

# French workers need a new political perspective

## Political issues in the fight against the attacks of Chirac and Raffarin

**WSWS Editorial Board**  
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*The following is a WSWs statement that will be distributed at demonstrations that have been called by all the main French trade union confederations and federations in cities and towns across France on Saturday, February 5. This is the culmination of a series of one-day strikes last week throughout the public sector, involving some 500,000 employees, against the government's austerity programme in defence of wages, jobs, conditions and the social services.*

*Saturday's protest has the official support of the Socialist Party and the Communist Party and is being called on a non-working day to enable private sector workers, inhibited from strike action by fear of reprisals, to participate in the movement.*

*The principal issue is opposition to the effort by the conservative government of President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin to break up of the legal 35-hour week, a reform enacted by the former Socialist Party-led government of Lionel Jospin. Employers will be given the right to greatly lengthen working hours. Recent polls have registered more than 80% disapproval of this measure among workers.*

*Workers are also protesting against changes to labour legislation disadvantageous to employees and demanding negotiations in the public sector to raise wages to offset loss of purchasing power.*

Once again, by demonstrating on February 5, French workers show their determination to resist the new round of neo-liberal-inspired attacks by President Jacques Chirac and his government headed by Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin.

Since 1995, millions have expressed their opposition to the social and economic policies of "left" and right-wing governments alike over and over again. This, however, has not prevented the continuous decline of wages, pensions and social conditions.

The defeat of the movement in the spring of 2003 opened the door for the government to proceed unchallenged with a whole raft of fundamental attacks on workers' and basic democratic rights. The pension legislation has been passed and implemented, the right to unemployment benefits has been drastically curtailed, and the labour code has been modified to enable employers to decrease standards of working conditions and job security.

Now, 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' federation MEDEF call this the right to "work more so as to earn more."

The program of Health Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy, restricting free access to medical services, is well under way, as well as increased charges for hospitalisation and doctors' visits. "Perben Two" (named after Justice Minister Dominique Perben) has greatly increased the arbitrary powers of the police and decreased the rights of the arrested and the accused.

Such phenomena are by no means limited to France. There is not a single European or other major capitalist country today where the social

and democratic rights of the working class are not under continuous attack.

While mass opposition to these attacks is necessary and welcome, the question of a viable political perspective is posed more urgently than ever before. If there is one major lesson to be drawn from the experiences of the last 10 years, it is that none of the parties and organisations of the so-called left has an answer to these problems.

During the 14 years of Mitterrand's reign and the 5 years of Jospin's premiership, the Socialist Party and the Communist Party have been instrumental in carrying forward the attacks on the working class.

Their programme of social reformism, of gradual reforms within the confines of the French nation-state leaving the foundations of capitalist property completely intact, proved incapable of resisting the international neo-liberal offensive whose aim has been to make workers pay for the crisis of big business and its nation-state system confronted with the rapid globalisation of the world's productive forces.

It was in fact one of the first casualties: junked by Mitterrand's first prime minister, Mauroy, in favour of "austerity" and attacks on workers conditions only 18 months after taking office.

The dispersed nature of the protests engineered by the trade unions has again revealed their determination to prevent a serious challenge to the government. Indeed, the series of one-day strikes has been designed by the trade union leaderships precisely to preempt any mass social movement of opposition to the government's destruction of social services and living standards of the working class.

This is an expression of the unions' nationalistic perspective: that the defence of the conditions of French workers is bound up with the defence of French industry against its international rivals. From this standpoint, they avoid anything that might seriously damage the standing of French business or challenge the political status quo.

What the MEDEF and the government now require of the trade unions is total submission—and the trade unions are obliging: not only are they working to sidetrack any opposition to the government's measures, but they are collaborating with the government and the employers in preparing new rounds of attacks.

The CFTC and CGT trade unions collaborated in Finance Minister Sarkozy's think tank led by ex-IMF boss Michel Camdessus, which produced a plan to improve French industry's "competitiveness" in the face of globalisation, on the basis of the increased flexibility and deregulation of working conditions. Sarkozy's bedtime reading!

The main "left" trade union confederations, the CGT and FO, explicitly opposed the call for a general strike, which became a central demand of the 2003 mass strike movement in defence of pensions, on the grounds that it would involve undermining the political legitimacy of the government.

They sought to prevent the movement developing into a political challenge to the government and its neo-liberal programme. The “Plural Left” government of Jospin had prepared the very pension reforms that Raffarin is now implementing.

While posing as socialists and revolutionaries, they are tying workers to the old, bankrupt organisations. All that is needed, according to their logic, are bigger and more militant trade union struggles.

The implication is that you can pressure the government in power to adopt a different policy, without challenging capitalist rule. They inevitably end up blaming the workers themselves—and not the policies and betrayals of the labour bureaucracy—for defeats.

While the LCR is striving to cobble the remnants of the bankrupt Stalinist and Socialist organisations into some new kind of reformist “left,” LO is developing one argument after another to explain why nothing can be done.

The basic unity of perspective of all the “left” organisations was epitomised in the second round of the presidential elections in 2002, when they all rallied behind Chirac in defence of the French Republic—i.e., the central institution of French bourgeois rule.

Politically speaking, all of them are responsible for the policies of a government that they called on workers to vote for. They all rejected the demand for a boycott of the election, raised by the *World Socialist Web Site* at the time, which would have established the political independence of the working class.

The defence of the social and democratic achievements of the working class requires a political and organisational break from these old organisations. A new orientation must take the realities of the modern world into account: the unprecedented globalisation of production and finance, which has undermined all nationally based programmes, and the profound crisis of world capitalism. The central axis of this orientation must be the unity of the international working class in a common struggle against capitalism, imperialism and war.

This crisis finds its most ominous expression in the explosion of militarism. The globalisation of production and the development of information technology have rendered national boundaries economically and financially increasingly obsolete. The domination of world production, trade and finance by transnational corporations under conditions in which the leading capitalist nation, the United States, has lost the global hegemony it enjoyed in the first two decades of the post-war period, has led to a new scramble for resources, especially the most strategic ones: oil, gas and water.

By exerting its overwhelming military superiority, American capitalism seeks to overcome its economic decline and its catastrophic trade and balance of payments deficits. Trade and economic rivalry has exacerbated to the point where it is now being carried out by military means. Hence, America’s neo-colonialist invasion of and the project of “liberating” the entire Middle East and North Africa, which is supported by the entire political establishment.

French and European capitalism are inescapably drawn into ever sharper competition with US imperialism over the world’s resources as well as into streamlining the economy by dismantling the welfare state and driving down labour costs.

Jospin’s Plural Left government actively engaged in this programme (record privatisations, the EU vote in Barcelona for an increase in the retirement age just before the elections), and Chirac and Raffarin are merely continuing with it, just as Schröder’s plural-left Red-Green coalition is continuing the work of the previous right-wing government of Helmut Kohl in Germany and the Labourite Tony Blair that of the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major in Britain.

Workers need to break, not only from these old parties but also from old national reformist assumptions and outlooks. The experience since the

1980s of attempts by militant workers to bypass the union bureaucracies by forming ad hoc “autonomous” strike committees and “sovereign” mass meetings, based on concepts of pressuring the leaders of the unions to oblige the government to make concessions, has always failed.

These committees and assemblies, because of their underlying assumptions, have been under the control of the very trade union bureaucracies from whom they may have appeared at first to be liberating themselves, through the agencies of the Stalinists and the left-radical LCR, LO and PT rank-and-file members who dominated them.

This was the experience of the 1995 movement against the Juppé government when the union bosses ended the mass strike movement on the basis of negotiations with the government that left it in power to continue its work. The experience of the 2003 debacle was similar but with more disastrous consequences.

Workers must recognise that it has proved impossible even to defend what remains of their social conditions by basing their struggles on limited demands of sections of workers. The crisis that confronts them is that of world capitalism itself and the outmoded nation-state system on which it is based. It is the revolt of the world’s productive forces against the fetters of the nation-state system that is driving the crisis of capitalism.

The working class is an international class that is intimately bound up with the world’s powerful productive forces. Only by fighting for its own independent political interests as a united international force can workers break the grip of capitalism over the planet and free the productive forces to satisfy the needs of humanity and not the enrichment of the small layer of the super-rich millionaires in the present system. It is such an international perspective for the building of a new, rationally organised world socialist economy and society that must form the basis of workers’ future struggles.

The first priority today is for workers is to build a leadership that defends the interests of the working class and that is completely independent of all the parties and organisations on which capitalism relies to perpetuate its rule—the bourgeois conservative parties, the old left parties (the Socialist Party and the Communist Party), the trade unions and their radical-left apologists in the LCR, LO and the PT.

This party must be a party of the international working class untainted by nationalism or Euro-chauvinism. It must categorically oppose all policies—put forward by ATTAC and all the parties of the left—that back one section of world imperialism against another. For this reason, we are against the proposed European constitution, which defines the European Union as an instrument of the major European powers and corporations against their rivals abroad and the working class at home. A progressive economic and political integration of Europe is only possible under control of the working class, in the shape of the United Socialist States of Europe.

Only Trotskyism as reflected in the ceaseless struggle of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) has defended and developed the principles of Marxism since 1953. This is carried forward today by the ICFI’s daily publication, the *World Socialist Web Site*. The content of the struggle has been against all forms of opportunism in the workers’ movement, which always seek to provide easy options and take short cuts in the fight for a socialist future and thus lead to defeats.

A coherent analysis of what is at stake for world capitalism and the international working class has only been provided by the ICFI. We invite you to join us now in the urgent task of constructing new workers’ parties based on socialist principles (which has already begun in many countries where sections of the ICFI exist) and the expansion of the readership of the WSWS. We also invite you to read and participate in the development of the WSWS.



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