

France: strikes reveal lack of programme to fight austerity measures

Antoine Lerougetel
25 January 2005

A series of one-day strikes last week against the French government's programme of dismantling the welfare state and reducing the cost of labour demonstrated the breadth of opposition to the policies of President Jacques Chirac and the administration of Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin. [See "Mass strikes by French public sector workers"] At the same time, they revealed the lack of a programme for workers to fight these policies.

Opinion polls have registered some 65 percent support in the general public for these protest actions. However, the dispersed nature of the protest, engineered by the trade unions, showed the determination of the labour bureaucracy to prevent the development of a serious challenge to the government.

In a generalised mass movement against the government's austerity measures, on Thursday, January 20, 50 to 60 percent of the 800,000 teachers in the state sector went on strike throughout France. They were protesting staff cuts, the reduction of the quality of education through the dumbing down of syllabuses, the increase of the teaching load and tampering with the baccalauréat exam. They were also demanding the restoration of the 5 percent loss in purchasing power that has resulted from the stagnation of their wages since 2000. They were joined by some contingents of teachers from private, largely Catholic, schools, whose staffs are financed by the state.

Also on the streets were hospital workers and other public sector workers: the majority of employees in the Department of Judicial Protection of Youth, 35 percent in the Department of the Environment, and workers in the agricultural service, the culture service, and the Archives. Many museums and monuments were shut down for the day, and local government workers also stopped work. The official figure for strikers in the civil service for the day, not including education, was 20.25 percent. The strike was called jointly by the trade union confederations and federations CGT, CFDT, FO, FSU and UNSA, all of which have links with the parties of the previous Plural Left coalition government of Socialist Party Prime Minister Lionel Jospin.

In the largest turnouts since the mass movement of spring 2003 in defence of pension rights and the national education system, between 210,000 and 330,000 state employees demonstrated on the streets of France in more than 70 towns and cities: 30,000 in Paris, 10,000 in Marseille; 8,500 in Rennes. Thursday's actions were the culmination of a series of one-day strikes.

On Tuesday, some 30 percent of postal workers struck nationally. The workers were opposing the bill being discussed that day in the National Assembly on the regulation of postal activities—that is, to incorporate into French legislation two European directives of 1997 and 2002, opening up the postal service to private competition.

On Wednesday, the big battalions of the railway workers came out on strike and in some cases voted to continue the action into Thursday to link up with the civil servants. Also on strike on Wednesday was the Surgeons' Collective, denouncing the critical state of surgery in the public

hospitals.

The electricians, who had struck and balloted massively against privatisation in 2003, were on strike on Wednesday, called out by the CGT. The privatisation of the state-owned electricity and gas industries, EDF and GDF, is next in line for parliamentary legislation. However, the CGT limited the action to requesting the reopening of negotiations, which had stalled on December 21, 2004. The CGT is claiming a 5.5 percent wage rise to compensate for higher pension contributions and the loss of purchasing power of workers and pensioners in the industry, as well as improvements to health benefits and the recognition of qualifications. The struggle against privatisation has given way to negotiations over contract details.

All the unions, including the CGT, the CFDT and FO, are jointly calling for a day of mass demonstrations throughout France on February 5 to protest mainly against the dismantling of the 35-hour week and to call for negotiations on wages. This has been planned for a Saturday, a non-working day "in order to enable the private sector, who cannot go on strike," to participate in the movement.

The public sector, some 5 million workers, represents 23 percent of the French workforce. It is often said that their strikes have an element of standing in for the private sector, since conditions are such for these workers that they feel that they can be victimised or penalised if they stop work. This is the result of years of betrayals by the trade union leaderships, which have isolated separate struggles and reached deals with employers and governments that were designed to break up the class consciousness and unity of workers.

Leaflets and other materials issued by the unions to mobilise for last week's actions steered clear of the critical issue of pension rights. This issue had brought some 4 million workers out on strike on May 13, 2003, and some 2 million demonstrators onto the streets against plans to raise workers' retirement age and reduce pensions by up to 30 percent. This has been combined with plans to hive off non-teaching staff in the state education system to local government.

This day was the high point of months of struggle involving thousands of teachers and other education workers in indefinite strikes lasting well over a month in many cases. The call for a general strike, which became a central demand after May 13, was explicitly opposed by the main trade union confederations on the grounds that it would involve undermining the political legitimacy of the government.

The right wing claims that its firmness in denying the payment of the wages for any unworked days in 2003 had broken the strike, and that this would prevent such mass movements recurring. However, it is clear that the main cause of the movement's defeat was the policy of the trade union leaders and left parties. They began with defending the national economy in the face of globalised competition and sought to prevent the movement developing into a political challenge to the government and its neo-liberal programme. The parties of the Plural Left were in fundamental agreement with the pension "reforms."

The defeat of the movement of spring 2003 opened the door for the government to proceed unchallenged with a whole raft of fundamental attacks on workers' and basic democratic rights. Again, these barely received mention in the trade union literature for the week's actions. The pension legislation has been passed and implemented. Whole categories of rights for benefits for the unemployed have been destroyed. The labour code has been modified in order to relieve employers of the legal obligation to apply minimum standards of working conditions and job security. Furthermore, the 35-hour week is being dismantled amid a wave of blackmail, with threats to workers that their firms will relocate if they do not accept longer hours and lower pay.

The government and the employers' organisation, the MEDEF, call this the right to "work more so as to earn more." A programme restricting free access to medical services is well under way, as well as increased charges for hospitalisation and doctors' visits. Modifications to the justice system, known as Perben Two, have greatly increased the arbitrary powers of the police and decreased the rights of the arrested and the accused.

The government has reacted to the mass movement by stressing its inability to accept the workers' demands. Prime Minister Raffarin declared, "The dialogue must always be open and those who decide to break the dialogue must expect to be confronted with the necessary firmness." He said that the government had gone as far as it could.

The government and the employers have also been encouraged by the acquiescence of the unions in calling for a compulsory minimum service for transport and other parts of the public sector. If they successfully navigate the present wave of protests, they will doubtless go ahead with their plans.

Discussions with demonstrators last week revealed the gap between the reality of the government's vast attacks upon the rights and living standards of the working class and the general consciousness of workers. Awareness of the fact that this is part of a worldwide tendency within globalised capitalism, as epitomised by the Hartz IV legislation in Germany, was virtually nil.

While there is widespread opposition and hostility to the government and general distrust towards the parties of the former Plural Left, political lessons have not been drawn from the failure of the mass movement of the spring of 2003 in defence of pensions and the national education service. There exists no perspective for a political solution to the social crisis. Hope prevails that militant trade union action can force the present government to make at least some concessions. This mood is encouraged by the various radical tendencies active in France that, while calling themselves revolutionary socialists, serve as apologists for the trade union bureaucracy.

The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed demonstrators in Amiens on Thursday, January 20. Marc Becquet teaches information technology and audio-visual media at the Amiens teacher-training department. He told the WSWS that he was demonstrating for two reasons: "The Fillon plan [François Fillon, minister of education] is a disaster, and the future of infant schools is very much under threat, although the minister has affirmed the quality of French infant schooling. There is also the reduction in resources and staff and the entire education policy and conception of education of this government. Salaries too, of course, but that is secondary."

Marc considered it important to use the right to strike, which must remain inalienable. "So it's important to go onto the streets to reject all that." However, he doubted whether it was possible to make the government change course. "It's difficult because they are inflexible. They want to break up a lot of things but they don't have much to offer. They have no project either for society or education. Social gains are undermined. They want the minimum done with the minimum of people."

Asked whether he thought the former Plural Left represented an alternative, he said: "It is not to be counted on. There are people who call

for forms of participatory citizenship. We must rally people on this. In 2003, in the struggle against the pension reforms, we lost a great deal, but we are ready to start again. What lessons are to be drawn from that struggle? I can't really say. The future? We have to break some mindsets; people are going to have to wake up, talk to each other, discuss—not hang on complacently to certain little privileges. People are going to have to broaden their outlooks a bit."

Benoît, a second year lycée (high school) student studying the 'S' science curriculum, was carrying the flag of the CFDT union with three of his friends. He was participating "because it's important to be aware of current politics, as our future is at stake. What frightens me today is education and everything they want to do to the social services. This government wants to change things. But they have to negotiate with the trade unions instead of just undemocratically imposing policies."

He hoped that the current actions would be sufficient. "I think the government will listen. Otherwise we'll be back until they do. They have to negotiate, otherwise it's not a democracy anymore. If, just because they got elected, they think we agree with them all the time, it's no good."

Benoît thought that the former Plural Left could represent an alternative to the present government, but only "on certain points, not all." He added: "The problem is some parties and trade unions are against reforms, all reforms. For example, on the pensions, they had to be reformed, otherwise the young would have had to pay and our pensions would have been shit. Yes, they reduced pensions, but there was a minimum to lose."

Brigitte Leclercq was handing out leaflets for the Force Ouvrière union (FO). She is the secretary for the union's Somme department section of the national road maintenance equipment service (DDE). She told the WSWS that the service was being decentralised all over France. "In two years our department's workforce will go from 1,000 to 300. All the roads are passing from national to local government—the salaries will change. At the DDE, people retire at 55 while the local government only allows retirement at 60. The civil service ministry does not respect its workers. Low salaries in the civil service must be raised."

"The government must be made to retreat—it's going to be difficult. We can try to minimise the incidence of decentralisation. We want everyone to have a job and a salary. We can't change the entire policy of the government because they've enacted a law on decentralisation, but we can try to minimise the negative aspects."

As for the pension legislation, Brigitte was clear that it was "not in favour of the workers." She went on: "In 2003, we did not know all the consequences of the law. It was only after the vote that we that we really understood what it meant. Now, they are even reducing the guaranteed minimum pension."

The WSWS pointed out that on May 13, 2003, there had been 4 million on strike and 2 million in the streets and a widespread call for an indefinite general strike. Marc Blondel, the then-general secretary of FO, her union, had specifically opposed the general strike and a political struggle against the government. Brigitte commented: "People must be defended. Yes, perhaps a general strike would have been the ideal solution, but I'm not political."

Asked whether the government should go, she said: "At least it must change direction. It seems to be run by the MEDEF [the main employers' organisation]." She thought that the former Plural Left could be an alternative. "But I'm not sure. Reforms have been carried out by left governments that haven't been beneficial either. Everything should change, that's the only solution, at least change at a European level."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

--