French workers in revolt

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We are reposting the following series of articles on the revolt of the French working class in November-December 1995 in the hope that it will help to clarify the political background to the present upheaval in that country. The ongoing revolt by millions of youth and workers is a further response to the effort by the French ruling class to slash or eliminate entirely the social gains made in decades of struggle.

In November-December 1995, the working class revolted against efforts by the right-wing regime of Prime Minister Alain Juppé to “reform” the social security system, just as today the government of Dominique de Villepin is “reforming” France’s labor laws. In 1995 millions of workers, led by the transport workers in particular, rejected the claims made by the government and the media and recognized the maneuver for what it was—an attempt to shift the burden of the social costs on to the back of the working population. The government, as it does today, found itself isolated in the face of the mass movement.

Despite the widespread support for the strike in 1995, the union bureaucracies and official Left (Socialist Party, Communist Party, the Greens), aided by the so-called “far left” (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, Lutte Ouvrière and Parti des Travailleurs), managed to contain the movement and preserve the Juppé government in power. Juppé’s right-wing regime was defeated in parliamentary elections in 1997, but the Socialist Party-dominated “plural left” coalition of Lionel Jospin that followed continued the attacks on the working class, opening the door once again for the right to return in 2002.

In December 1995, David Walsh traveled to Europe as part of an international team of reporters to provide on-the-spot coverage of the massive strike wave in France. They studied the strike movement and the political crisis it produced and interviewed strikers, union officials and representatives of various “left” organizations, as well as non-strikers from various layers of the population.

This pamphlet was first published as a series or articles. It presented a detailed analysis of the strike movement and the role played by the various unions, political parties and tendencies.

It addressed a number of questions: Why had this movement erupted in France? Why had there been no comparable movement to that point in the US, although the attacks on social programs carried out there went far beyond those proposed by the French government? What did these events portend for the future development of the class struggle in France, Europe and internationally? What had these events revealed about the revolutionary capacity of the working class, as well as the critical political problems which had to be overcome?

Political parties and trade unions in France

For three and a half weeks in November and December, masses of French workers did battle with the right wing government of President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Alain Juppé. They shut down and occupied work sites to resist the government's sweeping attacks on social programmes, pensions, health benefits and the jobs and conditions of public service workers.

With tens of thousands of rail workers in the lead, postal, telephone and utility workers, transit workers in Paris and elsewhere, teachers, health care workers, miners, fire-fighters, airport and local government workers waged an enormous struggle. In half a dozen mass demonstrations, millions of workers and students poured into the streets of every sizeable city and town demanding the withdrawal of the government's proposal, known as the Juppé Plan.

On the day of the largest mobilisation, December 12, as many as 2.3 million people participated in more than 250 demonstrations. In Marseilles, where the fascist National Front has won considerable support in recent years, more than 100,000 workers and students marched; in Nice, on the Riviera, 50,000 people marched in one of the largest demonstrations in that city's history.

The strike movement had the sympathy of the overwhelming majority of the French population. Attempts by right wing politicians to mobilise "transportation users" against the strikers proved an embarrassing failure. Even opinion pollsters, whose findings conform as a rule to the political needs of the bourgeoisie, were obliged to report that after three weeks some 60% of those surveyed continued to support the aims of the anti-government movement.

This revolt of the working class against the sort of budget-cutting austerity programme which has become commonplace in the advanced capitalist countries threatened the entire framework of ruling class policy in Europe. Juppé introduced his plan as part of the effort to reduce the French budget deficit to the levels required for entry into the European Monetary Union (EMU) under the Maastricht Treaty. At the height of the strike wave French President Chirac met with German Chancellor Helmut Kohl in Baden-Baden, symbolising the unity of the European and, in fact, international bourgeoisie in opposition to the French working class.

The workers in France demonstrated their enormous social power and frightened the ruling class at home and abroad. But, in the aftermath of the strike movement, the Chirac-Juppé government and the essential components of its plan remain in place. In this mass strike movement the working class expressed its revolutionary capacity, but also its greatest weakness: the lack of a socialist programme and leadership.

Workers were not beaten or starved back to work, they were betrayed. From the outset the official leadership of the French working class the Communist Party, the Socialist Party and the trade unions, as well as the middle class left organisations such as the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), Lutte Ouvrière (LO), Parti des Travailleurs did everything they could to contain the strike movement within the framework of the trade unions, block any political challenge to the government and exhaust workers to the point where they would have no

choice but to return to work. In the final analysis, the French working class came up against the lack of the only fuel which could have kept the engine of the movement running: a revolutionary political perspective.

The November-December strike movement in France was an historic event. The most massive strikes in a quarter-century were a shattering refutation of those who had proclaimed "the end of the class struggle" and bid "farewell to the working class." These ignorant and truly degenerate intellectuals for many of whom Paris is the spiritual home are not likely to admit their error. No matter. The deeds of millions of French workers have effectively demolished their elaborate ideological constructions. The French events have convincingly reaffirmed the revolutionary role of the working class, rooted in the proletariat's position in production. They demonstrated, moreover, the attractive force which the working class mobilised in struggle has for broad layers of working people who have traditionally been referred to as middle class.

Like the May-June 1968 General Strike in France, the strike wave of this past November and December was a strategic experience of the working class. As with all such major confrontations between the working class and the bourgeoisie, there are critical lessons to be drawn and assimilated. A careful study needs to be made of the strengths and, even more importantly, the weaknesses of the strike movement. Because our standpoint, unlike that of the petty-bourgeois hangers-on of the Stalinist and social democratic bureaucracies who glorify uncritically the spontaneous militancy of the workers, is the revolutionary implications of this upheaval. Therefore, it is above all essential to uncover and confront those political problems which were revealed in the French strikes: the historic crisis of working class leadership and perspective. The aim is to contribute to the political education of workers and the construction of the new revolutionary leadership whose necessity was underscored with such urgency by the recent events.

The social explosion of November-December ushers in a new stage in the international class struggle. What followed upon the 1968 May-June General Strike in France? Seven years of eruptions which brought about the downfall of long-standing fascist government in Portugal and Spain, the toppling of the military dictatorship in Greece, the defeat of the Heath government in Britain and the political crisis in the US which led to the departure of Richard Nixon, the first time in American history a President had been forced to resign. These convulsions shook European and world capitalism to its foundations. The bourgeoisie was only able to preserve itself due to the efforts of its counter-revolutionary agents, Stalinism and social democracy, assisted by the middle class revisionist tendencies. The working class has paid a high price for that missed opportunity.

This new movement erupts under sharper and more advanced conditions. The post-war economic boom has long since collapsed, the entire system of political relations associated with the post-war period has unravelled and the influence of the old labour bureaucracies has been severely eroded. The post-war prosperity has given way in France and much of Europe to double-digit unemployment and an enormous intensification of trade conflicts.

In 1968 the French working class was attempting to extend what it had achieved in the previous two decades. Today it faces a frontal assault on all its social gains by a ruling class which is dramatically less able to compromise.

The international implications of the explosion of class struggle in France are more immediate today than they were 27 years ago. The intervening period has seen vast changes in world economy resulting in an unprecedented degree of global integration. European capital itself is seeking to integrate. Virtually every major corporation operates on a global scale. Every significant political development has international ramifications. The fate of workers in one part of the globe has a tangible effect on the fate of workers' struggles in other parts. These immense changes have made the need for a consciously international approach by workers all the more vital. Juppé's measures are the policies of Thatcher, Reagan, Clinton, Berlusconi, etc., translated into French.

The entire world bourgeoisie, not only the Kohl regime and the directors of the Bundesbank, backed the Juppé government and called on it to stand firm against the workers' protests.

The fear which the movement in France generated within the American bourgeoisie found expression in the way the events were portrayed in the mass media. The US television networks, owned by multi-billion dollar corporations, invariably tailor their "news" reporting to the needs of big business. In this case, they studiously ignored the strike wave rocking France. The big business press dripped with venom. It maligned the French workers, reserving for them the language it now directs against the poor in the US. According to its logic, the French workers, in standing up for their rights, were selfish, greedy and pampered.

Aside from the naked class interests to which the press responds, there is no doubt another factor contributing to its attitude: that there has been no comparable social explosion to this point in the US. At the same time as millions were closing down rail lines, airports and post offices in France in response to Juppé's plan, there was no organised opposition to the proposals by Bill Clinton and Congress to the virtual elimination of social programmes in the US and to the shutdown of the federal government, instigated by big business, which threw hundreds of thousands out of work.

The working class revolt in France was not simply a trade union struggle. Its power and the implicit challenge it represented to the ruling class was bound up with the fact that it was a broad social movement which went far beyond narrow, sectional interests.

In fact, the influence of the trade unions has suffered a sharp decline in France in recent years, to the point where leading bourgeois figures have warned of the dangers to political stability which this poses. The weakness of the official unions is a major reason why the working class was able to build such a powerful movement. The powerful sense of working class solidarity which was exhibited is the residual legacy of the strong revolutionary and socialist traditions of the French working class.

Workers did not fight simply for their own immediate interests. They mobilised to defend a system of universal social protection which they consider to be everyone's due. French workers are proud of their social conquests and the operations of state enterprises such as the rail and telephone company.

On November 15, Prime Minister Alain Juppé ascended the rostrum of the National Assembly and announced the government's plan to reform the social security system. With a great deal of self-satisfaction and to the applause of nearly 500 deputies the right wing parties won 80% of the parliamentary seats in the elections of March 1993 he outlined four principal reforms: on health insurance, on pensions, on family policy and on the financing of social security.

Within a week and a half, several million workers walked off the job in a one-day strike and rail workers began an unlimited walk-out. A major social and political crisis erupted which posed implicitly (though not in the consciousness of the mass of workers themselves) the question: which class was to rule?

To understand why the so-called Juppé Plan provoked such an upheaval it is necessary first of all to examine briefly the system of social protection in France and the nature of the government's assault upon it.

The present system was created at the end of World War Two. The most conscious sections of the French working class had participated in the resistance movement against German occupation and the puppet regime of Marshal Pétain set up in collaboration with the Nazis, which controlled most of southern France. Arms in hand in 1945 the workers saw the victory over the Nazi regime not simply as the defeat of the fascist enemy, but as the opportunity to settle accounts with the French bourgeoisie itself.

As one historian writes, however, the leaders of the French Communist

Party [PCF], which dominated the resistance movement, "had other ideas. [PCF chief Maurice] Thorez, who spent the war in Moscow, was in a good position to know that Stalin had no plans to foment communist coups in western Europe, and accepted the division of the world into two distinct power blocs, as agreed at the Tehran Conference of 1943 [one of three major conferences held by the post-war allies, the US, Britain and the USSR, at which the shape of post-war Europe was determined]."

(*Twentieth Century France*, James F. McMillan, New York, 1992)

The French workers were blocked from undertaking a struggle for power by the leadership of the Stalinist Communist Party which acted to preserve the profit system. They were nonetheless able to force out of the ruling class a comprehensive system of social protection.

In the US, the term "social security" describes the old-age insurance system established by the Social Security Act of 1935. In France, it refers to the responsibility of society as a whole to provide protection against the threat of poverty, disability and illness, as well as to ensure a decent standard of living for the elderly, and the comprehensive system set up to achieve those goals.

During the recent strike wave, the media in the US could only respond with a mixture of malice and bewilderment to the benefits which the French population takes for granted. A *New York Times* reporter, for example, in an article entitled "To French, Solidarity Outweighs Balanced Budget," recounted with astonishment that a pregnant woman in France, regardless of economic or marital status, collects a subsidy of $150 a month from the government from the fourth month of pregnancy, a subsidy which will double with a second child and continue to be paid until the children are 18. Throughout pregnancy all medical needs, check-ups and medication are free of charge at a government-financed clinic.

The article continues: "Larger, poorer families can and do benefit from an amazing array of Government-financed benefits that include paid yearly holidays and transportation to a sea or mountain resort. The Government pays for moving expenses, care at home for elderly people, subsidised apartments, and even dishwashers and washing machines for those who cannot afford them and have large families."

The *Wall Street Journal* presented the case of a rail worker, Francis Dianoux, 37, "who enjoys all the benefits that come with working at Societé Nationale des Chemins de Fer, or SNCF, the French state railway: guaranteed job for life, retirement at age 55, free railroad trips, five-and-a-half weeks vacation. The cost of all this to SNCF and to French society is irrelevant to him."

The *Wall Street Journal* finds it inconceivable that workers in France do not share the view so widely propagated in the US and even accepted unthinkingly by many American workers that the capitalist market is the highest product of human civilisation and that any undertaking which doesn't earn a profit deserves to perish. "Overcoming such deeply entrenched feelings is the challenge facing the French government as it emerges from a crippling 24-day strike," the newspaper comments. Easier said than done, for here the bourgeoisie is encountering what remains of the egalitarian and revolutionary traditions of the French working class.

The social security system in France is neither wholly public nor private. It has had a highly decentralised administrative structure built around a large number of financially autonomous funds or *caisses*. The agencies which operate these funds are run by administrative councils half of whose members are appointed by employers' organisations and half by the unions.

The first change proposed by Juppé was to create out of the 19 existing health insurance schemes one universal system. It is clear, however, that the French government does not intend to maintain the special advantages offered by the different schemes, but create a new bargain-basement health plan which would represent a diminution of benefits for masses of workers. It would also open the door for increased activity by private insurance companies offering supplementary coverage.

The Prime Minister proposed as well to end the system of joint employer-trade union management of the various funds, setting off a storm of protest from the union bureaucracies. Force Ouvrière (FO), the anti-communist labour federation set up with the aid of the CIA after the Second World War, is today France's third-largest union organisation with some 400,000 members. It benefits in particular from its role in managing the national health insurance fund, which handles hundreds of billions of francs annually and provides patronage and positions for the FO bureaucracy.

Juppé claims that the government's purpose in putting the social security apparatus under its direct control is to democratise it. This is fraudulent. Under the proposal, parliament will "establish the general orientation and policy objectives of social protection" and determine expenditures which will guarantee "the equilibrium of the system." In other words, the French people, like the American, will be told that their elementary social needs are too expensive and incompatible with the requirements of the national economy, and the social security system will fall under the budgetary axe.

The government proposed as well to lengthen the contributing period of public service workers from 37.5 years to 40 years. The previous government of Prime Minister Edouard Balladur introduced this "reform" for workers in the private sector in 1993, without the unions lifting a finger.

The general pension scheme was also established at the end of World War Two. Seventeen groups of government workers opted not to consolidate their pension schemes into the common plan. Their retirement plans generally have lower contribution rates and higher benefits. As the number of workers has dwindled in these occupations, thanks in part to the destruction of public service jobs, these funds have increasingly built up deficits.

The minimum retirement age for 65% of government employees is 60. It is 55, and in a small number of cases, 50, for 35% of employees considered to be doing work "involving special risks or exceptional fatigue." Miners, nurses, mail sorters and certain categories of utility workers can retire at 55. So can primary school teachers, although new recruits have to work until they are 60. The average retirement age of Paris's 30,000 transit workers is 53.

A public service employee collects an average pension of 11,134 francs (£1,465) a month or 75% of his or her final base pay, while a worker in private industry receives 8,459 francs (£1,113) or 70% of base pay. Such pensions far exceed the retirement benefits of the vast majority of American workers.

In addition to the general assault on social security and health care, railway workers faced specific attacks on a number of fronts. To retire with full pension a rail worker must fulfil two conditions: he or she must be at least 55 (50 for 18,000 train drivers) and have worked for SNCF for at least 25 years. On average, a rail worker who retires presently at 55 has worked for the railway line for 32 years. If the contribution period were extended to 40 years, he or she would have to work an additional eight years, a 25% increase.

Rail workers were also outraged by the proposed plan for the railways agreed to by SNCF and the government. This document envisioned the destruction of 3,500 miles of rail lines and the elimination of tens of thousands of jobs. And above and beyond all this looms the threat of privatisation of SNCF as a whole or in part, a fate which lies immediately ahead for France-Télécom, the state-owned telephone and telecommunications company.

The third prong of Juppé's attack involves freezing family allowances and making them taxable for the first time. "Reform of the funding of social protection" is the fourth element of his plan. In order to make up a debt of some 250 billion francs (£33bn) built up between 1992 and 1996, the government proposed to introduce a Reimbursement for the Social Debt (RDS), a tax across the board of 0.5% on all income. Even retirees

making just above the minimum old-age pension of £443 a month will be subject to the new tax.

In addition, the universal social contribution (CSG), a regressive tax introduced by the previous Socialist Party government, which now stands at 2.4%, will be increased by an indeterminate amount and enlarged to cover all incomes in 1997. The unemployed and retirees with income over the minimum wage will be hit by a supplementary health insurance assessment of 1.2% in 1996 and by the same amount in 1997.

According to the CGT the Stalinist-run union federation the government's plan will cost wage-earners £5.6bn in 1996 and £8bn in 1997.

In short, the government launched an all-sided assault on the living conditions and past gains of the working class, gains won in bitter struggle. The French workers, recognising the nature of the attack, rose up to fight it.

As a result of the three and a half weeks of strikes, the government was forced to shelve its proposal to extend the public service workers' contributing period, as well as the SNCF-government plan for the railways. But the essential ingredients of the Juppé Plan the 0.5% tax, the enlargement of the CSG, the freeze of family allowances and the change in their tax status, the increase in health insurance payments for the unemployed and the elderly, the placement of the social security system under the control of the government all remain.

The trade union leaders, the Stalinists of the Communist Party and their middle class apologists in France and elsewhere have declared the strike movement a great victory.

The French bourgeoisie views the conflict's results more accurately. On December 15 *Le Monde*, one of the country's leading daily newspapers, pointedly headlined an article: "The Juppé Plan has been emptied of only a portion of its content." *Liberation*, another daily paper, in a December 13 article, asked: "What remains of the Juppé Plan? Almost everything."

The French strikes demonstrated that the working class remains, from the point of view of its economic position, the most powerful force in society. But the November-December events revealed just as starkly that the international workers' movement confronts the greatest crisis of leadership and perspective in history. The French workers fought resolutely, broad layers of the population turned to them, the government was isolated the movement possessed everything except the most decisive ingredient: a revolutionary leadership and an independent political perspective. It was this lack of an alternative strategy which permitted the official labour leaders to regain control of the movement and sabotage it.

Millions of workers were asking themselves the obvious question: if Railway workers demonstrating with flares in Paris on December 16 the Juppé Plan is the central plank of this government, then how can it be defeated without the departure of the government? The more class conscious workers added: and without the departure of the profit system itself.

But from the worthless organisations in which the French workers find themselves trapped, no answer was forthcoming to these questions. In fact, not one of them not the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the trade unions or the self-styled "extreme left" (the Pabloite LCR, Lutte Ouvrière, Pierre Lambert's Parti des Travailleurs) would even address the issue of political power. In this lies the key to the ultimate defeat of the strike movement.

The final act of the November-December events underscored the treachery of the CGT and FO unions, as they left transit workers in Marseilles isolated to face the full force of state repression.

While the French workers were defeated in this battle, the last word has not been spoken in France or anywhere else. It is from the perspective of preparing for an entire period of world-wide social upheavals that the Workers League and the International Committee of the Fourth International approach this critical experience.

Contents

In November and December 1995 wide layers of the French working class mobilised against the coalition government of President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Alain Juppé. Workers resisted the right wing regime's assault on social security, pensions, health care benefits and the jobs and conditions of public service workers. Millions walked out in either one-day or longer strikes. Scores of work sites were occupied by strikers. Many workers in private industry participated in demonstrations and other forms of protest.

Even a brief look at the chronology of the November-December events and a partial listing of the sections of workers who took part reveal the broad character, both geographic and sectoral, of the movement.

The battle began to take shape in the summer and fall of 1995. In August, Prime Minister Alain Juppé, claiming that a weakening economy was hurting tax revenues, ordered state industries to cut their budgets. In the same month, the then Minister of the Economy and Finance, Alain Madelin, attacked the "privileges" of the public service workers. He was dropped from the cabinet for his indiscretion, but it was not long before Juppé fired the opening shot. In September he declared a freeze on government workers' pay. On October 10, in response to this and the threat of cuts in the social security system, 3.5 million public service workers staged a one-day strike.

Five weeks later, on November 15, Juppé presented his plan for the "reform" of the social security system.

As in the US, the word reform in France now signifies that the institution or structure to be "reformed" is either to be eliminated entirely or changed irremediably in the interests of big business.

Even before Juppé's arrogant speech to the National Assembly dozens of universities had been closed down by striking students demanding increased funding for higher education. On October 27 thousands of students, parents and faculty marched in Rouen. Over 100,000 university students protested on November 21, joined by *lycée* (high school) students.

The workers' response to Juppé began in earnest on November 24, as 50,000 marched in Paris and one million nation-wide. Workers at SNCF, the state-owned railway line, began a walk-out, which spread rapidly throughout the entire system. Strikers blocked rail lines out of Paris, halting the operation of the high-speed train to the Channel Tunnel. Air traffic controllers prevented 90% of flights from taking off.

Four days later, 60,000 workers and youth marched in Paris in the second day of massive national protests. Four major postal distribution centres were shut down and two of them occupied. Eighty five bus drivers employed by the RATP (Paris transit authority) blocked a garage with their buses in support of the strike movement. Within hours, the entire Paris transportation system, buses and *métro* (subway), as well as regional and commuter rail lines, ground to a halt. Massive traffic jams formed in and around Paris, a daily occurrence over the next three weeks.

By November 30, half of the mail sorting centres in France were shut. Workers at the state-owned EDF-GDF electricity and gas utilities began to walk out. Truck drivers threatened action. An estimated 300 miles of traffic tie-ups stretched around Paris. A section of Renault auto workers at the Cléon and Sandouville plants walked off the job in support of the public service workers.

November 30 was also a day of national protest by students; 160,000 participated in demonstrations across France. In Toulouse, whose university was one of the first to strike, 30,000 students marched; in Rennes, 10,000 students and rail workers demonstrated; in Lorient, 7,000 students protested; in Lille, 4,000 students and 1,000 rail and utility workers joined in an anti-government march. In all, 30-40 universities were either partially or entirely shut down.

The EDF-GDF was paralysed by the walk-out on December 1;

according to the unions, two-thirds of the utility workers were on strike. The state-owned telephone and telecommunications company, France Télécom, which faces imminent privatisation, began to be hit by strikes.

On December 3, rail workers in Le Mans blocked the entrance to the local headquarters of the ruling party, the RPR [Rally for the Republic]. Bank of France workers met to consider a strike. The press reported that on the following day 107 out of 137 mail sorting centres were affected and 57 were occupied by workers; 20% of France Télécom workers were out. There were demonstrations December 4 of government workers in Perpignan (3,000), Nantes (1,000) and Brest and Rennes (1,000 each). Auto workers in Cléon and Flins staged industrial actions. Workers at university hospital centres in Clermont-Ferrand, Nancy, Nice, Poitiers, Caen, Roubaix and Arras walked out. In addition, workers at a dozen hospitals in the Paris area held general assemblies to discuss what action they should take. Orly airport in Paris was affected.

One of the largest mobilisations of the working class took place on December 5. At least 247 demonstrations were held nation-wide, with a combined attendance of more than one million: 160,000 workers and supporters marched in Paris; in Marseilles, rail workers, miners, dockers and students joined in a protest of 50,000; 30,000 demonstrated in Lyon and 25,000 in Nice. According to the press, 45.6% of telephone workers were off the job. Two hundred social security offices were closed. In different regions local government workers, day-care centre attendants, fire-fighters and street cleaners walked out for the day. Workers in private industry too showed their opposition to the government's plan. In the Seine-Maritime department of northern France, for example, numerous industrial plants were affected: a paper factory in Chapelle-Darblay, as well as the operations of Renault, Goodyear, ATO, GEC-Alsthom, SPIE and SEITA. Several thousand Michelin workers took action in Clermont-Ferrand.

In addition to functioning as Prime Minister, Alain Juppé is mayor of Bordeaux, a city of 250,000 people in south-western France. He received an unpleasant surprise on December 6 as the city witnessed one of the largest demonstrations in its history. More than 50,000 workers and students marched through the streets of Bordeaux, from some 700 private companies, public service facilities and schools. The demonstration included 300 workers from a local biscuit factory, as well as workers from IBM and Thomson.

One million French workers demonstrated on December 7, the next day of a general mobilisation. In addition to mass turnouts in Paris, Marseilles and again Bordeaux, tens of thousands marched in Le Havre, Rouen and Caen, all in Normandy. In the small Breton city of Lorient, workers from a shipbuilding yard and employees of SBFM, affiliated to Renault, joined strikers to form a march of 12,000. Workers at the Public Information Library (BPI) in Paris walked out. The same day miners in Freyming-Merlebach in the Lorraine basin on the German border, on strike over wage demands, fought with members of the CRS the national paramilitary police force in a pitched battle which lasted for hours.

On December 9, as talks began between the government and the union leaders aimed at finding a way to end the strike movement, the walk-out remained solid in the railways and Paris transport. Air traffic was disrupted at Charles De Gaulle Airport in Paris and at airports in Marseilles and Montpellier. Public transit workers in Saint-Etienne, Toulouse, Rennes, Marseilles and Bordeaux carried out actions. Forty percent of the Bank of France workers were on strike. The following day, a Sunday, witnessed more demonstrations: of 30,000 in Bordeaux, 5,000 in Le Mans and Chateauroux and 3,000 in Narbonne. In many smaller cities the strike began to take on the character of a general strike. The television news showed scenes of townspeople and store-owners bringing food and supplies to strikers in Périgueux, for example, a city of 40,000.

The largest mobilisation of all took place on December 12. According to union estimates, some 2.3 million workers took part in hundreds of demonstrations. In Paris, 150,000 participated; in Marseilles, more than 100,000; in Rouen, 70,000; Nice witnessed one of the largest protests in its history, as 50,000 marched against the Juppé Plan.

At this point the government and the trade union bureaucrats made a concerted effort to bring the movement to an end. The real danger existed that the strike wave would extend to private industry and out of the control of the unions. It was increasingly uncertain that the regime would survive the crisis. In addition, the potential for a European-wide movement against austerity measures was raised by the demonstration of 70,000 public service workers in Brussels in neighbouring Belgium on December 13.

Juppé offered concessions to the rail workers in particular on certain issues the SNCF-government "Plan-Contract" which threatened jobs and the workers' pension plan and to the public service workers in general on their pensions. He further proposed that a "social summit" be held on December 21 at which the grievances of the workers could supposedly be aired. The government also promised a bit more funding for the universities in an attempt to get the students off the streets.

Through these manoeuvres the regime succeeded in splitting off the rail workers who began to return to work, without enthusiasm, on December 14, followed over the course of the next several days by postal, utility and Paris transit workers.

The union leaders, the Stalinists of the Communist Party and the middle class "left" organisations grabbed eagerly for the crumbs set out by Juppé, declaring the strike a victory and all but announcing its end.

The final mass demonstrations were held two days later, a Saturday. While the protests in the provinces, according to the authorities, were smaller than previously, the Paris march was mammoth. Several hundred thousand workers and supporters marched from the Place Denfert Rochereau in the south of Paris to the Place de la Nation. Along the route of the march, the sidewalks were crammed with bystanders. Some applauded, some took videos of what they obviously considered an historic event, others were perhaps merely curious. Onlookers from their windows offered encouragement to the marchers. This reporter was at the Place de la Nation before the march arrived there. Thousands of individuals, without placards or signs, streamed down the Boulevard Diderot toward the march as it approached, as if drawn by a magnet.

The return to work picked up considerably on December 18 and 19. At this point one in two trains were running and the Paris transit and commuter rail systems were nearly back to normal. Only 15 mail sorting centres remained on strike. Twenty percent of the utility workers remained off the job.

By the day of the social summit, the vast majority of the strikers had been demobilised. Postal workers in Caen stayed out until December 27-28, when a company of CRS invaded an occupied postal facility and forcibly removed 15 strikers. In Marseilles transit workers held out until January 8 in opposition to a two-year-old system under which new hires were paid less and forced to work longer and more flexible hours.

The summit itself, attended by representatives of the government, big and small business and five union federations, was a fraudulent and empty affair. Billed as a serious discussion of the social issues which had caused the wave of strikes, Juppé took the opportunity to appeal to the unions for "understanding," "reconciliation" and "hope." He declared that he was fully aware "that strong differences remain between us." He didn't even bother to discuss the possibility of changes in his planned attack on social security, the measure which had sparked the movement. His only proposal was to hold three further meetings in 1996 on youth unemployment, family policy and hours of work. As one bourgeois editorialist commented, Juppé proposed "not much more than a ... calendar."

After Juppé made his introductory presentation, the union leaders let off a little steam. The meeting lasted ten hours, interrupted by several long breaks and a meal. All the participants went home, letting out a collective

sigh of relief. Was it for this that workers had struggled and sacrificed for three weeks?

Frederick Engels once wrote: "The French always take on new life at the approach of battle." Indeed the French workers seem to take an almost sensual pleasure from the prospect of a battle with the class enemy. This is rooted in the history of France, "the land where, more than anywhere else, the historical class struggles were each time fought out to a decision, and where, consequently, the changing political forms within which they move and in which their results are summarised have been stamped in the sharpest outlines." (Engels, preface to *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* by Karl Marx.)

The great French Revolution of 1789 dealt feudal Europe a deathblow and inaugurated the modern bourgeois era. The first large scale working class revolt took place in 1830 in France and helped to topple Charles X. Eighteen years later, the workers rose once more and ousted another king, Louis Philippe. The first workers' government in history, the Paris Commune, was established in 1871. In 1936 the French workers' striving for power was betrayed by the Stalinist Communist Party, as it was again in 1945 and yet again in the massive general strike of 1968.

The protracted decay of the traditional working class organisations and the confusion produced by the collapse of the Soviet Union have combined to seriously erode these revolutionary and socialist traditions over the past period. One must emphasise that, despite its massive scope, the recent strike movement had severe political limitations. Experience with 14 years of Socialist Party rule, propped up by the Communist Party, and the decades-long betrayals of the unions have produced within the French working class a turn away from politics and a distrust of virtually any form of organisation.

Without confidence in a socialist perspective and with no revolutionary party at their head, the workers were not able to launch or evenly seriously pose a struggle for power.

This low level of political consciousness is of course relative. One must say that the French workers showed themselves in the November-December events to be far less weighed down by the union bureaucracy, and far less gripped by individualist illusions, than American workers at this point.

The bitter and resentful attitude of the US media toward the French strike movement is entirely understandable. This movement, with all its political limitations, represented the antipode to the vision of society advanced by the ideologists of the American ruling class. In opposition to selfish individualism and the supposed virtues of the capitalist market, the strikers upheld the principles of collective action and social solidarity.

It is important to stress once more that in large measure the French strikers, who received no strike pay, were not primarily fighting over immediate economic or trade union issues. The rail, postal and telephone workers were consciously engaged in a struggle to defend all the social gains won over many years of struggle. A young train conductor told us at the Gare du Nord, "We're not fighting for a higher wage, but to defend the gains made by our parents and our grandparents." And workers saw themselves as fighting for the entire working population. One heard these themes repeated time and again.

This took very concrete forms. The French government claims that combating the very high rate of youth unemployment is one of its top priorities. But when government officials raise the issue, as Juppé did at the social summit, they do so in order to assert that the chief obstacle to the creation of jobs is the high cost of labour and the "excessively generous" social benefits. The European bourgeoisie in general holds up the American example low-paying jobs with few or no benefits as the model to follow.

But workers pointed out that extending the working life of millions of public service employees, much less the never-ending elimination of jobs through attrition, would deprive an entire generation of youth of decent-paying jobs in the state-owned enterprises and government departments. Workers of 40 and 50, who felt themselves relatively secure, would explain that they were fighting for their children, for future generations.

This flies in the face of the reactionary notion advanced by a slew of ex-radicals some of them stalwarts of the 1968 events to the effect that the strike wave was a movement of the "privileged," of "dinosaurs" who were opposed to "modernisation" and "Europeanisation." This view, which resonates in one form or another throughout the entire international radical milieu, expresses the hostility of these petty-bourgeois forces to workers coming forward in defence of their own independent class interests. But this layer of radicals, an essentially quite conservative social stratum, was not by any means representative of the middle class as a whole.

The strike movement struck a deep chord within the French population. Years of austerity measures and cutbacks under Socialist Party and conservative governments alike have taken their toll on the popular patience. And the French working people are not blind to what has taken place under Thatcher and Major in Britain, Kohl in Germany and Reagan, Bush and Clinton in the US. Those who walked out were saying: enough is enough. And many others agreed.

In Paris one didn't need to read the results of opinion polls to know that the strike movement enjoyed immense support. The reader needs to imagine a metropolitan area of ten million people (nearly one-fifth of the nation's population), without any form of public transportation -- no subways, no buses, no commuter or long-distance trains. Day in and day out in the early morning darkness, amidst honking automobiles, thousands made their way by foot or bicycle silently and patiently to their work places. It was a ghostly sight. Those who were driving to work endured sitting in traffic for as long as four or five hours a day. Tens of thousands hitch-hiked from the suburbs. Yet virtually no one, except a few enraged petty-bourgeois, complained. Unable or unprepared to strike themselves, the vast majority of the population felt that this was the least they could do.

The RPR, the party of Chirac and Juppé, attempted to organise train, subway and bus riders against the strike. In a December 1 memorandum addressed to local RPR officials, the party leadership outlined the means of establishing "committees of users." The memo enclosed a model petition to be circulated which was headlined: "Let us work!"

This campaign fizzled. One or two demonstrations were organised by government supporters, with perhaps five hundred or a thousand participants each. The handful of ladies and gentlemen the RPR brought together were clearly not public transportation users in any event. And even they had to start the interviews they gave to television reporters by stressing, nervously: "Of course we're not against the strike. We would just like to have the right as individuals to get where we want to go," etc.

It was clear that Juppé and Chirac, elected President of France a mere six months before, were quite isolated. The popular reaction was entirely comprehensible. Chirac ran a deceitful and demagogic campaign in the spring of 1995, pledging to make job creation his first priority. Unemployment throughout the year remained in double digits and his Prime Minister proceeded to launch a wholesale attack on social benefits which are enjoyed by every layer of French society.

One French news magazine, no friend of the strike, interviewed a number of middle class people who had voted for Chirac in May. It quoted one white-collar bank employee as saying: "I thought Chirac was going to change things, to fight effectively against unemployment and waste... The result: he did the opposite. Well, I'd like to go into the street too to say 'Screw you' to Juppé, Chirac and friends. To these incompetents loaded with lovely diplomas who grow fat on our backs, with government automobiles and tables reserved at the best restaurants."

The magazine quoted a young office worker: "I always voted for the Left. But after 14 years of deception that was enough. So, I decided to vote for Chirac. Without too many illusions, but with the secret hope that

there would be a bit more social justice in the country. But with the Juppé Plan it's still the wage-earners, the little people, who will be taxed. Elected pretending to be a socialist, Chirac today is showing his true face."

The general attitude, even of better-off middle class people, was perhaps summed up by a woman we interviewed in Paris on December 16 just prior to the huge demonstration. The woman, who turned out to be a psychoanalyst, was walking with her daughter and her dog along the route of the march.

When we asked her what she thought of the strike movement, she responded, "There has been a difficult situation in France for some years. One has the impression that one is paying more and more deductions, more and more for social security, and all that. It's become intolerable."

She added, "Of course it's true that the social security system can't continue to lose money as it's doing. So one is a bit perplexed in relation to all that."

So, all in all, we asked, did she support the strikers? With a smile, she replied, "Je ne suis pas contre..." I'm not against them.

It would be misleading to suggest that the strike movement was universally supported in the middle class. Many no doubt cursed the workers under their breath, but found the atmosphere uncongenial to an airing of their views. We spoke to the Tunisian owner of a small restaurant in Belleville in the west of Paris who was hostile to the strike. He explained, "The customers aren't coming. Everything is blocked. Business is down by 60%. All the bills are piling up and nobody will reduce them afterward."

We asked the owner if he had any sympathy for the workers on strike. "No," he said bluntly. "Those are guys of 30 and 40 who are thinking about the pensions they're going to get 20 years from now, but we have to live today." But this short-sighted view was a distinctly minority opinion.

Workers everywhere expressed anger at the government's attacks and the deterioration in the conditions of life. A striking special education teacher in the north of Paris who worked with handicapped children, for example, told us about conditions in his school's neighbourhood. It's so bad, he said, that in some households the only people getting up in the morning are the children going to school because everybody else is unemployed. He pointed out that a higher percentage of teachers from schools in impoverished areas were on strike because they see the appalling conditions first-hand.

A postal worker from the Landy mail sorting centre commented: "We're the ones who pay for social security. I'm on strike against the system. Everything costs more. Life is more difficult. People are being kicked out on the street. Why should we pay?"

A older worker Italian-born, an employee at SERNAM a transport company affiliated to the state-run railway told us, "Where I live I see people huddled up against the cold, who live on the street. It's terrible. Why is that? One is obliged to do something. Society is obliged... It's an international problem, clearly. The government is doing this because of Maastricht [the treaty providing for the integration of Europe]. They want us to work for pennies. In the US, people have no health insurance or anything. We don't want that here."

Millions of French workers, and wide layers of the middle class, opposed the government attack on social protection. A massive resistance movement developed. But despite the determination and solidarity demonstrated by the French working class the government's plan survived the conflict more or less intact. To understand this outcome one has to consider the current political problems of the French and international workers' movement.

Contents

In elections for the French National Assembly in March 1993, the right wing parties the Rassemblement pour la République (RPR) and the Union pour la Démocratie Française (UDF) won 460 out of 577 seats. The left the Socialist and Communist parties elected only 93 deputies. The victory of RPR leader Jacques Chirac over Socialist Lionel Jospin in the Presidential election of May 1995 confirmed, in the eyes of bourgeois pundits, the swing to the right in French political life.

This appearance of right wing consensus was shattered by the massive strike movement of November-December. The electoral victories of the bourgeois parties did not so much reveal a mass base of support for their policies as it did the bankruptcy of the traditional working class organisations the Communist and Socialist parties and the trade unions.

The entry into struggle of hundreds of thousands of striking public employees rapidly created a new relationship of social forces. Masses of workers mobilised themselves in solidarity with the strikers against the government's attack on the social welfare system. Large sections of the middle class demonstrated their support for the strikers and their immense hostility toward the ruling elite.

As it turned out, the government, with its vaunted 80% majority in parliament, was thoroughly isolated. It proved incapable of organising a single serious public demonstration in defence of its plans. There is no doubt that a powerful intervention by masses of workers in the US, Britain, Germany or any of the advanced countries would rapidly reveal the same fundamental alignment of forces.

But the strike movement also laid bare the fundamental political problems which confront the international working class. Despite the anti-government movement's deep social roots and mass support, the Chirac-Juppé regime survived the crisis with the main body of its attacks intact. How is this to be explained?

The French bourgeoisie enjoyed one great advantage in the November-December conflict: it possessed a strategy to restructure society in its interest and it held political power.

The French ruling class is driven to take back all the concessions wrested from it by workers in half a century or more of struggle. It does this now in the name of European economic and political unity. The drive for European union spearheaded by Germany and its central bank is an effort to improve the competitive position of European industry against its US and Japanese rivals.

The French working class, for all its combativity, was unprepared for the confrontation with the government in November and December. The numerous mass demonstrations we attended in Paris and Rouen were large and enthusiastic, but the political level was in general quite low. A striking feature of the movement was the virtual absence of political slogans and demands, except for the occasional call for Juppé to resign. When we tried to raise political questions with the participants, it was difficult to get beyond generalities. If we spoke to workers about the need to bring down the Juppé government the response was nearly always the same: "I'm all for it but in France today there is no alternative on the left."

The responsibility for this lies with the old parties and trade union bureaucracies of the working class, as well as the so-called "extreme left" the Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire (Revolutionary Communist League), Lutte Ouvrière (Workers Struggle), Parti des Travailleurs (Workers Party) which props them up.

But this is not simply the result of these organisations' pernicious role in recent events. The present level of French workers' political thinking must be grasped as a product of history.

The revolutionary socialist strivings of the French working class have been betrayed numerous times since the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union and the Communist parties, beginning in the 1920s. In 1936 the French Communist Party (PCF) and the Socialist Party reformists established the Peoples Front coalition government in alliance with the Radical Party, a bourgeois party appealing to sections of the lower middle class. The Peoples Front regime, headed by Socialist Party leader Leon Blum, contrived to stifle a great general strike movement of the working class, forcing the striking workers back to the factories after they had won

a few paltry concessions from the employers.

At the end of World War Two, French bourgeois rule was restabilised only with the aid of the PCF, which joined the coalition governments of 1945-47. In May and June of 1968 millions walked off their jobs or occupied their work places. Once again the Stalinists betrayed the workers, manoeuvring to prevent the strike from challenging the De Gaulle government.

Blocked in 1968, the French workers put their hopes in a "government of the Left," a bloc of François Mitterrand's newly-refurbished Socialist Party and the Stalinists. Such a regime came to power in 1981. Mitterrand held out the delusory promise of reforming French capitalism as though the country operated independently of the laws governing the world economy.

The meagre reforms initiated in the first months of this government, including limited nationalisations of ailing firms, provoked enormous opposition within the French ruling class. The Mitterrand government's response in 1983-84 to the deepening world slump and pressure from the French bourgeoisie was to turn sharply against the working class and impose austerity measures. Unemployment jumped from 8.9% in 1981 to 10.8 in 1984 and remained in double digits. Living standards fell sharply. The chauvinist campaign against immigrant workers was stepped up.

When workers fought back, the government intervened directly -- sending in troops in an unsuccessful attempt to break the strike of Paris transit workers in 1988 or relied on the treachery of the Stalinist-run Confederation Generale du Travail (CGT) and the other union bureaucracies. The CGT sabotaged every struggle against lay-offs and concessions. This collaboration with the Mitterrand regime was maintained after the Stalinists lost their cabinet seats in 1983.

At the end of 14 years of "Socialist" rule unemployment stood at 11%, and perhaps 25% among the youth. Half of French workers earn less than 7,000 francs (£933.33) a month, a quarter earn less than 5,500 (£733.33). Fifty percent of workers under 25 earn 5,300 (£706.67) a month or less. As in the US, wages are stagnating while the productivity of labour soars. From 1993-95 productivity grew 22 times faster than workers' earnings.

Many workers express open disgust with the Socialist Party. At the same time, support for the Communist Party has fallen precipitously. The leading vote-getter in the first post-war election, the PCF's percentage of the vote in national balloting has fallen to 8%.

Both these parties earned the hostility of broad layers of the population. In the absence of a genuine socialist alternative, one of the consequences of this growing alienation from the traditional left has been the growth in support for the neo-fascist National Front. Jean-Marie Le Pen's party had found a response among sections of the unemployed and more backward workers.

Having passed through a series of bitter experiences with its traditional organisations, culminating in the 14 years of Mitterrand's rule, the French working class was confronted with a genuine dilemma in November-December 1995. If workers brought down the Juppé government, what would they replace it with? There was no enthusiasm for a reprise of Socialist Party-Communist Party rule. Workers had no confidence that these parties would carry out policies fundamentally different from those of Juppé -Chirac.

Indeed, the Socialist Party government, propped up by the Stalinists, anticipated the attacks on the social welfare system later expanded by Juppé. It is no secret that a good portion, if not a majority, of the SP deputies in the National Assembly would have supported the Juppé Plan, if left to their own devices. A daily newspaper explained: "Consciously or not, many Socialists put themselves in the place of the government officials they hope to become once again tomorrow. This 'realism' prevents them from pouring oil on the fire."

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe, followed by the barrage of propaganda on the supposed "death" of socialism, contributed to the general disillusionment and ideological confusion.

The old parties and organisations having proven their worthlessness, the working class in France was posed with building a revolutionary socialist alternative to these bureaucracies. In essence, this task faces workers in every country of the world.

But what of the organisations which claim to represent an alternative to the Stalinists and reformists? The Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) of Alain Krivine, Lutte Ouvrière(LO) and the Parti des Travailleurs (PT) of Pierre Lambert have contributed significantly to the political blind alley in which the French workers find themselves.

These radical tendencies universally announced that they were in no position to provide leadership. They proclaimed they represented no alternative and that no alternative existed. "We are too weak to do anything" was their universal rallying cry, despite the fact that they had hundreds, if not thousands, of members in leadership positions in the unions. This only reinforced the sense of impatience and skepticism felt by many workers.

The LCR, Lutte Ouvrière and the Lambertist PT all have their origins in splits from the Trotskyist movement, the Fourth International. Separated from one another by decades of factional strife, they are united in their conviction that no movement based on Trotskyist principles can be built and their hatred of anyone who fights to build such a movement.

In 1986-88 when the strikes of nurses, railway and transit workers and others erupted against the "cohabitation" government of Mitterrand and Chirac, workers tried to bypass the discredited unions by creating independent "coordinating committees." The committees invariably fell under the leadership of these middle class opportunist organisations, which claimed to be anti-bureaucratic. Invariably the radicals proceeded to act as the union bureaucrats had before them: they entered into negotiations with the government and sold out the struggles.

Workers became suspicious of these coordinating committees, which were no better than the old unions, and they fell apart. For the powers that be and their defenders, the task in November-December 1995 was to create a new form within which to trap the movement and strangle it.

This was accomplished in the following manner: the hatred felt by workers for the social democratic and Stalinist parties was exploited by these very forces, with the help of the middle class radicals, to promote the notion that workers should reject politics and political parties altogether. The new slogans were: "Democracy! No politics! No colonisation of the trade unions by political parties!" This was justified theoretically in the outpourings of PCF and CGT think-tanks.

Fairly typical were the remarks of a young conductor at the Gare du Nord, who explained: "The unions have more or less lost their influence because for some years they've acted as an arm of management." But this same worker, when pressed to explain how he thought the fight should be conducted, said the unions had the experience in negotiating and should therefore play a leading role, under the pressure of the rank and file. He was prepared to concede that the struggle was political, but insisted that the workers were not ready for a new party, distrusted politics and wanted to run things without "outside interference."

There was, as a result of past betrayals and the intervention of the middle class radicals, a revival of syndicalist prejudices. The result: the strike movement remained within the bounds of bourgeois trade unionism and protest.

The government and the media claimed that there was no option but to impose cuts and increased costs on the working population. None of the old organisations explained to the working people that they were not in any way responsible for the budget deficit. Nor did they advance a socialist alternative.

The clamorous calls for Juppé to withdraw his plan could not conceal a painful fact: workers were determined to push back the government to

whatever extent they could, but the majority were skeptical that it could be driven out and replaced by a government of their own creation.

A non-union striker, speaking during a meeting at the Gare du Nord, spoke for many when he said, to applause: "I also want reform, but it should be equitable. If I take a franc out of my pocket, the bosses should too."

The strikes in the public service were not led by the unions, nor were the coordinating committees revived. Instead so-called assembles generales [general assemblies] were convened each day to decide on the course of action. Formally, no one was on unlimited strike. Each individual industrial action was a series of one-day strikes "renewed" every 24 hours at the general assembly.

So workers had the situation firmly under their control or so they thought. How could anyone sell them out, as had been done countless times in the past, when they had the decision-making power directly in their own hands? We heard the same argument countless times: it doesn't matter what the union leaders do at the national level, the general assemblies decide everything.

This illusion was encouraged by the Stalinists day in and day out and parroted by the radicals. Meanwhile the trade union officials stayed awake nights obsessed by only one thought: how to end the strikes without challenging the government?

Those who spoke at the daily meetings were generally the union functionaries from the CGT and the Force Ouvrière(FO), although they didn't present themselves that way. In the first two weeks of the strike they postured as the most ferocious opponents of the Chirac-Juppé regime. No denunciation of the government was too strong. Demagoguery was in full season. One banner read: "Juppé , we will strangle you."

The union officials were often followed to the microphone by one or more representatives of the middle class radical groups an LCR member, a Maoist, a supporter of Lutte Ouvrière, an anarchist who glorified the strike movement and called for its enlargement. Never a word of criticism of the union leaders. Never a call for a political struggle against the government. Never a call for the formation of committees of action and the struggle for a workers' government and socialist policies based on those organisations.

Then the microphone was offered to anyone who wanted it. Here supposedly was democracy in action! The difficulty was that rank and file workers had little to say. They didn't feel able to counter the union officials, or they shared a similar political outlook. Everything was taking place in front of their eyes, but the lack of a revolutionary political perspective rendered them unable to see the process of betrayal.

Contents

The strike movement which erupted in France in November-December 1995 had revolutionary social implications. Masses of workers were challenging European capitalist policy and, indeed, the policy of every ruling class internationally. The government of President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Alain Juppé had launched a sweeping attack on the social welfare system, without any popular base of support. Posed to the French workers was the need to organise their own political alternative to the capitalist government and its programme, i.e., to fight for a workers' government and the implementation of socialist policies.

The strikes began in the general assemblies which the unions were obliged to call in response to the Juppé Plan. Railworkers, followed by postal workers, gas and electric utility employees and transit workers, walked off the job. Millions of other workers kept close tabs on the strike movement, watching, waiting and hoping that the striking workers would take decisive action to change the situation in France.

Under these volatile conditions the task of ensuring the survival of the Juppé government and French capitalism fell to the trade union bureaucracies, the Communist Party (PCF) and the middle class "left" organisations.

The strike movement broke out over the heads of the trade union officials. One of the three top labour leaders in the country, Nicole Notat of the Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (CFDT French Democratic Confederation of Labour), openly welcomed the government's attack on social security, health care benefits and public employees' pensions. Other union officials issued verbal protests, none more strident than the bureaucracy of Force Ouvrière (FO Workers' Power), led by Marc Blondel, which stood to lose thousands of jobs through the reorganisation of the national health insurance fund. But verbal protest is the standard fare of union leaders in every country. It is a far cry from organising a mass anti-government movement.

The record of the French trade unions in recent years is one of class collaboration carried out by an increasingly compromised and marginalised bureaucracy. During the 14 years of François Mitterrand's Socialist Party (PS) rule, the three union centrals the Communist Party-led Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT General Confederation of Labour), the CFDT and the FO devoted all their efforts to suppressing the resistance of the working class to rising unemployment, falling living standards and government austerity measures.

France's union centrals have seen a steady loss in membership over the past decade and a half. The CFDT (loosely associated with the Socialist Party) and the Stalinist-controlled CGT suffered the sharpest drop in the 1980s. These unions were most closely identified with the Mitterrand government of 1981-95, which included Communist Party cabinet ministers from 1981-83.

The dues-paying membership of the CGT fell by 50% to one million between 1979 and 1986. Its ranks have since fallen to approximately 630,000. The CFDT lost more than 30% of its members during the same period, falling to 650,000. Membership of FO, despite CGT General Secretary

recruitment campaigns, fell by 25% to 600,000 in the 1979-86 period. Today it represents some 400,000 workers.

As a whole the French unionisation rate fell from 25% of the workforce in 1975 to 15% by 1986; the rate is now officially 9.8%. This decline has alarmed the more thoughtful representatives of the French bourgeoisie. In the fall of 1995 the President of the Employers Federation, Jean Gandois, told an interviewer: "We have everything to lose if the trade unions are weakened further. Therefore we have to find ways to keep their head above water."

The enfeebled state of the unions may have led the Juppé government to think it could dispense with the services of the labour bureaucracy altogether. *Le Monde* commented that "Alain Juppé is perhaps the first head of government who, conscious of the low level of union representation in France... thought he could safely ignore their consultation in carrying out reform." But events were to demonstrate that the unions were indispensable in bringing the strike movement under control and ultimately extinguishing it.

The present day French Communist Party bears no resemblance, other than in name, to the party established in 1921 as a section of the Third International. The PCF, along with the other parties of the Third International, came under Stalinist leadership in the late 1920s. By the mid-1930s it had embraced the Kremlin policy of the popular front, which obliged the Communist parties around the world to repudiate revolutionary socialist policies and ally themselves with liberal capitalist parties, entering into bourgeois coalition governments wherever possible. On this basis the PCF entered the popular front government of Leon Blum in 1936, which suppressed the revolutionary upsurge of the French workers and then handed over power to a right wing government. Despite this betrayal, the PCF of the 1930s retained a mass working class membership and following.

Even in the period of the May-June 1968 General Strike the PCF had the allegiance of large sections of the working class. It exploited workers'

illusions in its supposed socialist credentials to betray the strike and facilitate the re-election of a Gaullistgovernment.

But the PCF can no longer be characterised as a mass workers' party. It has lost the bulk of its working class membership. It is today little more than a bureaucratic apparatus, which wields influence primarily through its functionaries in the leadership of the CGT and its connections with the bourgeois parties.

The PCF has seen its percentage of the vote fall in national elections from 25-30% at the end of World War Two to 8.6% in the 1995 Presidential election, nearly two million votes behind the neo-fascist National Front. The response of the Stalinists, under Robert Hue, has been to shift farther to the right. In the name of the "mutation" of Communism, Hue proposes to transform the PCF into an openly pro-capitalist, nationalist, "humanist" party.

The outbreak of the strike movement in November of 1995 threw the PCF and the CGT leadership into crisis. In the first week of the strike the Stalinists were barely able to put forward a coherent political line. When the PCF and CGT officials found their voices it was to deliver the following message: under no conditions was the strike movement to challenge the government.

As party leader Hue told the press on December 6: "One must not make the movement say what it is not saying. The movement today is not a movement for political change." In a variation of the same theme, Louis Viannet, General Secretary of the CGT, told an interviewer on December 13: "The problem is not Alain Juppé as Prime Minister. The problem lies in the policy he is carrying out." The PCF-CGT policy reduced itself to a call for negotiations between the government, preferably Juppé himself, and the unions.

Before examining how this policy of betrayal was carried out in practice, one issue needs to be re-emphasised. Major strikes took place in 1986-87 among railway, transit and health care workers which entirely bypassed the discredited union structures. The various middle class "left" organisations the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR), Workers Struggle (LO) and Pierre Lambert's International Communist Party assumed the leadership of these struggles virtually by default, and proceeded to derail them. Their role was to lead the workers back to the official unions, refurbishing the Stalinist and reformist bureaucrats in the process. These opportunist groups were therefore instrumental in creating the conditions for the CGT and FO leaders to take over leadership, however tenuously, of the 1995 strike wave. Throughout the weeks of strike action and mass protest, the Stalinist CGT officials in particular had the look of condemned men who wondered why sentencing had not yet been carried out.

One can grasp the general role of the union leaders simply by following their manoeuvres. The strike reached its height during the first week of December. This was as well the high point of rhetoric from the CGT and FO leaders. They postured as men prepared to storm heaven itself.

On December 3 Blondel called for the "hardening" and "radicalisation" of the strike. "We're mobilising ourselves," he declared, "on one simple position: the withdrawal of the Juppé Plan." The following day, addressing the CGT's 45th congress, Viannet called for the "generalisation of the strike." Blondel, who played the demagogue and buffoon throughout the strike, told rail workers on December 6 that he was prepared "to go all the way to the end" to bring about the defeat of the government attack.

Reports that the Prime Minister was prepared to meet with the union leaders at a social summit were leaked to the press on December 7.

The following day railway union leaders met for the first time with a special mediator, Jean Matteoli. Jacques Barrot, Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, opened negotiations with the CGT and FO union leaders on December 9. The same day the FO leadership made it known that withdrawal of the Juppé Plan was no longer a precondition for negotiations. *Le Monde* reported that over the weekend of December 9-10 "contacts, by nature discreet, not to say secret, between the government and the unions multiplied."

That Sunday the Prime Minister announced on television that he would be holding a summit with the union leaders on December 21. He also declared that his government would not make any changes in the pension plans of the public employees and that the "contract-plan" to slash rail jobs and conditions would be discussed with the railworkers.

On December 11 Juppé met with the union leaders for the first time since the eruption of the crisis. On leaving the Prime Minister's residence, Viannet declared that it "would be intelligent if there were a freeze of the Juppé Plan and the ideal would be its withdrawal." Blondel told reporters that, hopefully, Juppé was "not closed to the idea of general negotiations." He was now demanding the "suspension" of the Juppé Plan.

The government and the unions continued to posture and bluster for several more days, but clearly the framework of a deal had been worked out. The strategy of the union leaders, who were in no position to order an end to the strike, was to conduct a war of attrition against the strikers. If workers were left out on strike long enough, politically disarmed, they would become exhausted and return to work.

By December 15, after Juppé's Minister of Transport had promised in writing that railworkers' pensions wouldn't be touched and that the government rail plan was a dead issue, the unions were ready to fold up their tents. The PCF's daily paper,*L'Humanité* carried the headline December 16: "The victory of the railway workers inspires others." Viannet pontificated: "The victory of the railway workers is the magisterial proof of the power represented by the unity of workers, embodied in the unions." The return to work began. The CGT and FO leaders did not care to remind anyone that the Juppé government remained in power and the central elements of its attack on social welfare programmes remained intact.

During the final days of the strike, we had the opportunity to observe this process first hand as it unfolded at the Gare du Nord, one of the centres of the movement. On December 14 the general assembly, held in the occupied signal tower, was opened by CGT official Alain Bord. He read out a list of work sites and the votes taken there all in favour of continuing the strike. Everyone was in high spirits. The next speaker, François Boudet, a supporter of the Pabloite LCR, was exuberant. The strike was going from strength to strength. The railway workers were to be the locomotive of the strike movement and of the revival of France itself. Now they should pull all the other workers into the struggle, especially those in private industry. After a few more speakers, a vote was held unanimous support for continuation of the strike.

That evening Juppé made his announcement putting on ice his change in government employees' pension plans and the railway "contract-plan."

What a difference a day made! At the Gare du Nord on December 15 the atmosphere had changed dramatically. Workers we spoke to before the meeting were depressed. They conceded that a return to work was likely. Those around the Stalinist PCF placed much of the blame on the workers in private industry. "The rail workers were strong, but nobody followed us. It was the workers, and the unions. We made the government retreat, but not far enough," one middle-aged Gorbachev supporter told us.

A non-union striker, conductor Paul Fauquembergue, was enraged. "The trade unions are responsible for this miserable outcome. I have only contempt for the unions because they don't stand for the interests of the work-force. They care about their own positions and money."

Alain Bord of the CGT was a changed man from the militant of the day before. Somberly, he began: "It was always clear. We don't tell you to continue, or to go back. The general assemblies decide." He then read out a list of locations returning to work.

The message was unmistakable. "We have maintained what we had," he continued, conceding that "the Juppé Plan remains." The CGT bureaucrat

had heard us before the meeting criticising the unions for not calling a general strike. Feeling obliged to respond, he asked, "Why didn't the unions call out private enterprise?" He answered his own question: "We don't have a magic button any more."

Boudet of the LCR, a pale shadow of the ebullient cheerleader from the previous day, called for a continuation of the movement, but without conviction. Poor François was a deflated balloon: "It's the first victory, the first concession, in 20 years," he said. "The extension of the strike to private enterprise has not taken place. That's the weakness of the movement."

In other words, the villains in the piece were the private sector workers and, by implication, the working class as a whole.

An FO official, Claudio Serenelli, a demagogue of the first order, grabbed the microphone. He was personally prepared to fight to the bitter end. However, one had to be realistic. "We haven't defeated the Juppé Plan," he said, "but if this is not a victory, I don't know what is." He blamed the problems of the strike movement on the section of public sector workers that had not come out. He would very much like to be a locomotive, he explained, but not without cars behind him.

For the first time some workers spoke angrily against continuing the strike. Their basic argument: we've won our demands, Christmas is coming, we've been out more than three weeks, enough is enough. When the vote came, ten voted against the strike, five abstained. It was clear that the strike was on its last legs.

After the meeting we spoke to a young maintenance worker, Dominique Chaupard, of Caribbean origin, who had argued in the meeting for the continuation of the strike for another week, but insisted that the strike should not aim to drive out the government. Chaupard, who earns only £933 a month, turned out to be a PCF supporter. One saw here the debilitating influence of Stalinism. We asked him why he was so firm about not calling for the defeat of the government.

"Well," he said, "this is a social, a trade union movement, and not a political one. And it should remain so." He further argued that to raise political demands would be undemocratic. "Yes," he explained, "the government was elected in general elections. As long as the majority of the people do not demand the overthrow of such a government, it would be undemocratic to put forward such a demand."

Chaupard had fallen prey to the latest twist in the Stalinists' arsenal of betrayal this absurd and cynical invocation of "democracy." In the name of democracy it was impermissible for the mass of the population to drive out the most right wing government since World War Two!

The attempts of the Stalinists and petty-bourgeois radicals to blame the defeat of the movement on those sections of the working class that did not strike is the most contemptible slander of all. These "leaders" could have united and mobilised the broad masses of workers, but only by waging the struggle as a political and revolutionary offensive against the government and encouraging the creation of democratic and popular organs of the working people as the basis for a new, workers' government. How else could the working class as a whole, after so many deceptions and disappointments, be roused? But this was the last thing the Stalinists and phoney "lefts" wanted. It was patently impossible to mobilise tens of millions on a policy of *not* fighting for a change of government and a commitment that, at the end of the day, not very much would change which is precisely why they adhered to such a miserable and treacherous policy.

Contents

At the end of last year a massive strike movement erupted in France in response to the government's attack on the social welfare system. Workers paralysed railway traffic, the Paris transit system, the post office, the stateowned gas and electricity companies and many other government facilities. The strikes won the support of wide layers of the population. Yet the government survived the crisis with the essential ingredients of its proposed measures intact. How was this possible?

The role of the pettybourgeois "left" organisations in France was decisive in the defeat of the strike movement. Numerous groupings in France profess to represent a left wing alternative to the social democratic Socialist Party and the Stalinist Communist Party. Among the most significant claiming some connection with Trotskyism are the Workers Struggle (Lutte Ouvrière, LO) group, the Revolutionary Communist League (Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire, LCR), which is affiliated to the Pabloite United Secretariat, and the Workers Party (Parti des Travailleurs, PT) of Pierre Lambert.

From a political standpoint, the most remarkable feature of the intervention of these groups in the strike movement was their refusal to campaign for the bringing down of the government of Prime Minister Juppé. Such a political struggle was the precondition for a successful fight against the government's proposals for slashing social welfare programmes. The strike movement posed the necessity for the working class to advance its own alternative to the capitalist regime: a workers' government committed to carrying out anticapitalist and socialist policies.

The old labour leaderships the Communist Party, the CP-led trade union federation (General Confederation of Labour) and the other established unions explicitly opposed such a political movement. The Stalinist and reformist bureaucrats insisted that the strike wave was simply a protest movement and was not aimed at bringing about a political change. They rejected any attempt to force the government out of power. The pettybourgeois groups trailed behind the labour bureaucracies, echoing their treacherous line.

The strikes erupted largely outside the official union structures, which had suffered a sharp decline in membership and influence over the preceding 15 years. Masses of workers were disgusted with the CGT and the other union federations the Force Ouvrière (FO) and the Confederation Francaise Democratique du Travail (CFDT) as well as with the Socialist and Communist parties.

The French events posed in the sharpest way the crisis of working class leadership and perspective. The pettybourgeois "left" groups exerted all their efforts to obscure this central issue. They intervened to promote illusions in trade unionism, uphold the perspective of mass pressure on the Juppé regime and bolster the credibility of the labour bureaucracies.

All of these organisations insisted there was no political alternative to the Stalinists and the social democrats. "There is no alternative on the left," they proclaimed. As for their own political role, the LO, LCR and PT revealed the real content of their socialist and revolutionary pretensions with the repeated protestation: "We are not the leadership of the working class."

The Workers Struggle (Lutte Ouvrière) group, named after its weekly newspaper, is deeply imbedded in the trade unions. It acted as a loyal adjunct to the union bureaucracies throughout the three week strike movement. In the December 1 issue of *Lutte Ouvrière*, in the midst of the strikes, LO spokeswoman Arlette Laguiller wrote in her weekly editorial: "This means that the rail workers, postal workers, RATP (Paris transit) and public transport workers in a number of large cities are on the right road in entering into struggle. And if other strikes break out, lengthen, develop in other public and private enterprises, it is possible not only to stick Juppé's criminal proposals down his throat; even beyond that, workers (can) impose all their demands on the bosses and the government."

According to the logic of this argument, there was no need for a campaign to drive out the Juppé government, since the working class by dint of its strike struggles could accomplish all of its aims with the regime still in place. This was simply a slightly "left" version of the line of the CGT leadership.

We first encountered LO at a general assembly of postal workers in a

mailsorting centre in the north of Paris. The meeting itself followed a pattern we have described in previous segments of this series. It was run by a CGT official who, after having said his piece, opened the floor for discussion. Of those who spoke, few if any were rank and file workers. A Maoist from the "left" SUD postal union took the floor, followed by an LCR member, then the Lutte Ouvrière supporter. In the styles peculiar to each tendency the Maoist, a jocular and condescending "man of the people", the Pabloite, an intellectual in a red scarf, the LO supporter, a solid trade unionist, etc. the "leftists" advanced the same general strategy: the need to extend the strike so as to force the government to retreat. No one criticised the CGT or demanded the strike be taken out of the hands of the trade union bureaucracy. No one raised the need for a political struggle. They politely applauded each other's contributions. A regular old boys' network of the "left."

After the meeting we interviewed the LO supporter. He saw the strike movement entirely from the point of view of trade unionism. "It's an attack on the union structures. It's a break with the pact between the government and the union bureaucracy which has existed since 1945. [Force Ouvrière leader Marc] Blondel is furious. The government has changed its policy. Before they said, 'We don't touch the unions or their rights. They are our partners.' They've put that in question," he said.

The LO supporter essentially shrugged off the significance of the strike movement, by this time involving several million workers. "It's not a social explosion. It's growing little by little. One can't say whether it will extend to private industry or not." Perhaps conscious of his own dismissive tone, he added, "Of course, workers are interested. It's important, before this workers were retreating. It's a new situation, it's something important. A counteroffensive."

He continued: "For the moment it's necessary to enlarge the movement. It's necessary to make the government retreat. It will be a defeat for them. They will have to hold elections."

Then he gave vent to the disdain for the working class and awe of the labour bureaucracies common to all of the pettybourgeois "left" groups: "The workers don't go beyond the immediate issues. The unions are ahead of the workers, they're in the lead."

As for the "leftist militants" like himself, he admitted, "Many are discouraged. They have been in hibernation."

What did he see as the role of his organisation in this situation? "We push for a strike, we call for a strike. There is no differentiation at this point between the unions and the political parties. Everyone is for the strike. The difference comes over its extension."

A damning admission. Indeed, there was no differentiation between the bureaucracies, dedicated to the preservation of the profit system and its political representative, Juppé, and the supposedly "extreme left" parties.

The conception that it was the union leaders who formed the vanguard, dragging behind them a reluctant working class, was not simply the view of one LO supporter. This was the official position of the organisation. An article in the December 8 issue of *Lutte Ouvrière* commented: "It is, in effect, by the will of the union confederations, in any case the FO and the CGT, that this movement has erupted, has lasted and has been extended up till now. In fact, the declarations and policy of the FO have been more radical and more violent than those of the CGT. But it is nonetheless the CGT which has been the guiding force in unleashing, prolonging and extending the conflict, thanks to the number of its militants."

The article continued: "At the beginning, the workers were not en thusiastic but, little by little, assisted by the unions' pressure and unity, determination grew in a perceptible fashion from one day to the next."

Only an organisation far removed from the lives, thoughts and feelings of the broad masses of workers could put forward such a position. If there was hesitation in the working class, it was well grounded: the fear that the unions would sell this movement out as they had betrayed every previous attempt of workers to defend their jobs and living standards.

Like the other radical tendencies, Lutte Ouvrière never published a single commentary seriously analysing the objective significance of the strike wave, including its implications for the socialist movement. It palmed off articles such as the abovementioned December 8 piece as political analysis. Much of that article was devoted to speculation on the motives of the Communist Party, the CGT and the FO leaders in transforming themselves, in Lutte Ouvrière's eyes, into militant class fighters.

The organisation's newspaper functioned as a sort of strike bulletin. As far as its editors were concerned, nothing existed outside the strike. All that was needed to defeat the Juppé Plan was the extension of the strike movement. Toward the end of the NovemberDecember events, LO proposed a general strike to fulfil "all the demands of the working class", but never specified what those demands were or should be. "Those who went on strike have discovered ... that workers' struggles can make the government retreat," the newspaper asserted.

Lutte Ouvrière did not act independently of the trade union bureaucracy, even on the level of demands and slogans. It did not put forward the "emergency plan" it had published for the previous year's national election. The only demands it raised, other than the call for the withdrawal of the Juppé Plan, concerned wages and reimbursement for days on strike.

The rotten role played by the French middle class "left" in the NovemberDecember events did not come out of the blue. It had been prepared by decades of opportunist activity. The Workers Struggle group flies under an altogether false flag. It calls itself Trotskyist, but LO's origins lie in a faction of the French Trotskyist movement that opposed the establishment of the Fourth International in 1938 and formally split from the world party led by Trotsky the following year. By the 1960s, LO embraced the position that the Fourth International had been destroyed by revisionism.

The group -- then known as Voix Ouvrière -- attended the Third Congress of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in 1966 as an observer. Its spokesmen put forward the centrist view that the FI had to be "reconstructed." This line was rejected by the congress and Lutte Ouvrière has remained a political opponent of the ICFI.

LO prides itself on refusing to raise socialist political demands, on the grounds that such policies are inappropriate to nonrevolutionary conditions. This position, which is typical of centrist opponents of Marxism, is a rationalisation for adapting to the existing bureaucracies which dominate the workers' movement. In reality, such organisations reject any possibility of social revolution. This was demonstrated clearly in NovemberDecember, when a prerevolutionary situation opened up and LO acted to block any independent political movement of the working class.

The group's candidate for President, Arlette Laguiller, running on a left reformist programme, received 1.6 million votes more than 5% of the vote in the first round of last year's presidential election. No one could have been more surprised and frightened by the implications of the vote than the Lutte Ouvrière leaders themselves. They took pains to downplay the vote anything but face up to the reality that large numbers of workers were looking for a genuinely socialist alternative to the old Stalinist and social democratic parties.

A few weeks after the vote, at their annual festival in Paris, LO held a meeting with the LCR at which the meaning of Laguiller's vote came under discussion. There was a farcical element to the event. The two organisations essentially argued as to which was the weakest and most insignificant. The LCR representative urged LO to take up the responsibilities arising from its achievement in the elections. The LO speaker would have none of that. He rejected the proposal, saying: don't exaggerate, we are still too small, we are not a revolutionary party. We aim to be one, but we still have to create a "truly proletarian party."

Marxists maintain that the class character of a party is determined first and foremost by its programme, not by the number of workers who adhere to it at any given moment. The task of the revolutionary party is to raise the political understanding of the working class to the level of the tasks posed by objective conditions.

Lutte Ouvrière, like all opportunist organisations, rejects this principled standpoint. In the pamphlet, *What is Workers Struggle*, written after the Presidential election, the LO leadership declared: "Workers Struggle is a small party and we are far from existing in every city, even in the largest in the country." In a section entitled "The party to be constructed," the pamphlet stated: "A party truly capable of defending the exploited must be able to be present everywhere." It must be a party of "dozens of thousands." Of course, the pamphlet explained, Lutte Ouvrière was no such party: "That is what we lack. Thanks to the response met by the campaign of Arlette Laguiller, we are going to try to find such support in the coming months. We don't know if we can succeed because at the moment we are far from being numerous enough...."

This demoralised and cowardly line was a justification in advance for Lutte Ouvrière's refusal to provide any alternative to the Stalinist and reformist bureaucracies.

LO's opportunism is bound up with its essentially nationalist orientation. It does not begin from the need to construct a world party. Their pamphlet fails to make any analysis of capitalism as a global system. It merely refers to a "permanent crisis" which has afflicted France since 1970, "provoked by the fits and starts of the economic system, the fits and starts of the capitalist market." In this way LO adapts to the nationalist outlook promulgated by the French Stalinists, who used their influence during the NovemberDecember strike wave to define the movement as a purely French struggle. Lutte Ouvrière and the other "left" groups kept their silence while the CP and CGT leaderships encouraged the view that French workers were competing with their class brothers and sisters in the rest of Europe for decent jobs and social benefits.

The LO leaders cannot conceive of a working class outside the official trade union apparatus. They see workers in private industry as "demoralised." They blame the weakening of trade unionism among these sectors for the government attack. "The demoralisation and failure to be unionised amongst workers had led the government to believe they could take on the union apparatuses," they wrote after the strike.

Lutte Ouvrière's opportunism was on display at its December 15 public meeting in Paris. Four days before, the CGT and FO leaders had met with Prime Minister Juppé for the first time. They were obviously seeking a political fig leaf for winding up the strike movement. But no warning of the impending sellout appeared in either the December 8 or 15 editions of *Lutte Ouvrière*.

On December 14 Juppé made concessions to the railway workers, having obtained assurances from the union leaders that they would press for an end to the rail strike. In this way the back of the strike movement would be broken, and Juppé would be free to impose his basic plan to slash social welfare programmes.

The same evening we bought a copy of *Lutte Ouvrière*. It carried an editorial by Laguiller endorsing the sellout and declaring it a "victory". The editorial said, "The present strike demonstrates that one can make the government and the bosses retreat. Even if it should end with what has already been obtained, that would be a victory for all. It has made Juppé retreat. It must give renewed confidence to all workers in their own strength. We have seen that when the workers stop work, everything is paralysed. And when workers go out into the streets, it is they who make the law."

By December 15 the return to work on the railway had begun. This was the background to LO's public rally that evening. It was held in a large hall, with big banners inscribed with red letters. There were many red flags. When one entered one saw an impressive platform, but no speakers. There were perhaps 2,000 people in the hall. But they were of very definite types. First, the caring middle class plenty of ladies with the stern but devoted look of Catholic school teachers. The hall had something of the atmosphere of a social gathering, even, for some, of a lonely hearts' club. There were workers there as well, but they were by and large the more gullible and politically naive types.

There were numerous literature tables, again impressive from a distance. One discovered, however, that they were covered with thousands of copies of perhaps two or three of the organisation's banal pamphlets.

Fortyfive minutes late, the curtain parted and the leaders ceremoniously entered from centre stage. The crowd jumped to its feet, particularly when "Arlette" came into view. A standing ovation lasted several minutes. A man behind us, obviously a LO supporter, leaned over to his neighbour and whispered cynically: "The cult of the personality!"

A number of the leaders sat on the platform, but it turned out there were only two speakers. The first was a railway worker, who simply recounted for half an hour the events of the strike movement. Then came Arlette Laguiller, who has the manner and hairstyle of the Maid of Orleans, or, rather, Joan of Arc reincarnated as a radicalised bank teller.

Laguiller, herself a fulltime FO union official, repeated a string of populist banalities about the rich and the government on the top and the downtrodden workers on the bottom. She claimed, "We have already won important concessions, a moral victory," etc. From time to time she paused for a sip of water this was the signal each time for a stormy round of applause. She spoke for an hour, there was another standing ovation at the conclusion of her remarks, then everyone went home. The performance bizarre and bombastic in its form had a definite content: it was a coverup for the bureaucracy that was in the process of strangling the strike movement.

In the dying days of the strike movement, two aspects of Lutte Ouvrière's pernicious role stood out. It lied to the working class, proclaiming the betrayal of the strike, which left the right wing parties in power and Juppé's proposals intact, to be a victory. And, in the next breath, it blamed the working class in particular the privatesector workers for the predictable results of its own treacherous policies.

Laguiller, in her January 5 editorial, wrote: "Those in the public sector rebelled and the government was shaking. The workers in the private sector did not have the moral and material capacity to follow and they passively accepted the strike on the one hand and the bosses' pressure on the other. But everything has an end."

LO is one component of the middle class "radical" milieu, a substantial social layer in France. A truly remarkable feature of these circles is what might be called the culture of opportunism. One did not meet with a single member of LO, the LCR or their periphery who could imagine raising an issue or standing on a principle that was not already in the air and more or less accepted by most workers. These were people with no political musculature. This could not be simply a personal failing, since we came across it repeatedly.

One felt like saying: if attitudes such as yours had prevailed in French political and intellectual circles in 1895, Alfred Dreyfus (the victim of a notorious antiSemitic frameup) would have rotted away on Devil's Island.

The Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR Revolutionary Communist League), led by Alain Krivine, is another of the opportunist radical organisations which played such a pernicious role in the working class upsurge in France of November-December 1995.

During the strike wave, the LCR glorified the spontaneous movement of workers and students, denied the need for a political struggle to drive out the Juppé government and defended the actions of the CGT (General Confederation of Labour) and FO (Workers Power) union bureaucracies.

Of the organisations in France which claim some association with Trotskyism, the LCR is most closely identified with the radical student movement of the 1960s. Guided by figures such as Ernest Mandel, the

long-time leader of the renegades from Trotskyism organised in the United Secretariat, the LCR embraced the slogans of "student power" and the "red university" during the heady days of May-June 1968. According to these theories, the working class had been integrated into capitalist society and replaced as the chief revolutionary force by the student protesters and other petty-bourgeois strata.

The present state of the LCR is intimately bound up with the fate of the generation of 1968. Those who fought at the barricades in May-June now have greying hair. During the past 28 years, many of yesterday's rock-throwers have sunk deep roots in a variety of bourgeois institutions.

The radicals and ex-radicals today comprise a deeply conservative social layer. For many years they associated the struggle for socialism, as they conceived of it, with one or another section of the Stalinist or social democratic bureaucracies. For these forces the collapse of the Soviet Union and the decay of the trade unions and reformist labour parties have placed a giant question mark over the perspective of socialism. They have less and less reason to pay lip service to an orientation to the working class, which has disappointed them in the past and threatens to cut across their social interests in the future.

The key to analysing the role of any one of the radical groups in the November-December events is to discover the mechanism by which the given organisation avoided its political responsibilities. The LCR leaders, a politically more agile bunch than the transparent opportunists of the Lutte Ouvrière (Workers Struggle) group, specialised in advancing seemingly "left" slogans which, upon examination, obliged no one especially themselves to do anything. The LCR, for example, associated itself with the slogan of the general strike. But from what point of view?

The general strike, as Trotsky explained, is "one of the most revolutionary methods of struggle... Nothing can be on a higher plane than the general strike, except the armed insurrection." Yet the LCR emphatically denied that the conditions in France were ripe for political change of any serious sort. Four months earlier, Krivine's newspaper, *Rouge* (Red), had carried an article asserting that French industrial workers were a reactionary lot who by and large voted for the neo-fascist National Front.

The LCR proposed that the working class engage in a full-scale confrontation with the employers and their state, but not fight for a change of government. After all, they maintained, because of the betrayals of the Communist and Socialist parties, there was "no alternative on the left."

Not only was the slogan criminally light-minded, it was raised in such a way to place the responsibility for the building up of such a general strike movement neither on the unions nor, heaven help us, on the LCR itself, but on the non-striking workers: "What's lacking ... to transform the present situation into a general strike is the substantial participation of private sector wage-earners in the strike movement" (*Rouge*, December 6, 1995).

In a supplement to *Rouge*, published December 9, the LCR went further. After describing the glories of the nation-wide demonstrations held December 7, its lead article noted, "Two difficulties lie heavily, however, on the mobilisation." Not the continued grip of bureaucratic leaderships, but "1-The limits [of the strike movement] in the private sector..." and "2-The hesitation, indeed even wariness, to renew the strikes." All the problems lay with the workers themselves.

While the strike movement was still building in strength, the LCR confined itself to those demands which were acceptable to the Stalinist and reformist bureaucrats. In almost the identical words used by CGT officials, the LCR complained December 9 about "a general refusal [by the government] to withdraw the Juppé Plan and open genuine negotiations. In fact, the government plays at bringing things to a head and seems to want to confront the strike movement."

As soon as it became clear that the government and the unions were going to wind up the strike, the LCR brought out a few "left" slogans which it keeps lying about for just such occasions. The headline of the December 14 issue of *Rouge* read: "Now Juppé must go!"

To be replaced by whom or what? The LCR was coy on that issue. "There is also an alternative in the social and political forces of the country: the left is in the streets, it expresses itself as well at the ballot box against the right. What's lacking is a political will!"

The basic proposition of the LCR was that it was wrong to "impose" a political perspective on the spontaneous movement. The movement itself would advance its own political solution. The LCR told trade unionists not to bother themselves about the political parties on the left that were "absent" and concentrate on trade unionism. "The role of trade unionism is to take charge directly, on the basis of its series of demands, of the political crisis that can explode at the top of the state" (*Rouge*, November 16, 1995).

Insofar as the LCR reproached the trade union leaders, it was merely for a failure to co-ordinate their efforts. Its criticism of Communist Party (PCF) leader Robert Hue was that he "did not at all envisage assisting in building a truly unified alternative, even," *Rouge* added, "if the CP militants were totally involved in the field."

The response of the LCR to the upsurge of the working class has been to cultivate ever closer relations with the PCF. The Krivine group held its first official discussions with the Stalinists on November 29. It declared that the "change in attitude of the PCF leadership is positive." This was in the midst of the strike wave which the PCF-CGT leaders were doing everything in their power to prevent from challenging the Juppé government.

In the immediate aftermath of the Stalinists' betrayal of the strike movement, on December 28, the LCR held another discussion with the PCF. The two organisations pledged further collaboration. The January 4 edition of *Rouge* explained that "a broad agreement (between the LCR and PCF) expressed itself on the deep significance of the struggles that took place in December." Revealed in this rapprochement between the Stalinists and petty-bourgeois radicals is a profound political and social polarisation. As the working class enters into a confrontation with the capitalist state, the LCR seeks out the embrace of the Stalinist apparatus.

Krivine's party adapted entirely to the anti-political mood which prevailed amongst the students. On November 23, under the headline, "The experience of democracy," *Rouge* declared: "No taking over [of the student movement by political parties]! We want to control our movement! In all the general assemblies of the students, the will to run the mobilisation democratically dominates the discussions." In student assemblies, LCR members and other radicals spoke as individuals, concealing their party affiliations, in the name of preserving the "independence" of the strike movement.

This shameful giving in to what was in fact an extremely low political level helped create the conditions in which the Stalinist and reformist traitors could "impose" their own solution: the preservation of the Juppé government.

A December 11 public meeting of the LCR in Paris addressed by Alain Krivine provided a concrete picture of the organisation and the social milieu it inhabits. Perhaps 500 people were in attendance. They belonged, in their vast majority, to the bohemian and academic middle class. This is a layer with tendrils planted in all sorts of flower-beds: the unions, universities, research centres, think tanks, publishing houses, magazines, etc.

The meeting started 45 minutes late. Clearly those running the affair neither expected a turnout of fresh forces nor did they want one. Although the gathering had been widely publicised, its chairman felt no need to introduce himself or anyone else except on a first-name basis. This was a family gathering. Had any worker or unemployed youth looking for a socialist alternative wandered in, he or she would have felt unwelcome.

If Krivine has always struck one as a would-be Ernest Mandel, the

audience was made up of several hundred would-be Krivines, each no doubt convinced that he or she was capable of filling the party leader's shoes. During the meeting audience members read their newspapers, conversed in the back of the hall, strolled about, perused the literature table.

One of the speakers was François Boudet (interviewed below), a CGT rail union official we had previously encountered at the Gare du Nord in Paris. Another was Jose Perez, a CGT official and strike leader in Rouen. From Perez's glowing description one would have thought that the Rouen organising committee represented the rebirth of the Petrograd Soviet, at the very least. We attended a mass rally in that city the next day and heard, from the speakers' platform, the same empty demagogy which the union leaders and their radical accomplices poured forth everywhere.

The main orator at the December 11 meeting was LCR leader Krivine. After referring to the positive qualities of the strike, he described its chief obstacle as the lack of a "national leadership". The leaders have not met, Krivine complained. There is no co-ordination, everything is organised informally.

The central task for the LCR, he asserted, was to take up the proposal to extend the strike. "It is necessary to snatch one victory" out of this strike movement, i.e., the defeat of the Juppé Plan. After spending most of his time discussing the small change of strike organisation, Krivine, in an effort to cover his tracks somewhat, added, "We are not trade unionists, not even militant trade unionists... We must create a political alternative, a party which meets the needs of the strike." However, after boasting that "hundreds of LCR members have union responsibilities," he hastened to add that "we are too weak" to offer a serious alternative. Krivine ended with an abstract description of "the kind of society" the LCR would like to see.

Not a word of criticism of the trade union leaders. Not a single warning. Not a hint of a socialist programme. No effort just the opposite to pose the LCR as the alternative. An exercise in "left" fakery and political evasion.

When the CGT rail union officials called off the strike in mid-December, the LCR did not utter a peep of protest. *Rouge* parroted the call of CGT leader Louis Viannet to "continue the movement in a different form." Its December 21 headline read, "In December Juppé ... retreated In January, he must give in We continue."

We obtained further insight into the nature of the petty-bourgeois opportunist environment several days after the Krivine meeting through a discussion with an official of the radical-dominated SUD (Solidarity/Unity/Democracy), a small union active among postal and telecommunications workers.

LCR leader Alain Krivine (left) with the late Ernest Mandel The SUD functionary, Philippe Crottet, in charge of the union's post office work in Paris, began as all the radicals did: one can't say for sure whether or not the union leaders will betray, the pressure from the rank and file is very strong, etc.

But Crottet was most interesting in recounting with some degree of honesty his own political evolution and that of an entire social layer. He joined the LCR in 1973 and was a member until 1988, when he became a full-time official in SUD. He'd had to make a choice then, he said, between working for the union or the revolutionary party. Look, he went on, one has to have a life, a family. His mother had told him: my dear boy, you are getting old.

Crottet took note of the demoralised state of the radical movements: "Over the last 15 years there have been fewer and fewer members of left wing organisations." He went on, describing what is in fact an international phenomenon: "Those who have remained active are now in the middle levels of the union structures. Today they are the real driving force of this struggle. It is because of them their generation, those who participated in '68 that there has been such a movement, such organisation, such activity in this dispute. But at the same time, even for those who were active, or even revolutionaries, there are only 24 hours in a day."

The origins of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire lie in the minority of the French Trotskyists who adhered to the revisionist political line of Michel Pablo, secretary of the International Secretariat (IS) of the Fourth International (FI), in the early 1950s. Pablo attempted to impose a liquidationist perspective, including dissolution into the Stalinist Communist Party, on the French Trotskyists. A majority of the party, in opposition to this attack on the principles of the FI, rejected this perspective. The Pablo-Mandel IS leadership expelled the majority and handed the French section over to the minority.

The French Pabloites have spent the intervening 40 years searching for some section of the Stalinist and labour bureaucracies to move to the left and do their work for them. They continue this effort today under Krivine, although perhaps with flagging enthusiasm. It must be exhausting work, sloughing off ones responsibilities for decades on end. The Pabloites now have the distinction in the name of Trotskyism no less of betraying three general strike movements in France: August 1953, May-June 1968 and November-December 1995.

What is the political significance of this movement?

At the outset it was clear that, while some workers came into the movement over the question of retirement and their own sectional interests, the vast majority understood that the problem of the retirement conditions of the rail workers wasn't enough. The reason why the strike grew so much is that people realised that in order to win, it was necessary to mobilise other industries.

Do you think it is necessary to make the government resign?

The movement aims to get the Juppé Plan withdrawn. The problem in France and Juppé plays on this is that Juppé says, "I have a plan, a perspective, and no one else does." People say, "Chirac was elected, he is the legitimate ruler." The Socialist Party is nowhere. The left doesn't really have a perspective. The risk of a movement like that, if it continues to push and brings about the resignation of Juppé, is that it will do the work of the extreme right. There are people who participated in '68 who react with fear. They say, "In the end, it is not the left who wins." If the Juppé Plan is really abolished, that will give strength to the movement because in France there has not been a success in the workers' movement for a long time. So if the government is forced to retreat, that will create a dynamic for the movement to go further.

But you are a member of a socialist organisation. Do you see your own organisation as an alternative for the workers?

Our movement is pretty limited because people are not ready for a political change, because if it's not Juppé, it will be [right winger Charles] Pasqua; or [Socialist party leader Lionel] Jospin. If it's the left, it will be the left that is committed to austerity policies. No one wants that. So the workers are trying to get the maximum from those who are in power at the moment.

In Germany there are 100,000 rail workers who face layoffs. Why don't you call for unity with the German rail workers and pose a socialist solution, not only for France but Italy, Germany, England?

I agree. The problem is that there has been a growth of individualism in the working class.

Do you think it is possible to raise the question of councils of action and a workers government based on councils of action?

No, I don't think so, because the weakness of the movement is that it is still led by the unions. The only exception was at Renault in Cleon. There was a meeting of 400 people which was not controlled by the unions. People were getting up and saying just anything and everyone got sick of it in the end. It's up to the union delegates to organise the strike, not us, they said. We try as best we can to organise actions in unity with other sections of the public service, but it's not possible to go further at the moment. However, if the movement were to go beyond its current

limitations, that could change.

But how is it supposed to do that if people don't tell the truth, that it is necessary to take the strike out of the hands of the union leaders?

Yes, that is true, but the union leaders have respect at the moment. At present they are standing firm.

Do you think that [CGT leader Louis] Viannet and [FO leader Marc] Blondel are going to betray this movement?

I think that each one is trying to find a way out, Blondel in particular, because his main concern is keeping control of the union positions. He is trying to find a way out that will allow him to do that. For the moment he is going along with the movement.

What is the current political thinking of workers?

They are against capitalist society with all its austerity and the rest of it. They don't see much that is positive. But as for talking about socialism in 1968 to 1972, that was quite natural. But since then, the word has become so corrupted that there is now a language problem. Now the word socialism is interpreted as a synonym for the East. Either the East or Mitterrand.

How do you see the role of the LCR in this movement?

It is, first, to explain politically that it is not just a social crisis, but a political one. Also to intervene in the unions to get them to go as far as possible. There are some unions where we have more support, such as the SUD-PTT and the teachers union. But even in unions where we are in a small minority, we must push them to go as far as possible. Lutte Ouvrière, for instance, says there is no possibility of a general strike. But we continue to push, even if we don't have much chance.

What is the difference between your position and Lutte Ouvrière? Is it just over the general strike?

They think we are overestimating the movement. They say it's not a political movement. We go further than they do. We are intervening in the CGT, for instance, even though we are a very small minority there.

But the general strike is not a political perspective. Where should it lead?

To the withdrawal of the Juppé Plan. If you advance, as you suggest, a workers' government based on councils of action, that doesn't at all correspond to the current reality. That would appear completely laughable. If you advance a government of the Communist Party-Socialist Party, that would be equally laughable, because people have experienced that. We say that the movement should continue and that it must advance a programme itself and construct a programme which is a real alternative to the official left.

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The objective conditions which produced the massive strike wave in France in November and December prevail throughout Europe. Everywhere on the continent, workers' past social gains have come under attack. Each national bourgeoisie attempts to lower labour costs to remain competitive with its international rivals and slash budget deficits in order to qualify, under the Maastricht Treaty, for European economic union.

In neighbouring Belgium, the destruction of thousands of public sector jobs, cuts in social spending, privatisations and the plans of Christian Democrat Jean-Luc Dehaene's coalition government like the regime of French Prime Minister Alain Juppé to "reform" the social security system, brought masses of workers into the streets of Brussels on December 13. This raised the spectre of an international movement against budget cutting, unemployment and deteriorating living standards.

While national economic conditions provoked the Belgian workers' anger, no doubt the French strikes also served as an inspiration. The December 13 demonstration had been scheduled well before the strikes in France broke out, but the massive attendance surprised its organisers, the General Central of Public Service (CGSP), affiliated to the social democratic General Federation of Belgian Labour, and the Federation of Public Service Christian Unions (FSCSP), linked to the Catholic union federation.

Seventy thousand public workers and supporters turned out, including firefighters, miners, postal, rail, telephone, transit and airline workers. Workers from private industry Volkswagen, Caterpillar, Forges de Clabecq also marched.

As in France, attacks on rail workers' jobs and conditions provided a spark to the mass movement. The plan, announced October 27, to restructure SNCB the state-owned railway line envisions its fracturing into autonomous "business units" (they use the English words), the elimination of lines and the destruction of 10,000 jobs by 2005. In 1981 SNCB employed 65,000; today its work-force is down to 42,000.

The bitter dispute at Sabena, the semi-privatised airline, also fuelled the movement. The company's management, after several months of fruitless attempts to extract concessions from the workers, simply threw out the collective agreement at the end of November.

The country's campuses were the scene of struggle as well. In Liège, on November 28, mounted police and a baton-wielding riot squad brutally attacked a crowd of nearly 10,000 French-speaking college and high school students who were demanding more state spending on education, injuring dozens.

Looming over all this were the generally-worsening conditions of life for great numbers of workers. Belgium, a country of 10 million people, is mired in economic stagnation and recession. The economy shrank during each of the last three quarters of 1995. Unemployment stands at 14.5%, nearly double the rate of 1991.

Economic distress and the assault by the Belgian ruling class on jobs, social programmes and living standards have provoked workers into action, but in that country too, a great crisis of working class leadership and perspective prevails.

Belgium contains the oldest industrial region in continental Europe. The working class has socialist and militant trade union traditions, which extend back over a century. These traditions have come under ferocious attack in recent decades, as they have elsewhere.

The extreme political limitations of the December 13 protest made themselves apparent. The marchers were spirited and demonstrative, but there were virtually no political slogans. One heard only: "Private and public [workers] solidarity." The trade union leaders did not even hint at a struggle to oust the coalition government, which includes the Socialist Party. The attitude of the Volkswagen shop steward interviewed below was typical of many on the march: the Socialists, the Christian Democrats and the Liberals (a right wing, pro-"free enterprise" party) were interchangeable and the trade unions, the only weapon that workers had.

The French strikes were very much on workers' minds and many expressed the hope that the same sort of movement might develop in Belgium. But it was largely a passive sentiment and there was little open opposition to the union bureaucracy.

Brussels transit workers were prominent on the march. Paul Smets, a member of the Socialist-led union, commented: "The situation in France has nothing extraordinary about it. Our comrades in transportation in France have the same problems as we do in Belgium. These problems exist at the European level. " Another transit worker, a streetcar driver with 25 years on the job, from the Catholic union, echoed the same thought: "Obviously the problems in France are directly related to the situation here. We see the deterioration of public services in general. I think it's justified because they're letting things rot. Jobs, pensions, everything."

Sabena workers were very active on the demonstration. One Catholic trade union member detailed the airline management's attacks. "Their [the company's] explanation," he said, "is that they have to improve the position of Sabena in relation to other European and American airlines." Should the working class unite across national boundaries, we asked. "It's

my opinion that workers must unite around the world. Because what we're opposing is the [economic] logic which now prevails."

The demonstration was organised, like a procession of medieval guilds, by region, so that French and Flemish-speaking workers demonstrated separately for the most part. So too did the social democratic and Christian unions. And the march, which proceeded through the heart of Brussels, was organised with great efficiency. As the groups of workers reached the end of the march route, they deposited their ponchos (red for the social democratic unions, green for the Catholic unions) in one truck, their signs or banners in another, and they were whisked off by bus. Tens of thousands of people simply disappeared into thin air. The workers never got to see or feel their own collective strength.

Various Stalinist and radical tendencies were present on the march: the Communist Party, the Maoists, the multifarious renegades from Trotskyism. None of them had anything edifying to say. Special mention must be made of the Pabloites of the Parti Ouvrière Socialiste (POS Socialist Workers Party) simply because it is the end-product of decades of work by the late Ernest Mandel, long-time leader of the United Secretariat, and his associates. Belgian Trotskyism has an inspiring history, but one would never know it by encountering the POS. It puts out a meagre bimonthly, *La Gauche* (*The Left*), whose editorial maintained that the reformist bureaucrats organised in the European Confederation of Trade Unions have "a heavy responsibility" to provide leadership in the struggle against Juppé, Dehaene and their counterparts throughout Europe.

We attended the press conference organised by the two union federations in the penthouse of the social democratic public service workers union. The Belgian union officials are extremely respectable gentlemen, made somewhat indignant because they've been put on the spot by the government attacks. The chief respectable gentleman, Jacques Lorez, Secretary General of CGSP, explained that the unions understood that the public service had to be modernised, "we are not dinosaurs," but, really ... this was a bit too much.

During the question period, we pointed out that the German rail unions had recently signed an agreement which permitted 100,000 layoffs. We wondered if this was the kind of "modernisation" that the Belgian labour leaders had in mind. Well, Lorez replied, one had to remember that Germany had undergone reunification and this was one of the inevitable prices workers had to pay. But Belgium was a small country, already efficient, and there was no need for the same measures there.

In response to our follow-up question, as to what alternative was being proposed in light of the massive public debt, another official explained that the unions were very much aware of the debt. But why, he went on, did it have to be solved on the backs of the public service workers? He didn't indicate on whose backs he thought it should be solved.

Two-thirds of all Belgian production is shipped abroad. The ruling class is not surprisingly determined to be included in the European Monetary Union, scheduled for 1997. To qualify for this exclusive club, a nation's budget deficit can be no more than 3% of its Gross Domestic Product and its public debt no more than 60% . Belgium's public debt to GDP ratio was 133.7% in 1995.

In order to drive down the budget deficit and public debt the two four-party coalition governments led by Dehaene since 1991 have carried out a series of austerity measures. A wage freeze and major spending cuts enacted in late 1993 provoked a massive response in the working class, including a one-day general strike, the largest in 57 years.

While unemployment is at record levels, the poverty rate, at 6% , is one of the lowest among the advanced countries. The social security system currently prevents some 35% of the Belgian population from sinking into poverty. That social safety net, which is as comprehensive as the French system and dates as well from the end of the Second World War, is £803 million in the red. The employers are calling for far deeper cuts.

Something that strikes one immediately in Brussels is the language question. Every street sign is in both national languages: French and Flemish (a form of Dutch). Slightly more than half of Belgium's population is Flemish-speaking, predominantly in Flanders, in the north of the country; a third, primarily in Wallonia in southern Belgium, is Francophone; and 11%, i.e., the population of Brussels, are officially bilingual. The political parties are divided along national lines. The ruling coalition is composed of the Flemish Christian Democrats (officially the Christian People's Party), Walloon Christian Democrats, Flemish Socialists and Walloon Socialists.

All the attacks against workers' past social gains over the past decade have been carried out with Socialist Party politicians in the various cabinets. The social democrats, in the words of *Le Soir*, a leading Belgian daily paper, "manage the delicate portfolios," i.e., those concerned with labour relations and social affairs. In the current regime Socialists, for example, are in charge of the ministries of transportation, labour, public service and education, among others.

The Socialist Party, both wings of it, is a thoroughly corrupt bourgeois party. A series of scandals has recently engulfed it. Willy Claes, a Flemish Socialist, was forced to resign his post as NATO's Secretary General last October due to revelations about his role in a 1988 bribery scandal he was then Belgium's Economics Minister in which an Italian helicopter manufacturer paid £1.25m into Socialist Party coffers. A leader of the French-speaking section of the party, who may have benefited from the deal, was murdered in 1991.

The discrediting of the Socialists and the general absence of any progressive response to the social crisis have proved fertile soil for a growth in nationalism and chauvinism, which threatens to set one section of the population against the other along ethnic lines in a Balkan-style catastrophe.

The first worker we spoke to at the December 13 rally, a Brussels fire-fighter (interviewed), referred to the unprecedented problems which the ethnic divisions are creating.

The ultra-right Flemish Bloc is now the largest party in Antwerp, the city with the biggest Flemish population. It preaches separatism and racism, claiming that Flanders, which is the more prosperous region, should stop footing the bill for the poor and unemployed in Wallonia.

As a mirror image of Flemish nationalism, the right wing National Front advocates separatism in French-speaking Wallonia. The petty-bourgeois radicals, the Pabloites in particular, have adapted themselves to Walloon nationalism for decades. Ernest Mandel pioneered this treacherous orientation in the 1960s and his followers in the POS maintain that line today.

In a March 3 article the *Financial Times* gloated about the role that language and ethnic questions play in debilitating the workers' movement. "Although Belgians are showing distinct signs of unrest, outrage has not reached the levels seen in France before Christmas, partly because in Belgium the linguistic divide between French-speakers and Flemish-speakers 'weakens the front,' as one political observer put it."

The day after the mass protest in Brussels, the government took further steps to privatise Belgacom, the telephone and telecommunications company. A few days later, the SNCB management provocatively announced its acceptance of all the proposals contained in the restructuring plan. Rail workers staged strikes, but the union bureaucracy was able to keep the movement under control and ultimately end it.

Prime Minister Dehaene, however, made clear that he was not going to repeat what he thought was Juppé's great error: attempting to downsize and reorganise the public enterprises at the same time as he launched a frontal assault on the social security system. On December 22 Dehaene announced that he was postponing until 1997 the proposed "reform" of social security. Struggles clearly lie ahead, under conditions where the most pressing problem confronting Belgian workers remains the lack of a revolutionary socialist alternative.

For us this demonstration has a double meaning, because in addition to showing our solidarity with the national movement, we have our own demands.

What are your demands?

We have linguistic problems. A certain section of the Dutch-speaking population wants to "Flemicise" Brussels. They want to create a unilingual Flemish structure and a unilingual French structure. People are beginning to fight amongst themselves, which has never happened before.

Do you think unity between French-speaking and Flemish workers is necessary?

Absolutely. In Belgium we've always had the two languages. But there is now a certain section of the Flemish we call them Flemagogues who want to see Belgium eliminated and make Flanders a separate country. Look at the flags there. They're not flying the Belgian flag or the European, just the Flemish. It's a provocation for people from Brussels.

What do you think is the significance of the French events?

Well, they have the same problems as we have, you know, I think it's world-wide. France or Belgium, little by little, there are more and more poor, the government takes more and more tax. All the countries are indebted.

Is there an alternative to the policies of the present governments and big business?

You know, I think it's all the parties, Socialist or Liberal.

There are about 400 of us here. We've been on strike since yesterday. Because yesterday we told the management we were going to the demonstration. And they made some provocative threats against the workers in a leaflet they put out. The reaction was immediate. There was a walkout and today as well, a strike.

Do you have particular demands in relation to VW?

We think that everybody is involved. Because what is happening to the public service concerns us too. If we let them run down the public service, inevitably that will translate itself into an increase in taxes on salaries.

Do you have confidence in the Socialist Party?

I think the Socialist Party here in Belgium is confronted by the same realities as all the other parties in Belgium. If we put the Liberals in power it would be the same. There's very little difference. Because what occupies them now is the norm of Maastricht, which has become the norm. I think the Liberals wouldn't be any better than the Socialists.

Is it necessary to unite the working class on the international level?

I think this proves it. Here in Belgium, in France, it's beginning to happen. The problem is that on the European level, there are not yet the sufficiently effective union structures which could put forward demands, because on the European level the bosses and the financial world are well organised, and the workers are not yet.

Do you have confidence in the union leaders?

I have confidence in the union structures, these are the only things the workers have at this point.

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The betrayal of the French workers' movement of November and December 1995 provided the government of President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Alain Juppé with a breathing space, but it did nothing to resolve the political and social crisis in France and throughout Europe.

In Britain, the Tory government of John Major, haunted by scandal and presiding over ever-increasing poverty, hangs on by a thread after new by-election defeats. The March 3 electoral victory of the right wing Popular Party in Spain brought to an end 13 years of rule by Felipe Gonzalez' Socialist Party. Italians go to the polls on April 21, with the fascist National Alliance expected to make substantial gains. In Germany soaring unemployment and deteriorating conditions of life are producing a general disgust with all the parliamentary parties.

The pressure on the European bourgeoisie to rationalise industry, carry out massive job cuts and liquidate the welfare state increases. The necessity to carry out such measures codified in the Maastricht Treaty on European economic unity flows from the deepening trade conflicts between Europe and its rivals in North America and Asia.

Juppé has begun to implement his dismantling of the social security system. In March his government sent the National Assembly three decrees which give the state extensive powers to regulate and cut the costs of the previously autonomous health insurance schemes. A government-appointed commission has come out with a report on the SNCF the state-run railway line that resembles the plan abandoned in the face of the railway workers' struggle in December. It proposes the closure of regional lines, the lowering of labour costs, increases in fares and the privatisation of profitable lines.

Working class resistance to the regime's plans continues. On March 19 transit workers in the port city of Marseilles walked out, claiming that the city administration had reneged on the January agreement which ended a month-long strike. In opposition to the government's plan to change the status of France-Télécom, the state-owned telecommunications company, five unions held a one-day strike on April 11.

All across Europe workers are demonstrating opposition to the austerity measures of the various regimes. Railway and airline workers in Belgium and public service workers in Luxembourg walked off the job in December. In Brussels, on February 28, 60,000 teachers and students, both French- and Flemish-speaking, marched to demand an end to government attacks on education. In Germany tens of thousands of steelworkers staged strikes and occupations in January to protest proposals to cut pension benefits and eliminate jobs.

But the European ruling classes retain one principal advantage over the workers. They have a much firmer grasp of the implications of the crisis and are preparing accordingly. In response to the recent workers' upsurge, the French bourgeoisie is already laying plans for the next confrontation. Shortly after the strike wave President Chirac announced that the present draftee army would be replaced by an all-volunteer, professional military. The French ruling class wants an army less likely to sympathise with the workers and willing to carry out ruthless measures at home and abroad.

Jean-Marie Le Pen's neo-fascist National Front has also stepped up its activity. Its Secretary General recently declared that a "pre-revolutionary situation" exists in France, characterised by "the deep gulf between the people and the political class."

The revolt by the French workers in November and December was a massive event. Millions responded to the fight of the rail workers and wide layers of public service workers. The strike wave exploded the argument, echoed by governments and mass media everywhere, that there is general support for the liquidation of half a century or more of social gains, as demanded by the capitalist market.

The French ruling class no doubt believed its own press clippings. It equated the lack of resistance or, rather, the collaboration of the unions and the Socialist and Communist parties with popular acceptance of its measures. Reality descended on Chirac and Juppé as a rude surprise. The 80% parliamentary majority won by the right wing parties in 1993 proved to be illusory. The regime suddenly appeared as it really was isolated and held in general contempt.

The events of November-December 1995 were no more pleasing to the European and international bourgeoisie. The Juppé policy is the policy of Major, Kohl, Dehaene, Dini and all the rest. The directors of the German Central Bank could only look in horror at the massive movement erupting in France.

In the US the sullen silence maintained by the media in the face of the French population's rejection of austerity measures concealed deep resentment and fear. The French strikes dealt a fatal blow to what remained of the triumphalism expressed by the international bourgeoisie in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the victory of "pro-market" parties everywhere.

The French events are the particular, national expression of a universal process. The contradictions of world capitalism have reached a new stage. Momentous as it was, one could liken the strike wave in France from the historical viewpoint to the flash of lighting on the horizon which signals the advancing storm.

The November-December events demonstrated the immense power of the working class. Far from having been fatally weakened by the technological advances of the past two decades, the modern working class has been considerably strengthened by the proletarianisation of social layers formerly considered and which formerly considered themselves to be petty-bourgeois. This objective phenomenon found expression in the fact that large numbers of French administrative, technical and professional workers identified the strikers' cause as their own.

The French strike established yet again that workers' interests are diametrically opposed to those of big business and its governments. It showed as well that struggles over basic social issues decent jobs, wages, social benefits, housing under present conditions rapidly pose the need to conduct a struggle against the foundations of capitalism.

The events further revealed that the greatest dilemma workers face is the nature of their own organisations. So long as the working class is unable to advance its own alternative to the nationalist and pro-capitalist policy of the labour bureaucracies, even the most determined struggle will be led into a blind alley.

The situation in France and one would find the same contradiction in nearly every advanced industrialised country contained a great paradox. One found a tendency among workers to turn away from politics in the midst of events which themselves raised in the sharpest fashion the need to assimilate the lessons of the class struggle, not only in France, but internationally, over the past three-quarters of a century. Grasping these critical lessons and adopting the programme of internationalism and socialism offers the only road out of the present impasse for the working class.

At the same time the French strikes demonstrated that the conditions are emerging for solving the problem of working class leadership. The material basis for the dominance of the old labour bureaucracies has been shattered by the vast changes in economic life. Confronted with globally-integrated capitalism, the trade unions and reformist and Stalinist parties are less and less able to posture as defenders of working class interests.

The working class in France exploded in an insurgent movement, largely outside of the official trade union bodies. The unions, which represent less than 10% of the French work-force, were able to retain a degree of control over the movement and ultimately suppress it due to the absence of a revolutionary socialist alternative.

The organisations with which the working class is saddled in France proved worthless as instruments of struggle. The Socialist Party is simply one wing of the bourgeois political establishment. The overriding concern of party leaders Lionel Jospin and Michel Rocard is the creation of a streamlined French capitalism that can compete in Europe and the world. In their eyes the sacrifice of the rights and gains of French workers in pursuit of that goal is a small price to pay.

The French Communist Party (PCF) is a decomposing bureaucratic apparatus moving further and further to the right. The record of the Stalinists' betrayals in France now extends over six decades and numerous revolutionary opportunities. The PCF dedicated itself in the recent strikes to the preservation of the Juppé government. The Stalinists are now holding a series of public forums, in collaboration with the Pabloite Revolutionary Communist League (LCR), the Greens and various liberal groups. They are trying to build a new nationalist, reformist trap for the working class.

The Stalinists maintain their influence primarily as a result of the opportunism and cowardice of the "far left" organisations: most notably the LCR and Workers Struggle (Lutte Ouvrière). These groups played the central role in the recent events in blocking the independent mobilisation of the working class. Anyone under the impression that the record of the French petty-bourgeois left in 1968 when it capitulated cravenly to the Stalinists was a product of youth or inexperience ought to be disabused of this notion by its role in the recent strikes. The "mature" LCR and LO behaved even more disgracefully. Having spent the previous decades integrating themselves into the union bureaucracies and other bourgeois institutions, having prepared no one for such an upsurge, having foreseen nothing these opportunists conducted themselves like the middle class careerists that they are.

The International Committee sought to approach the French strikes in an objective manner. We went to France with definite opinions about the social democracy, the Communist Party, the trade union bureaucracies and the middle class radical groups, based on long historical experience. But the conclusions we have drawn were in no sense imposed from without. The exposure of these organisations and the entire middle class "left" milieu comes from their own words and activities. We have merely presented what they did and what they said.

The record is clear: organisations such as the LCR and Lutte Ouvrièreopposed raising socialist and political demands, refused to take on the responsibility of providing direction to the mass movement and accepted the bureaucratic traitors in the unions and the Communist Party as the legitimate leadership of the working class. Like their counterparts throughout the globe, the radical opportunists in France form one of the most conservative layers in society, deeply hostile to the assertion by the working class of its own social interests. Nothing positive can emanate from this political swamp.

Could the French strike movement have led to the emergence of a revolutionary situation? All the cynics and sceptics on the so-called left will scoff at the very question. They ignore the fact that their own cynicism and scepticism play an objective role in preventing the revolutionary potential from emerging out of the objective crisis. "A revolutionary situation," wrote Leon Trotsky in regard to French strikes of an earlier day, "does not fall from the skies. It takes form with the active participation of the revolutionary class and its parties." In France every organisation with "Socialist," "Communist" and "Revolutionary" in its name proved to be a party of order. With the activity of all these movements directed toward preventing the working class from embarking on a struggle for power, a pre-revolutionary situation was stifled.

The International Committee of the Fourth International considered that its most important contribution to the struggle of the French working class, and its primary responsibility to the international working class, was to provide an analysis of the French strike movement and draw its lessons, in order to advance the struggle to build a genuine Marxist party in France as a section of the International Committee. In Trotsky's words, "To understand the situation fully and draw from it all the practical conclusions, boldly and without fear and to the end, is to assure the victory of Socialism."

What is the current situation?

Apparently the government has stopped the attack on the railways. Juppé has taken a step backwards on the question of retirement conditions for the railworkers. But I am not very convinced by this retreat, because he has not retreated at all on the question of social security, which affects everyone. The threat to increase the number of years before retirement to 40 is still in the air. I think it will come back in the back door and we will find ourselves in two or three years in the same situation, because fundamentally, nothing has been resolved. So I am a bit sceptical.

If the Juppé Plan survives, that will mean that the union leaders accept that the working class must pay for the crisis.

Exactly. We haven't really stopped the government over what they want to do most. Basically, we are not responsible for the crisis. For example, they asked us in 1982 to accept a tax of 1% of our wages to

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