France: CGT union federation moves further to the right

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From April 24 to 28, the northern French city of Lille was host to the 48th congress of the CGT (General Confederation of Labour) trade union federation. For five days, some 1,000 delegates discussed the orientation of the union for the coming three years and elected a new leadership.

Two weeks earlier, under pressure from a nationwide mass protest movement, the Gaullist government of Dominique de Villepin had withdrawn its "First Job Contract" (CPE) legislation. CGT secretary-general Bernard Thibault tried to use this success to curb the tensions within his own organisation and unite the delegates behind the leadership's right-wing course.

In his opening address, he described the withdrawal of the CPE as a "historic" victory. It represented a "beautiful episode in the history of the French trade union movement," a "collective success" that was achieved through the "unity of school pupils, students and wage earners" and the "support of trade unions in numerous European countries, something that was barely acknowledged publicly." The "joint mobilisation of wage earners and a large section of youth was crucial for this victory," he added. "Together, we were stronger."

Invited to the congress, representatives of three student and pupil federations—Bruno Julliard (UNEF), Karl Stoeckel (UNL) and Tristan Rouquier (FIDL)—were greeted with calls of "all together, all together" and standing ovations.

In reality, the withdrawal of the CPE was anything but a "historic" victory. After eight weeks of demonstrations and strikes, the French government was forced to undertake a tactical retreat. However, it has only withdrawn one aspect of its "equal opportunities law," while the rest remains in force, and it is sticking doggedly to its social and economic course.

Within the government camp, the far right around Interior Minister and UMP chairman Nicolas Sarkozy emerged strengthened from the dispute. If recent opinion polls are to be believed, Sarkozy now has a real chance of being elected as French president next year.

The Gaullist government survived a powerful social movement, which could easily have brought it down, without incurring too much damage. It owes its survival primarily to the trade unions, which put a brake on this movement and kept it under control. The unions, including the CGT, continually stressed that they were not seeking to bring down the government, but only the withdrawal of the CPE.

Thibault's triumphalism not only camouflages the real role the unions played in the mass movement against the CPE, it covers up the further shift to the right by the CGT. With constant invocations of "unity" and "common interests," Thibault justified closing ranks between the CGT, which was long dominated by the French Communist Party (PCF), and the trade union federations historically dominated by the social democrats.

Thibault, who has headed the CGT for seven years, advocates a *syndicalisme rassemblé*, a unified trade union movement. While the CGT credits itself with **a** "class struggle" tradition (meaning militant forms of action such as demonstrations and strikes), Thibault wants to shift the emphasis towards negotiations and agreements with the employers and the government. He supports a strategy that links "tough demands with active participation in negotiations."

He promotes closer co-operation with the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour), which is aligned with the Socialist Party and pursues a policy of social partnership. In the past, it has repeatedly acted as a strikebreaking force. In 2003, the CFDT betrayed the big strike and protest movement against pension cuts and attacks on the education system. While millions stopped work and demonstrated, the CFDT reached a unilateral agreement with the Gaullist government.

Thibault's orientation has met with resistance within the CGT. In 2004, he suffered a serious defeat in the union on the issue of a national referendum on the European constitution. The secretary-general had spoken out in favour of the constitution and was subsequently called to order by the CGT national committee — a unique action in the history of the union.

In Lille, the document submitted by the leadership on future orientation met with fierce debate, which *Le Monde* described as "verbal guerrilla warfare."

The congress received over 3,000 amendments to this document. Most, however, were more concerned with the form than the substance of this orientation. The opposition of Thibault's adversaries (including members of the "radical left" Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) and the Parti des Travailleurs), who accused him of "reformism," was limited to a purely *trade union* perspective. None of them raised the necessity for a new *political* orientation directed against the capitalist social order.

Numerous resolutions and contributions demanded that the term "class struggle" be re-introduced into the preamble of the text. Others were critical that the word "worker" was constantly replaced by "wage earner." One delegate accused the leadership of turning the CGT into "a trade union of political mandates, a bureaucratic elite of technocrats." The CGT's membership in the social-democratic-dominated European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) also came under criticism.

CFDT chairman François Chérèque was greeted with boos and whistles when he spoke to the congress delegates in Lille on Tuesday. The son of a Socialist Party minister in the Mitterrand era, Chérèque is particularly hated among CGT members in education and transportation because of his role as a strikebreaker in 2003.

But in the end, the leadership around Thibault easily prevailed. Four-fifths of the delegates agreed to the document outlining the new orientation. It was only when it came to the reorganisation of union finances that there were difficulties. For seven years, the leadership has been trying in vain to divert a larger share of the membership dues from the numerous subordinate bodies to the centre. This time, it succeeded. Some 63 percent of the delegates agreed to a reorganisation. This agreement may well have been facilitated by the fact that membership dues of 3 million Euros constitute only a third of the union's annual income, the remaining two-thirds coming mainly from subsidies.

The CGT also wants to close ranks with the traditionally social democratic trade unions on an international level. It plans to join the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) in the autumn.

From 1945 to 1995, the CGT was a member of the Stalinist-dominated World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), which was fiercely opposed by the ICFTU, which served as an anti-communist front organisation during the Cold War. The CGT left the WFTU in 1995 and soon thereafter joined the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), in which social democratic trade unions like the German DGB and the British TUC set the tone. The CGT still maintained its distance from the ICFTU, in which the American AFL-CIO plays an important role.

Thibault is using the fusion of the ICFTU with the Christian World Confederation of Labour (WCL), planned for this autumn, to justify the entry of the CGT. He claims the unification of these two right-wing, bureaucratic apparatuses represents the establishment of a completely new international organisation, which corresponds to the interests of workers in the age of globalisation. In Lille, much energy was expended to convince delegates of the necessity to accept this move.

Union officials from 80 countries met on the eve of the congress for a public debate. Here, Thibault proclaimed that the "unification of the trade union movement on a worldwide basis" was an "absolute necessity." He said the trade unions had to "again develop effective international solidarity" to confront globalisation, which produces "inequality between countries and inside each country" and "increased uncertainty."

The former secretary-general of the ETUC, Emilio Gabaglio, spoke enthusiastically of ending a chapter in which the trade union movement had been divided. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, "the ideological grounds for the division were largely superseded." Moreover, he affirmed, the world trade union movement is confronted with a common challenge, "unrestrained globalisation."

The president of the Indian CITU, M.K. Pandhe, stressed the necessity for common action, when, for example, Japanese companies were active in India and sacked workers who sought to organise themselves into a union.

And the secretary-general of the Italian CGIL, Guglielmo Epifani, said the international trade union movement was confronted with the most difficult situation in its history: "By attacking the relations of solidarity, globalisation aims at smashing the basis of the trade union movement."

Even the vice-president of the American AFL-CIO, Larry Cohen, called in Lille for a joint struggle against what he referred to as "casino capitalism."

The General Secretary of the ETUC, John Monks, went so far as to participate in the large demonstration against the CPE on April 4, in order to ingratiate himself with the CGT. Monks, a past leader of the British TUC and an avid supporter of Tony Blair, was hardly ever seen on demonstrations in Britain.

It is absurd to present the international unification of the "free," ex-Stalinist and Christian trade union bureaucracies as an act of solidarity between workers and a new dawn for the world's trade unions.

All the unions meeting in Lille have a long history of decline and betrayal. The American AFL-CIO hasn't supported a serious labour struggle in decades, much less won one. In mining, steel, the auto and aircraft industries the AFL-CIO has collaborated in the destruction of millions of jobs and accepted wage cuts of 50 percent and more. The unions in other countries are no different.

If the trade union apparatuses are closing ranks internationally, they are doing it to further their own bureaucratic interests. The globalisation of production has undermined their traditional role as mediators of class conflicts within the national framework. The unions' traditional pressure tactics have been rendered ineffective by the global operation of modern transnational companies that can rapidly shift investment and production to cheap wage countries. The general loss of members, a consequence of numerous self-inflicted defeats organised by their bureaucratic leaderships, has drastically reduced the trade unions' influence.

They react by striving to prove their use as co-managers for the governments and transnationals. To do this they need a certain organisational weight, hence the efforts at strengthening the apparatus through unification.

The trade unions stopped defending the interests of their members long ago. Instead, they use their expert knowledge, their apparatuses and their expert advisors to implement the measures dictated by the corporations, if possible with minimal conflict, in order to preserve the "social peace."

Tripartite commissions, in which union representatives co-operate with employer associations and the government in order to plan the dismantling of the welfare state and collective bargaining systems, are common throughout Europe. The ETUC is not much more than a lobby that co-operates closely with the European Union Commission in Brussels. The criticism of the CPE by the French trade unions was directed less against the content of the new law than the circumstances under which the de Villepin government had sought to introduce it—without previously consulting them.

The tendency to collaborate with governments and employers is common to all trade unions —the traditionally reformist, as well as the advocates of "class struggle." It results from the limitations of a trade union perspective, which accepts the capitalist economic order as a condition for its activity and therefore rejects any political perspective aimed at the overthrow of this system. The CGT is exemplary in this respect.

Founded in 1895, the CGT is the oldest French trade union. In the post-war period, it was under the strict control of the PCF and was particularly strong in large-scale industrial factories.

In 1968, it played a crucial role in selling out the rebellion against the government of General de Gaulle. While 11 million workers participated in a general strike, it was negotiating the Grenelle agreement with the government, which brought the rebellion under control with the help of a number of economic concessions.

Despite this sell-out, the CGT experienced the high point of its organisational influence during the 1970s. Between 1968 and 1977, its membership reached well over two million. As long as living standards continued to rise, many workers maintained their illusions in the reformist programme of the left-wing coalition of the Socialist and Communist Parties and remained faithful to the CGT.

From 1977, there began a continuous decline that continued throughout the reign of President Mitterrand. In 1992, the CGT reached its organisational nadir with just 630,000 members. The PCF underwent a parallel decline, gradually losing control over the CGT. Since then, membership has stagnated. Today, with 711,000 members, the CGT is only the second-largest union federation in France. The CFDT has approximately 100,000 more members.

The CGT is reacting to this decline like trade unions everywhere: It is abandoning its class struggle rhetoric and linking itself even more closely with the government and the corporations. This is the new direction posed by the Lille congress.