

# France: half-million-strong protest against government attacks

Our correspondents  
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More than 500,000 people demonstrated on the streets of France against the ever-growing attacks of the government of Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin on Saturday, February 5. The government, backed by President Jacques Chirac, is pushing through legislation to extend working hours beyond the current 35-hour week, whilst allowing price rises that have grown with the introduction of the euro to eat away at workers' standard of living.

This ground swell of opposition from workers in both the public and private sectors took the Confédération Générale de Travail (CGT), the Confédération Française Démocratique de Travail (CFDT), Force Ouvrière (FO) and a number of smaller trade unions that had called the demonstrations by surprise. In the run-up to Saturday's demonstrations, trade union leaders were unanimous in their estimates that a maximum of 300,000 workers would take part.

More than 120 demonstrations took place all over the country. Big cities like Marseille had over 30,000 demonstrators, whilst Paris saw well over 50,000 marching from Place de la République to Place de la Nation.

On the Paris demonstration, supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* distributed 5,000 copies of a statement by the Editorial Board headlined "French workers need a new political perspective—Political issues in the fight against the attacks of Chirac and Raffarin."

The statement warned workers: "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."

This warning was confirmed by the day's events. All of the trade unions were very careful not to put forward any

clear demands. There were virtually no banners or leaflets on the marches raising specific demands. This is, apparently, the main lesson they drew from their calling-off of the 2003 pensions movement. Unions such as the CGT had called for a return to 37-and-a-half years of pension contributions for all workers, only to very visibly abandon such demands at the behest of the government.

Typical of the nervous and cautious stance of the trade union leaderships was Thierry Dumez, CGT secretary general of the Seine Saint Denis department near Paris. When interviewed by the WSWS during the demonstration about the aims of the union, he remained evasive: "The demands of the CGT today are the better redistribution of profits, to increase salaries, improve the purchasing power of the salaried workers, and the reduction of working hours to reduce unemployment in France."



"No!" – a blunt message to the Raffarin government

Even more tight-lipped was Philippe Lengrand, CFDT regional secretary for the Paris area, who stated, "Our demands revolve around the issue of the reduction of working hours. We have a government today that wants to attack the 35-hour week, which wants to attack the [labour laws], and which lures salaried workers, making them believe that in working more they will earn more—which is false."

Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin reacted to the mass demonstrations in a interview the following Monday on

the state-controlled radio, *France Inter*, by commenting, “In a democracy, I’m not contemptuous of demonstrations, but I ask the trade union leaders not to hold parliament in contempt either.... I’m not deaf but it’s not because I listen that I should obey,” before adding that the legislation extending the 35-hour week would “follow the prepared timetable” because “that’s what democratic life is.”

Raffarin makes such arrogant statements only because he knows that the trade unions will do everything in their power to stop such a social movement escaping their control and challenging the government. As the WSWS statement explained, “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.”

Meanwhile, the Socialist Party and the Communist Party are engaged in parliamentary games in the National Assembly. They have filed more than 2,000 amendments to the law extending the 35-hour week, which are expected to delay the law’s passage by a few days. Like the trade union leaders, the SP and CP deputies avoid at all costs making any demands that could precipitate a social movement. They make it abundantly clear that they will quietly accept the new law when it is finally voted through.

It was precisely the law on the 35-hour week passed by Lionel Jospin’s Plural Left government that undermined the strict rules on work hours. The new law prepared by the Raffarin government uses the legal beachhead created by the Socialist and Communist parties, while putting the regular working time back to the old standard or even longer.

The left radical movements such as Arlette Laguiller’s Lutte Ouvrière (LO) and Alain Krivine’s Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) tell workers that their only perspective must be a trade union struggle to force the government to back down.

The LCR’s leaflet in Saturday’s demonstration concludes: “Will the trade union confederations propose new initiatives, a perspective to prepare the necessary united mobilisation? Many expect it. It’s up to militants, to workers to make themselves heard, including within their own organisations, to mobilise to act in this direction.”

In a similar vein, but with some more radical phrase

mongering, Arlette Laguiller’s February 7 editorial states: “In 1995, [Prime Minister] Juppé, despite all his airs, was obliged to retreat confronted with the railwaymen. What’s needed is a similar mobilisation, but on another scale, not a single section of workers but all workers. It’s only by an ample, collective, explosive, uncontrollable reaction that workers can shut up these cynical ministers, gophers for the MEDEF, stop the attacks on their conditions of existence and bring to a halt their descent into poverty.”

Such a limited syndicalist and national perspective, espoused by all these old and worn-out organisations—from the Socialist Party, the trade unions, right through to the LO and LCR—has revealed itself to be utterly bankrupt many times over the last 20 years.

As the WSWS statement explains, workers need a new political perspective: “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.”



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