialism and war are inseparably connected.

The European governments have proved completely incapable of opposing the warmongering of the Bush administration. The initial resistance of the German and French governments never went beyond diplomatic manoeuvres in the UN. They subsequently legitimised the war and thus gave a new impetus to the warmongers in Washington.

The fight for a socialist Europe would form a powerful counterweight to American imperialism. At the same time, it would be a point of attraction for the American working class and would encourage it to oppose the Bush government.

With the *World Socialist Web Site*, the International Committee of the Fourth International has established an effective instrument for developing a new international workers’ party. The WSWS has a worldwide readership; daily it analyses the most important political events and provides a political orientation.

We invite all those in France who are looking for a political perspective to read the WSWS, contact the editorial board and contribute to the development of the WSWS.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact