

France: May Day demonstrators protest attacks on social programs

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May Day demonstrations taking place across France were smaller than those of the last two years. In Paris the crowd was estimated at 14,000 to 30,000, with demonstrators marching from the Place de la République with lively contingents from the unemployed organisations at the head. Many green “cartes vitals,” the electronic card used to access public health care services, were brandished. Some half of the demonstrators marched behind CGT trade union banners.

Millions took to the streets in 2002 to protest fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen reaching the second round of the presidential elections. In 2003, large demonstrations took place in opposition to the Chirac-Raffarin government’s cuts in pension rights and dismantling of the public education service.

This year, these same issues remain. The government has continued the assault on workers’ rights with attacks on unemployment benefits, which have deprived over 200,000 workers of payments since January 1, and plans for savage reductions in health provision and sickness benefits.

The relative smallness of the demonstrations this year, coming as they do after a routing for the ruling UMP party in the regional elections—where Chirac’s representatives were wiped out of the controlling position in all but one of France’s regions—can only be explained by the lack of political perspective put forward by the parties of the left.

Many organizations handed out leaflets on the demonstrations, but the absence of any political perspective—apart from vague appeals to put pressure on the government to halt its counter-reforms—was very noticeable.

A team of WSWs supporters handed out the WSWs statement “One year since the US invasion of Iraq”,

which draws a balance sheet of the first year of the US-led coalition’s illegal occupation of Iraq and calls for a socialist alternative to the war.

Naïla, a Paris law student, told the WSWs that she was against the European Union as it had been created. “I can’t say it’s a good thing for the countries joining,” she said. “The people are likely to suffer big losses in rights and social services. Using deficits as a pretext, France in Europe is submitting to neo-liberal, untrammelled capitalist norms and it’s a bad thing for the French people,” she said. “Two years ago, when there were the massive May Day mobilizations in opposition to Le Pen’s getting into the second round of the presidential elections, I responded to the call by the political parties to vote for Chirac. I now feel that I was taken for a ride. Chirac was elected with the votes of the left. I hesitated: in the context it was a sort of moral blackmail. I wouldn’t do that again.”

On Iraq, Naïla felt that the war should never have been launched. She was aware that President Jacques Chirac wanted the United Nations to take over control in Iraq and was not sure what attitude to take regarding withdrawal of troops from the country: “I know it’s a geopolitical question: the West wants to exclude the Middle East countries from control of their region. I don’t know what to say about the total withdrawal of American troops and whether UN troops should go in. If they went there would probably be another Islamic republic.”

Valéry, a primary school teacher and member of the CGT trade union and the Communist Party, defended the call of the left parties to vote Chirac, despite the disastrous social policies his government was implementing and which were at the centre of the May Day demonstration. “I don’t regret voting Chirac—it was for the immigrants—we couldn’t let Le Pen in.”

She had to admit that under Chirac the immigrants had not fared well with the crackdowns of former Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, but insisted that Le Pen's "low" score in the second round of the elections (18 percent) had been a good thing.

She thought that the expansion of Europe—with the addition of the 11 accession countries—was good, but disagreed with the fact that it was being built on capitalist, not socialist lines.

Jean-Philippe Lambert, a researcher into acoustics and music, said that the expansion of the EU was all about economics and not social conditions. The only interesting thing about the EU was that it brought workers from different countries into contact with each other and into communication and discussion. The driving force of European expansion was the growth of free market capitalism. The decisions to privatize the French-state owned electricity and gas utilities EDF-GDF came from the EU.

He commented, "In the elections two years ago there was a lot of propaganda from the parties—since then nothing. Elections change nothing, it's the politics of the lesser evil. The Socialist Party and the big unions don't represent people as they live. Party and trade union activism is no good, they just leave the structures intact. People are going to have to get together and discuss outside the parties and trade unions."



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