

France: How Lutte Ouvrière aids unions' betrayal of struggle vs. Gaullist regime

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After five national days of action in which millions took part, the trade unions are collaborating in a sell-out of the movement against the Gaullist regime's "First Job Contract" (CPE) and related attacks on the working class. They have entered into discussions with the governing Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), allowing the government to announce the withdrawal of the most contentious provisions of the new law while it works to reformulate its attacks on job security in close cooperation with the unions.

Despite the withdrawal of the CPE, little will change for the workers and young people who have taken to the streets in recent weeks. The assault on social rights and the dismantling of employment protections will continue—with the support of the unions.

From the beginning, the unions strove to keep the mass movement under control and head off a direct challenge to the government of President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin. The Socialist Party and Communist Party, together with their allied student associations, have also made clear that they want to settle the conflict as quickly as possible.

In aborting the opposition movement, the unions have worked with UMP Chairman Nicolas Sarkozy, bolstering his efforts to succeed Chirac as president in next year's national elections. Sarkozy, who as interior minister was responsible for brutal police actions against the students, is a right-wing populist who promotes authoritarian forms of rule. The readiness of the union leaders to work with Sarkozy marks a new stage in their political degeneration.

Lutte Ouvrière (Workers Struggle—LO) plays a key role in covering up this betrayal. In the course of the entire dispute over the CPE, it has not raised a word of criticism of the unions or the official "left" parties. The more stark the confrontation with the government, the clearer its unwillingness to yield on the underlying substance of its "free market" policies, the more obvious the perfidious role of the union leaders, the more resolutely Lutte Ouvrière has promoted the illusion that protest by itself is sufficient to defeat the attacks of the government and the ruling elite, implying that there is no need for an independent political struggle by the working class or a socialist strategy for workers' power.

Lutte Ouvrière, which has long sought to embed itself in the union milieu, maintains in its political agitation and propaganda that spontaneous militancy can compel the union leaders to

conduct a genuine struggle against the government and the capitalist system. Its forte is pure "action"—strikes, the "power of the streets"—combined with a denigration of theory, historical and political knowledge, program and perspective.

One searches in vain in its statements and publications for a perspective that goes beyond the generally accepted demand for the disputed law to be withdrawn. Even the call from the National Coordinating Committee of Pupils and Students for a general strike and the resignation of the government evoked no response from Lutte Ouvrière.

"The continuation and expansion of the action will force the government to back off and withdraw the CPE." This sentence, from a speech by LO leader Arlette Laguiller, contains everything that Lutte Ouvrière has to say to the mass movement—as though the mere withdrawal of this one piece of legislation will resolve the crisis confronting youth, students and workers.

After the day of action on April 4, when the union leaders announced they would begin discussions with the UMP, Lutte Ouvrière's newspaper appeared with the headline: "It is Not Time for a Pause, but to Continue the Fight."

In its editorial, LO dismissed the discussions being held by the unions with the UMP as an unfortunate misunderstanding. It praised the unions for having supposedly recognized that the CPE was non-negotiable and that it was necessary to demand its "withdrawal pure and simple."

As for the decision of the unions to meet with the UMP, the editorial merely declared, "By doing this, they take the risk of demobilizing the workers and students just at the moment when their mobilization is strongest, where the chance of forcing back the government is greater than ever."

Like the preceding editorials, this one concluded with an exhortation to "carry on."

"The movement of students and high school pupils will continue in any case," LO stated. "The protests of the working class must continue to be expressed. There is no reason to offer Chirac a pause in a movement that could and can still carry on. All those who have participated in the actions against the CPE and the CNE should make their demand heard for the struggle to continue without stopping, until the total withdrawal of the CPE and the CNE." [The CNE is another law—not withdrawn by Chirac—that strips large sections of workers of employment protections.]

A minority faction within LO, which regularly publishes a column in the party newspaper, is even more explicit. It expressly

states that it is possible to overcome the treachery of the trade union bureaucracy simply by means of pressure from the streets.

In the April 7 edition of *Lutte Ouvrière's* newspaper, this faction wrote: "... constantly increasing the mobilization of the sphere of labour is the only means to force the government and employers to make serious retreats in relation to workers' fundamental demands. In order for the trade unions, which will without doubt get involved in negotiations, to remain steadfast so that they move in the same direction as the three million who took to the streets, and the many more who agree with and support them, it is necessary to keep up the pressure and increase it."

The betrayal of the unions has not come as a surprise to those who follow French politics. Nor is it a coincidence.

Since the mid-1990s, the working class in France has fought back time and again against the attacks of the government and employers. But all of these struggles have been sabotaged by the unions and the official "left" parties, which either stabbed them in the back or led them into a dead end.

After 1997, when the Gaullist government of Alain Juppé made way for Socialist Party leader Lionel Jospin's "Plural Left" government, Jospin continued the policy of welfare cuts, which ultimately led to a return to power by the right wing.

The struggle against economic insecurity, unemployment, welfare cuts, racism, war and attacks on democratic rights requires the building of a new party that is politically independent of the old bureaucratic apparatuses. This is possible only on the basis of an international socialist perspective that is directed against capitalism, uniting working people across all borders and ethnic divisions.

The supremacy of the world economy over all aspects of national economy has undermined the policy of social reformism, which in the 1960s and 1970s could still produce limited advances for the working class. This is the reason for the rightward turn of the trade unions and the official "left" parties. Their differences with the government of Chirac and de Villepin are largely tactical in nature. They agree that a fundamental "reform" and "modernization" of the labour market—namely, the destruction of all social rights and past social gains—is essential for French capitalism, which they defend, to stand up to international competition.

The rightward turn by the unions and the reformist parties is an international phenomenon. Whether in Germany, England, Italy or the US, the policies of "left" and right-wing bourgeois governments are, in their essence, the same. In Germany, the Social Democrats and Christian Democrats have even formed a grand coalition, and everywhere the unions collaborate closely with governments and employers.

Lutte Ouvrière preaches socialism in words and even claims to be Trotskyist, although the organization, whose origins go back to the 1940s, was never a part of the Trotskyist world movement. But there is no trace of this in their political interventions. By seeking to limit the movement to the simplest forms of trade union militancy and protest, it provides a valuable service to the bureaucratic apparatuses and works to hinder the emergence of a revolutionary alternative.

There is a certain division of labour between LO and another wing of the so-called "extreme left" in France. While LO plays the

passive part, the *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (Revolutionary Community League—LCR) assumes the active role. The LCR publishes joint statements with the Communist Party, the Greens and even with the Socialist Party, and strives for close cooperation with these parties and the unions. As a rule, LO remains aloof from such alliances and goes its own way. This, however, is never accompanied by active and independent political initiatives aimed at helping the working class to liberate itself from the stranglehold of the old organizations.

In 2002, in the second round of the presidential election, when the right-wing extremist Jean Marie Le Pen of the National Front ran against the Gaullist Jacques Chirac, the LCR called for a vote for Chirac, while LO, after much hesitation, called for abstention. They both rejected a campaign for an active and coordinated working class boycott of the election, as proposed at the time by the *World Socialist Web Site*. Such a boycott would have enabled the working class to adopt an independent standpoint and would have prepared it for future struggles against Chirac.

LO refuses to take political responsibility for the consequences of its own policies. It justifies this by saying that it is far too insignificant to have any impact—even though its candidate, Arlette Laguiller, won 6 percent of the vote in the last presidential election.

This view is clearly expressed at the end of a long article on the struggle against the CPE in a recent edition of LO's theoretical magazine *Lutte de classes*. The article states: "Revolutionaries and their political agitation have hardly any effect on changing the moods of the working masses. These changes in the sense of regaining the will to fight are largely unaffected by organisations whose membership and presence throughout the popular classes are far greater than than ours."

There could hardly be a more crude and unabashed admission of prostration before the labour bureaucracies.



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