

France : Demonstrations against Bush and in defence of the health service

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Demonstrations took place in France June 5 against a visit by US President George W. Bush and against the social policies of the Jean-Pierre Raffarin government.

Bush, after visiting Rome the previous day and provoking tens of thousands to demonstrate against him and his war ally, Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi, was in France to participate with 16 other heads of state in the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the D-Day landings in Normandy in 1944.

Aside from the photo opportunities and empty speeches about freedom and democracy and old friendships, the Paris visit provided Bush an opportunity to press ahead with efforts to win support for American efforts to legitimize its illegal, colonial-style occupation of Iraq.

The visit occurred only eight days before the European elections on June 13, in which the UMP, the governing party of President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Raffarin—already severely beaten in the regional elections—stands to suffer another defeat at the hands of the Socialist Party and its allies. The UMP is at present 10 percentage points behind the Socialist Party in the opinion polls.

The demonstration in Paris against Bush's visit coincided with countrywide protests organized by the trade unions in opposition to the government's attacks on the public health service and medical benefits. As is traditionally the case, the Paris component of that protest was the most important. The possibility of "duelling" demonstrations led to bitter and unseemly wrangling between the organizers of the anti-Bush and trade union demonstrations, who acted as though the two protests were mutually exclusive.

In the event, according to the trade unions some 250,000 people—much fewer than the mobilizations of up to 2 million in defence of pensions and the national school system in the spring of last year—demonstrated in all the major French cities and towns in defence of the health service, with wide discrepancies in the numbers of those participating reported by the police and the trade unions.

The vast mobilizations and long, drawn-out strikes of 2003, strangled by the trade union bureaucracies with the assistance of the left and "far left" parties, have inevitably produced a degree of scepticism among many workers in trade union actions. In Paris, where the CGT union claimed 50,000 marchers versus the police tally of 10,000, the column gathered at 2 p.m. and went from République to Nation.

Set to assemble at 6 p.m., some 10,000 rallied against Bush, marching from the Bastille to the Gare de l'Est station.

The march in Paris in defence of the health service was largely made up of contingents of workers walking behind the banners and flags of the CGT (France's largest industrial trade union, historically aligned

to the Communist Party), identifying them as car, railway and hospital workers and other sectors. There were smaller contingents from the FSU education federation, FO, UNSA, the G10 confederation and the CFE-CGC, with the CFDT (loosely aligned with the Socialist Party) bringing up the rear. CFDT leader François Chérèque preferred not to accompany the other union tops at the head of the demonstration.

There were no political formations on this demonstration apart from small delegations of the Socialist Party (PS) youth, the MJS. The Communist Party handed out leaflets in support of their list for the European elections, as did the pseudo-Trotskyist Lutte Ouvrière (LO) and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), who are presenting a joint list for the elections. LO and LCR did not join the march, but stood separately in a group on the pavement around their leaders—Arlette Laguiller and Alain Krivine, respectively.

Numerous leaflets distributed to marchers explained the loss of rights involved in the government's reform of the health service, which is a barely disguised cost-cutting exercise: doctors' fees are not to be completely reimbursed—one euro will have to be paid for all visits, regardless of ability to pay; hospital fees are due to rise yearly by a euro a day from the present 13 euros; limitations are imposed on a doctor's right to prescribe; systems are to be put in place to check whether patients are seeking second opinions if they are not satisfied with a doctor's diagnosis and to penalise such "abuse"; a proposed increase in the special CSG tax designed to finance the social security system, even for pensioners.

These measures open the way for an explosion of private medical insurance for those who can afford it. Certain leaflets pointed out that the deficit in the funds that finance the health system is not due to abusive or fraudulent use, but to decreased revenue because of unemployment and also to massive tax breaks and reductions in charges for the employers.

However, all those protesting the government's measures claim that with pressure from the streets and trade union action the Chirac/Raffarin government can be forced to scale back its attacks and even be obliged to carry out reforms in the interests of the working class. The Somme department federation of the LCR issued a leaflet proposing, not the removal of the government, but that "The preservation and improvement of our social security and health system based on solidarity must be imposed on the government."

There were very few leaflets making reference to the war in Iraq and certainly no attempt by the organisers of the trade union demonstration nor, more significantly, by the organisers of the anti-Bush demonstration, to encourage people on the 2 p.m. march to join the 6 p.m. protest against the war.

Teams of WSWs supporters distributed leaflets on both

demonstrations making a clear link between the attacks on workers' rights and social conditions and the explosion of American and European militarism. The leaflet—entitled “One year since the invasion of Iraq by the United States”—stated: “We reject the position of those who oppose a socialist alternative on the grounds that the only question is to get rid of Bush. Such a position ignores the real roots of militarism, the war and social reaction: the crisis of American and world capitalism.”

The leaflet advertised a public meeting to be held by supporters of the WSWs in Paris June 8. It called for the unity of American, European and the world's workers against the eruption of American militarism and opposed the European Union, calling for the United Socialist States of Europe.

The WSWs supporters welcomed the opportunity to demonstrate the essential unity of the vital issues raised by the two demonstrations. Not so the other left organizations.

The entire French political establishment has been playing on the myth of American imperialism's intervention in the Second World War as a selfless act of liberation from Nazism, rather than its assertion of its status as the dominant world power held back only by the USSR. Now that the mask of liberator and peacemaker has slipped, as the US has become the one superpower in the globalised world, this French establishment, left and right, is attempting to stick the mask back on again in order to justify their continued support for American imperialism and claims to some of the spoils of the new colonialism.

Although ostensibly opposed to the US occupation of Iraq, the French Socialist Party, reported *Le Monde* June 5, “has decided to scrupulously distance itself from any ‘anti-Bush’ demonstration, fearing for ‘a party of government’” to be associated with a demonstration where “you could hear people shouting ‘Bush go home,’” as the PS secretary put it at a European election meeting on June 1.

Claude Bartolone, Socialist Party national secretary in charge of communications, declared that it was out of the question that the Socialist Party would get “mixed up with parades of crude anti-Americans.... We have no desire for our position on Iraq to be even more deformed in the minds of the Americans by acts in bad taste.” No Socialist mayors, councillors or deputies in Normandy were to snub the ceremonies for Bush planned in Caen, any more than the small number of Socialists leaders invited, of which ex-prime minister Laurent Fabius is the most prominent.

Le Monde pointed out June 5: “On the left, the big organizations put little effort into protesting against the presence of George Bush in Paris on June 5. Certainly, most of them signed the call to demonstrate that day, launched under the auspices of the Mouvement de la paix [the Movement for Peace],” which protested against that the memory of “all the victims of Hitler's barbarism,” of “the men and women who gave their lives so that Europe and the world should be liberated from racism and fascism” should “be used to legitimize imperialist aims.”

The CGT, while formally supporting the anti-Bush demonstration, did not make a call for its members to join it. “It was out of the question that (CGT leader) Bernard Thibault should risk weakening the mobilization for “*la Sécurité*” (social security).

“The PCF [French Communist Party] was circumspect. It had suggested bringing forward the anti-Bush demonstration by a day.” In the PCF daily *l'Humanité*, over the previous week the Sécurité demonstration was mentioned on the front page five times and the anti-

Bush demonstration downplayed. To shift the date to June 6, said Arielle Denis of the Mouvement de la paix, was politically impossible. The demonstration would have appeared to be against the ceremonies commemorating D-Day and the Liberation. The affair would have been impossible for the PCF, many of whose mayors and officials were taking part in the official commemorations.

The organization of the anti-Bush demonstration was carried out by an umbrella organization called Agir contre la guerre—Act Against War—and was actively supported by the LCR, various Palestinian support groups, and a Chechnya solidarity committee. On the demonstration, pride of place was given to a group named “Americans against the war.” The leading banner read: “Freedom and sovereignty for the Iraqis, withdraw the occupation troops—peace, justice, democracy in the Middle East.”

The largest contingents on the demonstration, numbering perhaps 5,000 and made up of many young people, marched with the Agir contre la guerre and Palestine Solidarity banners. Several hundred marched with Lutte Ouvrière and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire. Some 200 were on the FSU delegation and a token PCF group featured Francis Wurtz, their head of list for the Ile de France European election constituency in the Paris region.

Absent from both demonstrations, apart from the WSWs leaflets, was any programme for uniting the European, American and world working class in the building of a socialist society as the means of overcoming the eruption of imperialist militarism and the drive to destroy the social gains of the working class.

The WSWs spoke to CGT hospital worker Jean-Marc Calvet, who was on the Sécu march with his 17-year-old daughter Laetitia. He is the union representative for the 1,500 workers of a hospital in Seine et Marne near Paris. Speaking of the failure of the struggle against the government's pension legislation last year, he said: “We can all question what we did. If we had managed to get 5 million people on the streets we could have won.” He thought that people had not properly understood the situation. He recognized that there were less people on the streets this year than last, and said it was hard to mobilize people in his hospital.

He was adamant that representatives of the workers should not take part in the ceremonies with Bush. “Chirac is legitimizing Bush's war and Bush is strengthening Chirac and Raffarin.” When asked what he thought about the controversy about the timing of the two demonstrations, he said that they should be separate, but admitted, “I agree there is a link between the war and the attack on our social services.”

The WSWs invites readers and supporters to attend the Paris public meeting at 8 p.m. on Tuesday, June 8, at the FIAP Jean Monnet, Salle Lisbonne, 30 Rue Cabanis, 75014, métro Glacière (line 6).



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