One-day national strike in France: over a million march against Gaullist policies

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Over a million workers struck and demonstrated on Tuesday in 150 towns all over France against the neo-liberal policies of the Gaullist government of President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin. The actions were called by all seven of the main trade union confederations and all the parties of the left, including the Socialist Party.

Workers took part to express opposition to declining wages and pensions, the dismantling of safeguards for workers in the Labour Code, new labour contracts making it easier for employers to sack workers, and steep cuts in unemployment entitlements. Other issues raised were the housing crisis, government harassment of immigrants, and police attacks on social protests—especially those of secondary school students who have been demonstrating in defence of public education.

In the Paris region, rail and Metro strike action significantly reduced public transport service, and public transport was disrupted in many other cities and towns across the country. Air traffic was affected, and the Lyons airport was entirely shut down. Many classes were cancelled throughout the school system, and some schools were closed.

On the same day as the mass demonstrations throughout France, the build-up of tensions within the political élite found expression in an open split within the leadership of the ruling Gaullist party, the Union for a People's Movement (UMP). Prime Minister Villepin and Nicolas Sarkozy, the right-wing interior minister and UMP chairman, clashed over how to deal with the growing popular resistance.

At the regular Tuesday meeting of UMP deputies to the National Assembly, Villepin turned on Sarkozy for his provocatively hard-line "free-market" rhetoric, declaring, "We must beware of our own utopias. In the history of France, *ruptures* (a favourite expression of Sarkozy) and revolutions always end up in a bloodbath."

Villepin's rebuke reflected growing fears within the French corporate and political elite over the rise of popular resistance to the regime's right-wing social policies, concerns that have been intensified by the rejection of the European constitution in last May's national referendum in France and the electoral debacle suffered by conservative candidate Angela Merkel in this month's German elections.

Teams of WSWS supporters distributed thousands of copies of the WSWS Editorial Board statement "Answer the government/corporate offensive with socialist internationalism." The serious and reflective mood of the marchers was evident in widespread interest in the statement. Many demonstrators, having begun to read the leaflet, came back and took more for their friends.

Press commentators pointed out that the mobilisation, which equalled in size the anti-government actions of March 10 of this year, was the largest mass action so soon after the summer break in more than 30 years. Social movements in France tend to reach their height in the spring, and such a large mobilisation in the early fall foreshadows a very large confrontation between the working class and the government in the coming weeks and months.

Police estimates of the turnout were sharply at odds with those made by the unions, but it is safe to say that at least 100,000 participated in Paris and 50,000 in Marseilles, where SNCM ferry workers on strike against denationalisation, supported by port workers, headed the procession. There were marches of between 10,000 and 20,000 in scores of medium-sized and small towns.

Up to half of France's 900,000 education workers struck, and large contingents of teachers and non-teaching staff were prominent, as well as students, who had taken the lead in opposing last year's Fillon education reform. Amid calls for the repeal of the laws, which lengthen teachers' working hours, introduce partial annualisation, and undermine educational equality, the demands focused on cuts in the education budget and the reduction in teaching posts, the sacking of thousands of teachers without tenure and the elimination of primary school classes. There is also widespread opposition to the support voiced by the new education minister, Gilled de Robien, for the overwhelmingly Catholic private education sector, which accounts for nearly 20 percent of France's pre-university education provision.

Other public sector workers were well represented on the demonstrations, with over 25 percent of civil servants on strike, alongside some 20 percent of postal workers and 30 percent of electricity workers, who marched, in particular, against the growing wave of privatisations. Many hospital workers participated to protest against cuts in health care.

A major feature of the day of action was the participation of private sector workers, whose unionisation rate is only 7 percent, and who are more vulnerable to victimisation than workers in the public sector. These workers, largely written off by union bureaucrats and middle-class radical groups like the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR—Revolutionary Communist League) and Lutte Ouvrière (LO—Workers Struggle) as being too

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cowed to strike, could be seen in large numbers on the streets.

Hewlett-Packard workers, under threat of mass redundancies, headed the Paris demonstration, and were also to be seen alongside ST Microelectrics workers on the streets of Grenoble. British Airways flight attendants and Air France and Orly Airport workers had contingents in Paris, along with workers from Eurocopter and Saint-Gobin.

Retail workers from Géant Casino, Auchan, Trois Suisses and la Redoute, as well as staff from Legrand, Renault trucks, Airbus, Alcatel and Ford marched and demonstrated. In Lille, in northern France, Heineken brewery workers protested against "infernal work rates," and glass workers from Boissois Glaverbel marched against job cuts.

A significant feature in Paris was the massive presence of administrative and management workers organised by the CFE-CGC (French Confederation of Management). Three thousand took part and denounced the "bargain basement sale of the Labour Code." Richard, a Eurodisney administrator, told the press, "The mobilisation of management is enormous today. We are there to make the businesses function, but not against the people who work with us."

Large delegations marched behind trade union banners sporting the badges and insignia of their organisations: the Communist Party-influenced CGT (General Confederation of Labour), the Socialist Party-aligned confederations, FO (Workers Power) and the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour), as well as the education and teachers' unions—the FSU (Federation of Unified Unions) and the Socialist-orientated UNSA (National Federation of Autonomous Unions). However, it was noticeable in Paris that many workers came with colleagues, friends and family without trade union badges or banners, taking the opportunity to show their desire to resist the neo-liberal offensive.

In a move to revive the credibility of the parties of the Plural Left coalition (Socialist Party, Communist Party, Greens) of the preceding government of Lionel Jospin, the LCR, which has long presented itself as a genuine socialist alternative to the Stalinists and social democrats, signed a joint call on October 1 for the October 4 actions. The phrase-mongering of the document, opposing "the free-market and repressive offensive organised by the Chirac-Villepin-Sarkozy government," was aimed at providing a fig leaf for the parties which, in government, were responsible for the biggest round of privatisations since World War II. They carried out a sustained offensive on social rights, in line with European Union policy, which the Socialist Party, in particular, had taken a leading role in drawing up in the commissions of the EU.

Small delegations of the Plural Left parties were in evidence on the processions. *Libération* of October 5 observed: "After having signed a joint appeal ... the SP, the CP, the Greens and the LCR shared the pavement alongside the Paris march. After the snowballs in Guéret in March hitting the spectacles of Hollande (François Hollande, first secretary of the Socialist Party), and the egg to the head of Fabius (Laurent Fabius, former SP prime minister and campaigner for a "no" vote in the European Constitution referendum) at La Coureuve, the welcome reserved for the Socialists on the demonstration could not be taken for granted. The SP boss had, besides, opted to avoid any risks by participating in Tulle. His ex-second-in-command [Fabius] chose Rouen."

In statements to the press during the day, the main trade union leaders made it clear that they would adopt their time-honoured practice of holding back the mass movement by means of stop-and-go tactics, building up illusions that the government would negotiate a retreat before any real battle was joined. Bernard Thibault of the CGT declared, "The government and the Medef [France's principal employers' association] have a few days to give tangible signs that they have got the message. The CGT is already ready to envisage a follow-up if an appropriate response is not forthcoming... "

Jean-Claude Mailly of FO said: "Either the government and the employers respond to the issues, or they won't and we will see what ensues." Gérard Aschiéri read from the same script: "Will the government take notice? That is, negotiate on salaries, employment, the public services? If it doesn't, we are ready discuss follow-up action."

The only fear that the government and the employers will have from such statements is that they will not suffice to hold back the movement.

A drama teacher interviewed in Amiens expressed her concern about the government's attacks on education and education workers and recognised that they were only the continuation of the policies of the previous Plural Left government of Lionel Jospin. Asked whether she thought that such a recycled alternative to the present government would turn back the tide, she exclaimed, "We have to believe that it would."

Two young teachers, Celia and Cécile, who had been active during the long struggle to defend pension rights in 2003 and had followed the WSWS campaign for a socialist perspective, declared that they saw the need to build a genuine socialist alternative to the parties of the Plural Left. They recognised that the economic situation, internal and external, meant that the neo-liberal drive against social gains would be implacable. They recalled, with particular bitterness, the final sell-out by Bernard Thibault of the CGT and Gérard Aschiéri of the FSU on June 10, 2003. They were eager to have further discussion on the perspectives of the WSWS.

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