

Answer the French government/corporate offensive against workers with socialist internationalism

WSWS Editorial Board
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The French trade unions and parties of the left have called for a national day of action, consisting of strikes and protest demonstrations, to be held October 4. The action is directed against the “free market” policies of President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, including attacks on labour rights, cuts in social services, privatizations and the lowering of wages.

The following is the text of leaflet that will be distributed to demonstrators.

Workers seeking to fight against neo-liberal attacks are up against a government which will stop at nothing to destroy their rights. They need a new political perspective capable of defeating this government and its allies in the political establishment.

This was underlined by the spectacle, on the morning of September 28, of army helicopters carrying GIGN special forces commandos to wrest control of the ferry *Pascal Paoli* from the striking sailors and staff occupying her.

This use of the military to intervene in an entirely legitimate action by unarmed ferry workers protesting against the privatisation of their company and the loss of jobs, rights and conditions represents a new step in the imposition of neo-liberal measures. Ordered by Prime Minister Villepin, with the full approval of President Chirac and Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, it shows the lengths to which the capitalist class and the state will go to overcome workers’ resistance to the destruction of their rights.

The Communist Party-led CGT (General Confederation of Labour) union and the Corsican nationalist STC (Corsican Workers Union) representing the ferry workers are already negotiating a compromise solution which involves privatisation and a substantial reduction in the workforce, despite widespread support by port workers and the shutdown of the port of Marseilles.

Workers should not forget the role played in 2003 by Bernard Thibault of the CGT and Gérard Aschiéri of the FSU, praised by President Chirac and Civil Service Minister Francis Fillon, for stifling the strike movement in defence of pensions.

The army’s treatment of civilians as though they were enemy aliens is becoming a general feature of globalised capitalism, in which any impediment to profit-making, such as decent wages and social services, must be eliminated.

This is underscored by the inability of the richest country on earth, the model for all national ruling elites in the era of globalisation, to deal with the havoc wrought by Hurricane Katrina.

The social disaster that already existed in New Orleans was cruelly revealed by Katrina. It was the result of decades of neglect of the civil

and social infrastructure throughout the United States by Republican and Democratic administrations alike. The distress of the population, particularly the infirm, the poor and minorities, was met with troops armed to the teeth.

The hurricane brought to the surface some of the most essential features of the capitalist system’s profound crisis: the social deprivation faced by tens of millions of people in America and the vast gulf which divides the overwhelming majority of the people—those who work for a wage—from a fabulously wealthy oligarchy that controls both major parties.

The negligence and indifference shown by the Bush administration toward the people of New Orleans mirrored the criminality and sadism of the US war in Iraq, which has now claimed the lives of over 100,000 Iraqis and nearly 2,000 US troops.

The use of force to lay hold of vital resources and markets has gone hand in hand with the destruction within the US of social programs and attacks on real wages to fund massive tax cuts for the rich. It is a policy of plunder at home and plunder abroad.

The efforts of the European powers to compete with the US commercially, economically and geo-strategically, and also with China and India, underlie the relentless drive of all national ruling elites and governments to drive down the cost of labour.

France, Germany and the UK are at present engaged in a joint geo-strategic offensive, together with the US, against Iran over that country’s right to develop nuclear energy. This diplomatic and political attack bears all the hallmarks of the preparation for an Iraq-style military intervention. The aim is imperialist control of this strategic region rich in oil and gas reserves.

The attempt by the authorities to indict the *Pascal Paoli* strikers as pirates and hijackers, that is, as terrorists, is entirely in line with the French government’s intention to criminalise resistance to neo-liberal policies and moves towards a police state.

In continuity with Lionel Jospin’s Plural Left government of the Socialist Party, the Communist Party and the Greens, the Villepin government is escalating the assault on social rights and public services. The sick, the unemployed and the elderly will have to pay to finance deficits in social security; the budget provides no serious resources to solve the housing crisis; workers in the private sector, in education, in the social services are being made to work longer hours for wages with declining purchasing power.

Sarkozy indicated the true intentions of the French bourgeoisie in his speech of September 3 to his party’s youth movement. He explicitly rejected equality as a principle of French political and social

life to his youthful supporters, proposing “a model where levelling, egalitarianism, the thin spreading of resources will no longer have a place, a model where work will be basic to everything ... the republic will not give everyone the same thing.”

This was an appeal to the most reactionary and backward forces within French society. It not only called for deeper attacks on workers’ rights and a further strengthening of the power of the employers and the state, but repudiated the historical motto of French republicanism—largely honoured in the breach by bourgeois governments—“Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.”

French politicians make an open break with this motto of the French Revolution only if they wish to rally the forces of counterrevolution, forgo consensus politics and bourgeois democracy, and replace them with coercion and dictatorship.

The last régime to do this was that of Marshal Philippe Pétain, who collaborated with the Nazi invaders between 1940 and 1944.

Sarkozy and Justice Minister Clément are encouraging hysteria over Al Qaeda terrorist threats in order to greatly increase the arbitrary powers of the state and make deep inroads into civil liberties. They are drawing up retroactive laws violating the principles of the Declaration of the Rights of Man that “No person may be punished other than on the basis of a law established and published before the crime, and legally applied.” Police powers of surveillance are also to be vastly increased, imitating the reactionary Patriot Act imposed by the Bush administration.

The brutal eviction without alternative homes, on the orders of Sarkozy, of homeless families in Paris, condemned to live, for lack of suitable social housing, in dangerous buildings unfit for human habitation, is another signpost to New Orleans. The tragic fires and the death of 48 Africans, which Sarkozy blamed on an excess of illegal immigrants and made the pretext for an increased crackdown on immigration, were also the result of years of neglect by local and national government administrations of the left and the right.

The answer to mass sackings and the destruction of social conditions is not the economic nationalism supported by the entire political elite as well as the trade unions. The meaning of such a concept is clear in the French trade union negotiations with the American transnational Hewlett-Packard, which has announced the sacking of 6,000 workers in Europe, including 1,240 in France, and many more worldwide. Instead of a fight against the sackings throughout the transnational company, the unions are pressing for the firm to reduce the planned reduction of its French workforce to 15 percent, the average for its rationalisations in other European countries, rather than the proposed 25 percent.

No trade union has sought to mobilise the HP workers internationally to resist the sackings.

The last 25 years have seen an unprecedented global integration of production and the development of massive new productive capacity in areas such as China and India by transnational corporations. The global mobility of capital coupled with the creation of an ever-lower international benchmark for wages has fatally undermined the trade unions, which take as their point of departure the existence of the profit system based on private ownership of the means of production and are organisationally and programmatically rooted in the nation state. They have become little more than a management police force charged with imposing wage cuts and speedups in the name of remaining internationally competitive.

In order not to be pitted against lower-paid workers in other parts of the world, and to combat the threat of plant relocation and other forms

of outsourcing, workers must adopt an entirely new political perspective—socialist internationalism. The only way that European workers can defend their jobs is in an alliance with workers in China and India, not in a contest with them that only serves the interests of the employers.

The globalisation of economic life, which at present appears only as a threat, lays the most powerful basis for uniting the international working class in a common struggle for a new economic system based on production to meet the essential social needs of the population—for decent jobs, housing, education, health provision and pensions.

The French “no” vote in the referendum on May 29 on the European constitution and the rejection by the mass of workers and the unemployed of the neo-liberal offensive of the main political parties in the German elections two weeks ago express the resistance of the working class of Europe to the destruction of the welfare state.

The left parties and politicians which campaigned for the “no” vote in the referendum did so only to contain the growing resistance of the working class. The government and the Socialist Party have no intention of impairing European capitalism’s competitiveness.

The Socialist Party dissidents (Fabius, Emmanuelli, Montebourg, Mélançon), supported by their old partners in the Plural Left coalition, the Communist Party, are working to reunite with the majority pro-European Constitution wing of the Socialist Party to form a Plural Left Redux in case the right wing loses control of the situation, and to prevent the working class from making a break from 40 years of Mitterrand and five years of Jospin.

The pseudo-Trotskyist LCR is attempting to cobble together a left coalition with these erstwhile collaborators of theirs in the “no” campaign as an alternative bulwark against an independent movement of the working class. The last thing the LCR and the petty-bourgeois radicals of LO and the PT seek is a principled break from these discredited forces.

Such a break, on the basis of an international socialist perspective, is essential if the working class is to overcome the offensive coordinated by the entire political and trade union establishment. This is the task of the WSWS and the parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

We invite workers and youth to follow our web site daily and contribute to its development, and join in the fight to build the ICFI.



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