

US media reacts to French protests with hatred and fear

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The US media, not known for following the internal political developments of other countries too closely unless it has a direct impact upon the US, has provided an inordinate amount of ill-tempered commentary on the wave of protests and strikes in France against the introduction of a law that enables employers to fire young workers without cause.

The reaction of the media has been universally hostile, varying from denunciations by the right-wing press of “mob rule” to the more low-key perplexity expressed by the liberal media, which suggests that French are suffering from some type of collective dementia because they believe they have the right to such things as job security.

The headlines of several newspaper commentaries give a flavor of this contempt, from the *Wall Street Journal*'s, “The Decline of France” (March 21) and “Casseurs” (or “Smashers,” March 29); to the *Washington Post*'s “French take to the Streets to Preserve their Economic Fantasy” (March 22) and “The French In Denial” (March 28); to the *New York Times*' “France's Misguided Protesters” (March 27).

In one way or another all of the commentaries suggest the protests are illegitimate. They declare that France's labor laws and social protections are outmoded and must be “reformed” if corporations are to thrive and create jobs. They suggest that “everyone” agrees with this, everyone, that is, except the millions of workers and young people marching on the streets of France. Echoing the infamous comments of British Prime Minister Tony Blair at the time of the invasion of Iraq, the US media suggests that the strength of a democracy is measured by the ability of political leaders to defy the will of the people and do “what's right.”

As always, the *Wall Street Journal* leads the pack of reactionary voices. Having spared no provocative insult against Jacques Chirac and Dominique de Villepin for refusing to line up behind the US invasion of Iraq, the *Journal* now declares the French president and prime minister the champions of democracy. The French government is facing down “Jihadist” students, who, the newspaper claims, are resorting to violence to defend their “religion of job security.” Writer Nidra Poller declares, “Democracies run on elections and legislation; mobs rule by fire and the sword,” suggesting that state repression is needed to crush the protests and uphold “democracy.”

Wall Street Journal, like premise of newspapers such as the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* is that France's high unemployment rate is due to the unfair burden placed on employers by the social protections fought for by the working class and put in place after World War II. If corporations are given the unrestricted right to fire workers and exploit them like American workers, the story goes, this will entice companies to create new jobs.

While “those of you brainwashed by Anglo-American market capitalism” see the need for this type of “market flexibility” to increase employment, *Post* writer Steven Pearlstein declares cynically, “viewed through the dark prism of the French imagination, these aren't real jobs—they're ‘garbage jobs’ and ‘slave contracts’ meant to undermine the birthright of all Frenchmen to be shielded from all economic risk. Give in on this, and who knows what could go next? The 35-hour workweek? The six weeks of paid vacation? State-mandated profit sharing? Retirement at age 60?”

Oh, what horrors!

Posing as a defender of the unemployed, Pearlstein claims that the reason immigrant youth and many university students cannot find jobs is because a “shrinking pool of older, middle-class workers” enjoy the “full panoply of worker protections” and are “sucking the innovation and vitality from the economy.” Expressing dismay over the fact that young people are demanding the same rights their parents achieved, Pearlstein complains, “rather than supporting the reforms that might generate more jobs and more income, the outsiders have bought into the nostalgic fantasy of a France that once was, but can never be again, making common cause with the very ‘insiders’ whose selfishness and pigheaded socialism have left them out in the cold.”

Indeed it is the continuing influence of socialism and egalitarian ideals in France—in spite of the betrayals of Stalinism and social democracy—that most outrages Pearlstein and his cohorts in the media. The *Post* reporter disparagingly notes the results of a recent poll by the University of Maryland on international policy attitudes showing that only 36 percent of French respondents felt that “the free enterprise system and free market economy” is the best system. This was the lowest percentage of any of the 22 countries polled and compared with

59 percent in Italy, 65 percent in Germany, 66 percent in Britain and 71 percent in the United States.

Complaining that France sported “only” 14 billionaires, as compared to 24 in similarly sized Britain, Pearlstein concludes his column: “Indeed, when you ask French university students who is the Bill Gates of France, they look at you blankly. It’s not simply that they can’t name one. The bigger problem is that they can’t imagine why it matters, or why that has anything to do with why they can’t find a good job.”

Nowhere does Pearlstein explain how the hoarding of vast fortunes by the super-rich and the gaping levels of social inequality have improved the lot of American workers. Instead, he, along with the other well-heeled pundits in the corporate-controlled news media take as given that US employers should wield dictatorial powers in the workplace and retain the unquestioned “right” to destroy thousands of jobs and slash wages and benefits. After all, Dr. Pangloss, this is the best of all possible worlds.

Pearlstein’s fellow columnist at the *Post*, Robert J. Samuelson, argues that the protests in France point a “larger predicament” for Europe. “Hardly anyone wants to surrender the benefits and protections of today’s generous welfare state, but the fierce attachment to these costly and self-defeating programs prevents Europe from preparing for a future that, though it may be deplored, is inevitable.”

Samuelson then lets the cat out of the bag, acknowledging that the media’s take on the French protests is bound up with political situation in the US and concerns over how American workers will respond to the unprecedented attacks now on the agenda of corporate America and both of its political parties. “The dilemma of advanced democracies,” he says, “including the United States, is that they’ve made more promises than they can keep. Their political commitments outstrip the economy’s capacity to deliver...To disavow past promises incites public furor; not to disavow them worsens the country’s future problems.”

This anxiety over possible “public furor” in the US was spelled out even more clearly in a *USA Today* editorial, entitled, “Before you scoff at the French, consider the U.S. connection.” It begins by warning that the French protests demonstrate the “lengths that people will go to preserve guarantees and benefits” despite “harming their own long-term prospects and those of their children.”

While the US should consider itself “fortunate” that it does not “endow its workers with the right not to be fired,” the editorial says, “one can see counterproductive sentiments similar to those of the French protesters in the workers at companies such as General Motors. They demand preservation of generous pensions and lifetime health coverage from employers that might be driven out of business...”

“On a larger scale, it’s possible to see the French in the intractability of the Medicare and Social Security debates,” the editorial continues. Claiming that longer life spans, the coming

retirement of baby boomers and exploding health costs, were pushing the government and economy toward a “fiscal abyss,” the newspaper complains that “those who receive these benefits, or are about to, have shown scant interest in reforms needed to avert a looming crisis...”

The editorial concludes: “The USA rarely has the strikes and street protests that France is almost as famous for as its cheeses. But it does suffer from some of the same unwillingness to consider the future.”

Thus, the media’s sudden interest in France reveals itself to be a concern that working class resistance could spread to the US itself, where the reactionary agenda of free market policies was initiated in the first place, before it spread to Britain and the rest of the world. With unrelenting attacks on workers by GM, Delphi, Northwest Airlines and other US corporations, as well as plans by the Bush administration to slash “entitlement” programs to pay for further tax cuts to the rich and the burgeoning costs of America’s worldwide military adventures, there is no doubt that at least some establishment figures who are not too blind to see are considering the possibility that if mass opposition could explode in France, it could happen here too.

The arguments that society simply cannot afford to provide for the basic needs of working people are becoming increasingly threadbare, not only for French workers but for their American counterparts as well. Despite their efforts to reassure themselves about popular support for the profit system, the reality is that there are growing numbers of workers and youth in America who realize that the real problem is that society cannot afford to allow a tiny minority of the population to monopolize the wealth created by working people. Despite the insistent claims over the years about the death of the class struggle and the working class, the explosive events in France, as they so often have done throughout history, are a sign of what is coming throughout the world, and within the US itself.



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