

The French Popular Front of 1936: Historical lessons in the “First Job Contract” struggle

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The conflict over the “First Job Contract” (CPE) has developed into an open confrontation between the government of Dominique de Villepin and Jacques Chirac and broad layers of French society. On the one side stands the government, supported by the employers federations, and on the other the youth, backed by their parents and the large majority of working people.

Fundamental issues have been raised for some time. The young people who take to the streets in protest on a daily basis and occupy French universities and schools are no longer willing to subordinate themselves to a life as putty in the hands of economic interests. They seek a place in the society and at least a comparable level of social security to that enjoyed by their parents. That is not much to ask—but far too much to accept for a government which subordinates every aspect of social life to the profit principle.

It is on this basis that Prime Minister de Villepin strictly refuses to give way. “If the law is withdrawn, then we can forget about reforms for the next 10 years; that would be a dreadful signal” This was the comment made by one business leader following a meeting with the prime minister, and which sums up the attitude of the French ruling elite.

As has so often been the case, issues are being fought out in France which have implications for Europe and even the entire world. Backing the French government are not only French business associations, but also the representatives of international big business and the European Union authorities in Brussels. They are all adamant that the social gains of earlier years be eliminated in the name of international competitiveness. And in a similar manner to France, the working class in Germany, Italy and the rest of Europe is reacting to the unrelenting dismantling of social standards and rights with embittered resistance.

The fundamental issues at stake in this conflict exclude any possibility of compromise. Despite increasing pressure, the prime minister reaffirms on a daily basis his determination to remain firm. On Tuesday he addressed the parliamentary group of the Gaullist UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) and insisted that he would yield “neither to ultimatums nor extortion.” At the same time, the police are proceeding with increased brutality against protesters.

If this mass movement wants to successfully rebut the CPE, then it must bring the Gaullist government down. There is no lack of militancy or energy on the part of protesters, and in this respect the government is clearly on the defensive. What is missing are political experience and orientation.

During the past 70 years the French working class has been close on two occasions to overthrowing bourgeois rule and taking power—in 1936 and 1968. Both opportunities failed because the Socialist (SP) and Communist (PCF) parties paralyzed the huge mass movements and led them into a dead end. In 1936 this was the task carried out by the Popular Front government under Léon Blum, and in 1968 the PCF and its trade union organization, the General Confederation of Labor (CGT).

In both cases the consequences of defeat were devastating. In 1936 the

Popular Front government aided the bourgeoisie in retaining power, sabotaged the Spanish revolution and thereby paved the way for the Second World War and the Vichy regime. In 1968 the general strike was sabotaged by the CGT, which strengthened the rule of the bourgeoisie and enabled the latter in following years to conduct its own counteroffensive.

Ever since the beginning of the 1980s standards of living for the working class have stagnated or actually dropped, while the number of unemployed and precarious forms of work have been on the rise. During most of this period France was governed by coalitions involving the Socialist Party and PCF—from 1981 to 1995 under President François Mitterrand, and from 1997 to 2002 under Prime Minister Lionel Jospin. It would be absurd to assume that these parties, which have functioned so effectively as faithful trustees of French capitalism, would now suddenly represent the interests of workers.

It is impossible to defeat the Villepin government without drawing the lessons from these experiences. This article deals with the Popular Front of 1936. Today the influence of the Social Democrats, the Communist Party and the trade unions is much less than it was at that time, but they are still doing everything in their power to contain the mass movement and prevent it from becoming a real danger to the government and bourgeois rule.

They are supported in their efforts by so-called “extreme left” groups which, in reality, are neither left nor extreme. While the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), Lutte Ouvrière (LO), and the Parti des Travailleurs (PT) verbally adapt to the radical moods amongst youth, in practice they are doing all that they can to divert the mass movement into the safe haven of the old bureaucratic organizations while protecting their authority. In particular, Olivier Besancenot of the LCR constantly stresses the necessity of the “unity of the entire left from Workers Struggle to the Socialist Party.”

We appeal in particular to young people who are making their first political experiences to turn to the lessons of history. It is not sufficient to protest against the CPE. One must also know how to counter the paralyzing influence of the old bureaucratic apparatuses and their defenders. Along with a will to fight one also needs a political strategy.

In this respect the LCR creates enormous confusion. It proclaims its allegiance to the political legacy of Leon Trotsky, but in fact its own policy is diametrically opposed to this tradition. Hardly anyone who has recently joined the LCR or voted for its leader Olivier Besancenot will be aware of the fact that in the 1930s Trotsky was virulently opposed to the Popular Front and put forward his own alternative for the political independence of the working class.

Like other European countries, France was rocked in the 1930s by extreme social tensions and class warfare. In January 1933 Hitler took power in Germany. One year later, in February 1934, the mobilization of several thousand fascists and Royalists brought about the downfall of the French government. The overthrow of Prime Minister Edouard Daladier was not so much due to the strength of the fascists but had its source in the

internal decay of his Radical Party, the oldest bourgeois party in France.

Daladier was replaced by Gaston Doumergue, whose semi-dictatorial regime met with the embittered resistance of the working class. The Communist Party reacted to the increasing militancy of workers by forming an alliance with the Social Democrats and the Radicals in the form of a Popular Front.

At an earlier period in Germany the Communist Party had refused to form an united front alliance with the Social Democrats in order to jointly repel the danger of fascism. The Trotskyists, who raised the demand for such a united front, were pitilessly persecuted by the Stalinists. It was the subsequent division of the German working class which finally made it possible for Hitler to assume power.

In France, however, the Stalinists not only formed an alliance with the Social Democrats but also with the bourgeois Radicals. They subordinated their own program to the interests of their alliance partners and suppressed any demands which could have deterred their new allies in the camp of the bourgeoisie.

The Stalinists presented the Popular Front as an alliance of the working class and the middle class against the danger of fascism. In reality the new government arose from a change of political course dictated by the foreign policy of the Moscow bureaucracy. After the defeat of the German proletariat, due to its own misleadership, the Stalinist bureaucracy then declared that the defense of the Soviet Union required an alliance with the bourgeoisie of the “democratic” imperialist countries. It instructed Communist parties abroad to refrain from anything which could destabilize their rule. As Trotsky wrote, the Popular Front was like, “a society for insuring Radical bankrupts at the expense of the capital of the working class organizations”. [1]

Despite the fact that its ranks were drawn primarily from the petty bourgeoisie, the Radical Party defended the interests of the big bourgeoisie. The party strove to subordinate the petty bourgeoisie to the interests of French imperialism. Trotsky wrote: “The alliance with the Radical Party is, consequently, an alliance not with the petty bourgeoisie, but with its exploiters. To realize a genuine alliance between the workers and the peasants is not possible except by teaching the petty bourgeoisie how to emancipate itself from the Radical Party, how to cast off the Radical yoke from its neck once and for all. Meanwhile, the People’s Front acts in a directly opposite manner: entering into this ‘front,’ Socialists and Communists take upon themselves the responsibility for the Radical Party and thus help in this way to exploit and betray the masses.” [2]

In order not to upset the Radicals, the Stalinists opposed the struggles conducted and demands raised by workers. Trotsky continued: “At the time when the masses by their votes and their struggle seek to cast off the party of the Radicals, the leaders of the United Front, on the contrary, seek to save it. After obtaining the confidence of the masses of workers on the basis of a ‘socialist’ program, the leaders of the workers parties then proceeded to concede voluntarily a lion’s share of this confidence to the Radicals, in whom the masses of workers have absolutely no confidence.” [3]

In May 1936 the Popular Front won the parliamentary elections and the Social Democrat Léon Blum formed a government with the Radicals that was supported by the Stalinists. Encouraged by what appeared to be a favorable electoral result the working class undertook a series of strikes and occupations which spread like wildfire and culminated in a general strike involving two-and-a-half million people. France was on the brink of revolution.

The Stalinists, who were themselves surprised by the strike, now took it upon themselves in cooperation with the trade unions to bring the workers movement under control, persuaded or forced workers to quit their occupied factories in order to defuse the revolutionary situation and reestablish the authority of the Blum government. In the words of the PCF

chairman at the time, Maurice Thorez: “It is necessary to know when to end a strike.”

The bourgeoisie brought about the end of the strike with substantial concessions: wage increases, a 40-hour week and paid vacation. These gains, however, were short-lived. Once bourgeois rule had been stabilized these gains were reversed.

The end of the general strike meant that the ruling class had no more use for the Blum government. Many workers whose expectations had been frustrated turned away from the government. In June 1937 the Radicals once again constituted the biggest parliamentary party and occupied the post of head of the government—with the exception of a short period—up until the end of the Third Republic. Strikes and conflicts reemerged and for a short time Blum resumed as head of government in the spring of 1938. But in general the political trend was increasingly to the right.

Daladier, the one-time left protégé of the Radicals and their most important representative in the Popular Front, moved against the working class with dictatorial measures, decreed wage cuts and in 1939, following the conclusion of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, banned the Communist Party. After the German invasion a considerable section of the French bourgeoisie backed the Vichy regime and collaborated with the Nazis. The Popular Front had paralyzed and demoralized the working class and politically strengthened bourgeois reaction.

Leon Trotsky, who between 1933 and 1935 lived in exile in France, followed events closely and sought to influence the outcome. Even later, after being forced to leave France for Norway, he took great interest in developments in France and remained in close contact with his French comrades.

Trotsky rejected the policy of the Popular Front but this by no means meant that he ignored the strivings by both Communist and Social-Democratic workers for unity. Both parties controlled a large membership at that time. Trotsky endeavored to find ways and means to give this striving an independent direction to enable the broad masses to free themselves from the paralyzing influence of the bureaucratic apparatuses and the Popular Front.

To this end Trotsky called for the formation of action committees. Such committees were not restricted to workers, but could also include members of different parties and trade unions, as well as members of other social layers—state employees, craftsmen, tradesmen and small farmers. As “apparatuses of struggle,” Trotsky argued, the action committees would be in a position to implement the will of the masses against the bureaucracies.

“The workers will be able to elect a Committee of Action,” he wrote, “only in those cases when they themselves participate in some sort of *action* and feel the need for revolutionary leadership. In question here is not the *formal democratic* representation of *all* and *any* masses but the revolutionary representation of the struggling masses.” [4] The first precondition for the emergence of such committees consists in clearly understanding the significance of the action committees “*As the only means of breaking the anti-revolutionary opposition of party and trade union apparatus.*” [5]

The “Action Program for France,” which Trotsky submitted in 1934, was also aimed at strengthening the combativeness and independence of the masses against all forms of bureaucratic patronage and welding together all oppressed social layers.

In his writings on France, Trotsky consistently criticized political tendencies which were prepared to raise the most radical demands, but then in practice sacrificed such demands in favor of unity with the conservative apparatuses—as was the case with the “revolutionary lefts” led by Marceau Pivert.

“Repeating this or that revolutionary slogan. Marceau Pivert subordinates it to the abstract principle of ‘organizational unity’ which in action turns out to be unity with the patriots against the revolutionists. At

the time when it is a life and death question for the masses to smash the opposition of the united social patriotic apparatuses as an absolute 'good' which stands above the interests of revolutionary struggle.... The condition for the victory of the proletariat is *the liquidation of the present leadership*. The slogan of 'unity' becomes under these conditions not a stupidity, but a crime. No unity with the agents of French imperialism and the League of Nations." [6]

It is not difficult to recognize the traits of the "revolutionary left" from the 1930s in today's "extreme left"—although Besancenot, Alain Krivine (LCR), Arlette Laguiller (LO) and others possess all the vices of Pivert but none of his virtues. Pivert was a centrist, i.e., he varied between revolutionary and anti-revolutionary politics, and at crucial periods always decided in favor of the latter.

Today's "extreme lefts," however, reconciled themselves a long time ago to the existing order. They avoid any serious criticism of the Socialist and, in particular, the Communist parties. The LCR even stresses that a new left movement can be only be developed on the basis of unity with the Stalinists of the PCF—a party which for 70 years has rushed to bail French imperialism out of one crisis after the other and which has spent the greater part of the last 25 years in government!

These pseudo-lefts cannot even bring themselves to call openly and directly for the downfall of the Villepin government. Olivier Besancenot sent a formal letter of resignation to the prime minister, informing him of the immediate termination of his labor contract due to "a number of serious errors" However such satirical japes cannot take the place of a serious political perspective.

The resignation of Villepin would inevitably raise the question: Who comes next?

Lurking in the wings is the right-winger Nicolas Sarkozy, who continually hopes that the crisis besetting his inner-party rival will further his own chances next year of becoming the UMP candidate in the presidential election campaign. Sarkozy is currently cooling his heels and has even sought to go on the offensive against the prime minister by demanding a six-month "trial period" for the CPE.

With Sarkozy waiting in the wings would it not be more advisable to continue backing Villepin? This is the question many Socialists—and secretly also many LCR members—are asking themselves. After all, in the presidential election in 2002 these forces backed Chirac as the guarantor of Republican values in the second round of voting against another right-winger—Jean-Marie Le Pen of the National Front. In fact, the LCR ended up strengthening the Gaullist UMP and paving the way for the attacks now being carried out by Villepin. In similar manner Sarkozy would be able to capitalize should the current government succeed in defeating the mass movement against the CPE. The collapse of the government, on the other hand, would also drag Sarkozy down with it.

The SP also hope that the current mass movement against the CPE increases their electoral chances in 2007. But they are unwilling to take over government under conditions where their predecessor government has been brought down by a militant mass movement. That would awake expectations which a Socialist Party regime could not possibly fulfill. Lionel Jospin already made this experience when he took over in 1997 from the Gaullist Alain Juppé, who had been toppled by a massive strike movement the previous year. Subsequent disillusion with the government headed by Jospin led to a huge defeat for the Socialists in 2002, from which they still have to recover.

In the long run the Socialist Party opposes the ousting of Villepin because what is at stake is not just the fate of the UMP, but bourgeois rule as a whole—which both the Socialist Party and the Gaullists fervently defend. For its part, the LCR does not want to put pressure on the SP in this respect in the hope that a future revised version of the Plural Left government will send a few jobs—perhaps even a seat at the cabinet table—their way.

The struggle for the overthrow of the Gaullist government inevitably raises the question of an alternative social perspective. It presupposes that the working class frees itself from the grip of those old organizations which have defended French capitalism for 70 years and more. This is only possible on the basis of a socialist perspective which is able to address and unite all oppressed social layers. To this end, French workers and young people must reject the bureaucratic apparatuses and their left hangers-on, and seek allies amongst fellow youth and workers throughout Europe and the world who confront the same attacks and problems.

The most important lesson to be drawn from the past 70 years of struggle is the urgency of building an independent, international socialist party.

Notes:

1. Leon Trotsky. *Whither France?* London: New Park Publications, p. 113
2. *Leon Trotsky on France*, Pathfinder Press, p. 197
3. *Whither France?* p. 99
4. *Ibid*, p. 101
5. *Ibid*, p. 102
6. *Ibid.*, p. 104



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