The social movements in France: Political lessons from the last 10 years

Part one

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Peter Schwarz, a member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site, *gave the following lecture at a seminar held by the Socialist Equality parties of Germany and Great Britain from April 17 to April 21 in Berlin. We are publishing the talk in two parts.*

For more than 200 years, France has been seen as the country in which class contradictions are most openly fought out and which provided the social impulse for events that have had European-wide repercussions. This applied to the revolutionary period from 1789 to 1815, and then again in 1831, 1848, 1871, and finally in 1968, when the May-June revolt, which began in Paris, spread like wildfire across Europe.

The conflicts surrounding the so-called "First Job Contract" (*Contrat première embauche*—CPE), which shook France during the past two months, are of such a character and have significance far beyond French borders. They show in exemplary fashion the real social and political condition of Europe. Even if, based on historical tradition, the French population is rather more inclined to take to the streets in their millions than, for example, the Germans, the same explosive tensions and political conflicts are also at work here and in the rest of Europe.

The events in France represent an international strategic experience and require a careful analysis. There is no national solution to the problems confronting the youth and working class in France. The CPE conflict poses in all its sharpness the task of building a new revolutionary leadership on the basis of a socialist perspective.

The *World Socialist Web Site* intervened intensively in the recent events and placed these developments at the heart of its work. A number of members of the editorial board worked regularly in Paris. We analysed the current events on a daily basis and published articles in both French and English. We examined the role of the trade unions and different political tendencies, and addressed the lessons arising from historical events—such as the Popular Front of 1936 and the general strike of 1968.

Central to our work was the raising of political consciousness, making clear the necessity of breaking with the old reformist organisations and exposing the role played by those petty bourgeois radical groups that provide a left cover for these organisations. In so doing, we have begun to establish the basis for building a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in France.

The "far left" and the movement against the CPE

Apart from the International Committee, there was not a single political tendency in France that made the slightest attempt to undertake such tasks. All the parties of the so-called "extreme left"—the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Communist League—LCR), Lutte ouvrière (Worker's Struggle—LO) and the Parti de travailleurs (Worker's Party—PT)—published statements following the withdrawal of the CPE by the government, which were aimed at concealing the major political questions raised by the conflict.

All three organisations proclaimed the withdrawal of the law a major victory. Their principal political conclusion was that the working class could gain all its demands if it expanded its movement quantitatively and maintained its "unity." By this they meant unity with the trade unions. None of them even raised the question of a new political orientation, let alone a socialist perspective. None of them advanced a programme that went beyond French borders; a world outside of France does not exist for these people. None of them criticised the trade unions and the reformist parties; or, any mild criticisms raised referred at most to entirely subordinate, tactical questions. In short, all three organisations defend a narrow-minded, purely trade union and entirely nationalist perspective.

In regard to the withdrawal of the CPE, the LCR, for example, wrote: "This success is a first crucial step on the path to a common movement of youth, wage earners and the whole population, in order to enforce real measures against economic insecurity and unemployment. The movement of youth opened the road: the struggle begins to pay off when it assumes a democratic form, is political, questions the institutions, overcomes divisions and unites workers and different generations."

The text culminates in the demand, "All the unionised organisations" now have to "prepare a general mobilisation" in order to implement further demands.

For its part, Lutte ouvrière commented: "The withdrawal of the CPE is above all a success because the way in which it was achieved, by action on the streets, shows the way forward.... The social crisis...can only be stopped by the massive intervention of workers in struggle, by demonstrations, by strikes, with the social power that is theirs, capable of making the bosses and the government retreat."

The PT attributed success to "the unity of the workers with its trade unions" and went on to stress several times that unity is the fundamental question.

The PT was the only one of the three organisations to raise the issue of the European Union. It declared: "The necessity of breaking with the European Union arises and will continue to arise as the basis for opening the way to the satisfaction of fundamental demands." For the PT, however, the alternative to the European Union is not the unity of the European working class and the United Socialist States of Europe, but "democracy" within France, whereby "democracy" is a synonym for the French state. At the end of May, the organisation held a large meeting in Paris with the slogan, "For the re-conquest of democracy, for the break with the European Union."

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This national, pro-trade-union perspective is reactionary and indicates an utter failure to comprehend current reality. Such a perspective is being put forward in 2006, not in the 1960s or 1970s. In an advanced stage of globalisation, after years of unrelenting welfare cuts throughout Europe, and with the integration of millions of low-paid workers in China and India into world production, all three organisations declare in unison: "Workers only have to step up their fight, and the social crisis can be stopped."

Such a stance does not just reflect stupidity or naiveté. The glorification of trade union struggle is aimed at defending the union apparatuses and the official "left" parties and channelling the mass movement behind them.

In France over the past 10 years, there have been a series of mass movements involving the mobilisation of millions. On each occasion, the trade unions and the official left parties have sought to suppress the movement and defend the existing bourgeois order. As a result, these organisations have been seriously discredited and weakened. The official level of union membership in France is around 8 percent of the working population—one of the lowest in Europe. And in 2002, the official left parties (Socialist Party—PS, Communist Party—PCF) suffered a humiliating defeat at the polls.

If there is one central lesson to be drawn from the social movements of the past decade, then it is the necessity for the working class to break with the decrepit trade union and reformist apparatuses and develop its own independent political movement. The role of the "far left" groups consists of preventing this political rupture with these rotten organisations and, should the present government collapse, help bring to power a new version of a "left government" under the aegis of the social democrats (PS).

The events in France show very clearly that only the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International can provide the basis for an independent political movement of the working class. All other tendencies reject this. The task is not to play the role of the most radical wing of the spontaneous movement, but to establish a political understanding of events, develop a socialist consciousness and draw the necessary lessons from history.

The crisis of revolutionary leadership and orientation emerges as a central and consistent theme in the events of the last 10 years. At the same time, significant new developments can be observed. New layers and generations are entering into struggle that are far removed from the old reformist organisations and the petty bourgeois radicals (LCR, LO). Second, the reformist parties and trade unions have become increasingly discredited. And, third, the ruling elite is being forced increasingly to rely on the "left" groups that have moved sharply to the right.

This development does not spontaneously solve the crisis of revolutionary leadership, but instead poses it in a sharper and more acute form. The degeneration of the old reformist organisations and the integration of radical groups into the bourgeois apparatus have taken such an extreme form that there hardly exists any other force than ourselves in opposition to the camp of the bourgeoisie. This means that we are faced with a great political responsibility.

Let us now examine briefly the developments of the past 10 years in chronological order.

The strike movement of November/December 1995

At the end of 1995, hundred of thousands of workers undertook a three-and-a-half-week-long strike against the right-wing government of Alain Juppé and President Jacques Chirac. Millions took part in mass demonstrations. The movement was directed against the attacks by the government on social security benefits, pensions, health insurance and jobs. Its goal was to defend the social gains of the post-war period, which were under assault throughout Europe. Five years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the European bourgeoisie no longer saw any necessity in retaining those social concessions with which it had appeased and suppressed class conflict in the post-war era.

At the heart of the mass movement were public service workers—from the railways, transport, power stations, post office and municipalities. These sectors have a relatively high rate of unionisation. The driving force of the movement, however, was not the trade unions. On the contrary, they saw their task as keeping the protests and strikes under control and preventing them developing into a political movement that could threaten the government.

For their part, the "far left" took over the role of foot soldiers for the trade union bureaucracy. At the numerous strike meetings, there was always a speaker from the LCR or LO sitting alongside the representative of the trade unions, and he or she invariably supported the union representative and essentially advanced the same political line.

The trade unions finally suffocated the strike movement by agreeing to a rotten compromise with Juppé. In a manner similar to the recent dispute over the CPE, the Juppé government withdrew the most contentious parts of its plan, while all the other elements remained. Juppé was allowed to remain in office for the time being, and Chirac was given the time necessary to prepare an orderly change of government.

The Jospin government

The authority of the Juppé government was so undermined by the strike movement of 1995 that Chirac decided in the spring of 1997 to dissolve parliament prematurely and call new elections. The idea is alleged to have originated with Dominique de Villepin, who is the current prime minister and who headed the presidential office at that time.

There has been considerable speculation about what induced Chirac and Villepin to take this step, which was most likely going to lead to a loss of the right wing's majority. The elitist Villepin is not especially sensitive to public opinion, as he recently proved. It could therefore have been a miscalculation on his part. It is far more likely, however, that Chirac and Villepin were consciously prepared to accept an electoral victory by the left parties, knowing this was the only way they could keep the working class under control.

The era of Socialist Party president Francois Mitterrand had ended just two years previously and had resulted in a profound discrediting of the "Socialists" and the Communist Party. The ruling elite was therefore dependent on a renegade from the Trotskyist movement to maintain a left appearance. In the figure of Lionel Jospin, the future prime minister, the bourgeoisie brought into a leading position in government a man who had spent at least 20 years of his life in the Organisation communiste internationaliste (OCI, the present-day Parti de travailleurs), led by Pierre Lambert, at one time a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Jospin joined the OCI in 1964 while a student at the elite ENA (École Nationale d'Administration—higher civil service school), and in 1972 he entered the Socialist Party. He rapidly became one of Mitterrand's closest collaborators and rose to the leadership of the national apparatus. At least until the beginning of the 1980s, he continued to work under the discipline of the OCI.

Jospin's political characteristics developed at a point when the OCI was turning away from the perspective of the ICFI; it would ultimately emerge

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as a prop for the social-democratic bureaucracy.

In the course of the 1960s, the OCI had begun to question the viability of the struggle waged by the International Committee against the revisionism of Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel. This shift was initially expressed in the claim by the OCI that the Fourth International was dead. It had been destroyed by Pabloism, the OCI maintained, and had to be refounded on a new basis. At the Third World Congress of the International Committee, in 1966, the OCI insisted on speaking of the "reconstruction" of the Fourth International.

This stance amounted to an offer of a general political amnesty to centrist forces. It represented an invitation for co-operation with all political tendencies that generally supported the "reconstruction of the Fourth International," even if they did not agree with, or rejected, the political principles that had been defended in the dispute with Pabloism.

The International Committee sharply rejected this position. Its British section, the Socialist Labour League (SLL), wrote to the OCI in 1967: "Only this struggle against revisionism can prepare the cadres to take the leadership of the millions workers drawn into the struggle against capitalism and against the bureaucracy.... The living struggle against Pabloism and the training of cadres and parties on the basis of this fight *has* in the years since 1952 constituted the life of the Fourth International."

On the eve of the major class warfare of 1968, the SLL warned the OCI of the political consequences of its positions: "[T]he radicalisation of the workers in Western Europe is proceeding rapidly, particularly in France.... There is *always* the danger at such a stage of development that a revolutionary party responds to the situation in the working class not in a revolutionary way but by adaptation to the level of struggle to which workers are restricted by their own experience under the old leaderships, i.e. to the inevitable initial confusion. Such revisions of the fight for the independent Party and the Transitional Programme are usually dressed up in the disguise of getting closer to the working class, unity with all those in struggle, not placing ultimatums, abandoning dogmatism, etc."

These warnings fell on deaf ears. The revolt of 1968 swept thousands of new, inexperienced members into the ranks of the OCI, and its youth organisation the AJS (Alliance des jeunes pour le socialisme—Youth Alliance for Socialism) and the OCI leadership adapted to the political confusion of these new layers.

The demand for a "united class front," which the SLL had also criticised in 1967, now became the formula with which the OCI subordinated itself to the social-democratic bureaucracy and led the newly won forces back into the old bureaucratic apparatuses. By "united class front," it meant the *Union de la gauche*, the alliance of the Socialist and Communist parties under the leadership of François Mitterrand, which it vehemently supported and defended against any criticism from the left.

Under these circumstances, the OCI developed in the 1970s into an important new "reservoir" for social-democratic bureaucrats. Lionel Jospin is only one of numerous contemporary leaders of the Socialist Party to have passed through the school of the OCI.

The OCI also made its presence felt in the trade union bureaucracy. For many years, it controlled the leadership of the Force ouvrière (Workers Power—FO) trade union federation, which had originally emerged in a right-wing split from the Stalinist-dominated CGT (Confédération générale du travail—General Confederation of Labor).

The Jospin government measured up to the expectations of the French ruling elite. It harmlessly channelled the militant movement that Juppé had been unable to contain. One can see this most clearly in the number of working days lost each year through strikes. In 1995, at the height of the mass movement against Juppé, 5.8 million days were lost; in 1997, in the first year of the Jospin government, just half a million.

But the initial hopes in Jospin soon gave way to bitter disappointment. He failed to keep his election promises, and when he did, they proved to be utterly hollow. The legal anchoring of the 35-hour week turned out to be an instrument to impose low-wage and insecure employment together with job flexibility. By 2000, the number of the workdays lost to strikes had risen to 3.1 million, more than 50 percent of the figure in the mass strike year of 1995!

The presidential elections of 2002

Jospin received his comeuppance in 2002. A poll taken three weeks before the presidential election revealed that 70 percent of voters saw no difference between the main candidates, Chirac and Jospin.

Taken together, both men had the support of just one quarter of the electorate. A third of the electorate did not bother to vote or spoiled their ballots. Jospin won just 16 percent of the vote, while the candidate of his most important coalition partner, the Communist Party, won just 3.4 percent. More than 10 percent voted for candidates of the "far left." The most sensational result of the poll, however, was the fact that the candidate of the neo-fascist National Front, Jean Marie Le Pen, won more votes than Jospin and became the rival to the incumbent president, Chirac, in the second round of voting.

Barely had the result of the first round been announced when thousands of young people took to the streets against Le Pen. Other sections of the population followed one day later. The demonstrations grew day by day and embraced the whole country. Initially, there were tens of thousands, then hundred of thousands, and finally on May 1, between 2 and 3 million participated. Many of those who were recently active against the CPE had their first political experiences in 2002.

The ruling elite was aware of the fact that this movement endangered the very fabric of the Fifth Republic. The mass of the population was not prepared to accept an election result that stood in such stark contrast to its aspirations.

On May 1, following a gigantic demonstration, I witnessed an interesting panel discussion in Paris. The podium was filled with representatives of all the main political parties, as well as leading French intellectuals—right winger Jean Pierre Raffarin, who became prime minister shortly afterwards; François Bayrou of the pro-market UDF (Union pour la démocratie française—Union for French Democracy); Dominique Strauss-Kahn of the Socialist Party; Noel Mamère, the presidential candidate of the Greens; the philosophers Alain Finkielkraut and Bernard Henri Levy; and the publisher of *Le Monde*, Edwy Plenel (a former LCR member). The LCR itself was represented by the figure of Daniel Bensaid.

All were united in their view that the institutional framework of the French state was in crisis, and the discussion revolved around the question as to how this crisis could be overcome and the bourgeois foundations of the Republic saved. All of them called for a vote for Chirac—as Levy emphasised—not against their will, but "with enthusiasm."

In the following days, a broad campaign began to direct the mass movement behind Chirac. "To stop Le Pen, one must elect Chirac" was the slogan. Members of the Socialist, Communist and Green Parties inundated the demonstrations with banners demanding a vote for Chirac. Chirac's own election posters were decorated with stickers featuring the symbol of the Socialist Party and bore the words "I am voting for Chirac."

The LCR called for a "struggle against Le Pen on the streets and at the ballot boxes," which under the given conditions could only mean casting a vote for Chirac. Lutte ouvrière dallied a long time and then decided to call for abstention.

While the left was running his election campaign, Chirac used the opportunity to consolidate the camp of the right wing. He rallied the

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various splinter fractions of the right in a new party, the Union pour la majorité présidentielle (Union for a Presidential Majority—UMP), and so prepared for the parliamentary election that took place two months later. He was finally elected president with 82 percent of the vote, and the UMP secured a large majority in the National Assembly. Jean Pierre Raffarin became head of the government, with Nicolas Sarkozy as his "super-minister" for internal security.

Throughout the presidential election in 2002, the *World Socialist Web Site* intervened intensively in political events and made clear it was entirely possible to mobilise the working class as an independent political force.

In an open letter to Lutte ouvrière, the LCR and the PT, we called for an organised, working class boycott of the second round of voting. Such a boycott would have denied the election any legitimacy. It would have created the best conditions for the political struggles that were inevitable after the voting. It would have been a particularly important contribution in the political education of the masses and young people. It would have enabled them to see through the lies of the bourgeois political establishment, which claimed that Chirac stood for the defence of the democracy.

All three organisations, whose candidates in the first round of voting had received a combined share of more than 10 percent of the popular vote, rejected such an initiative. Arlette Laguiller, the leading candidate of Lutte Ouvrière, explained to us in an interview that it was not possible to do anything—the "balance of power" was not right. The PT refused to make any statement about the second ballot, and the LCR was not prepared to speak with us.

The pensions movement of spring 2003

After less than a year in office, the new government was confronted with a new mass movement that looked like a repetition of 1995: a mass protest against the "reform" of the country's pension system that envisioned cuts in benefits of up to 30 per cent, as well as opposition to the decentralisation of the national education system. The latter measure by the government was seen by those affected as a step towards privatisation and an attack on the egalitarian and democratic values historically associated with the centralised education system in France.

Millions of workers in the public and private sectors took part in a series of strikes and demonstrations held on eight days of action. A total of 12 days of action took place in the education sector, with many teachers striking for weeks.

But in contrast to 1995, this time the government did not back down. The movement was strangled by the trade unions and ended in a complete defeat.

The CFDT (Confédération française démocratique du travail—French Democratic Confederation of Labour), the largest of the union federations, sabotaged the protests and struck a deal with the government independently of the other trade unions. The CGT and FO pursued a tactic of dissipating the strikes and explicitly declared their aim was not to bring down the government.

Later, the education secretary, François Fillon, paid tribute to the trade unions in the National Assembly and praised the "responsible attitude" taken by the Stalinist CGT and its secretary Bernard Thibault. Even in the most "strained moments," the CGT had shown itself to be a "reasonable opposition." The newspaper *Le Monde* commented: "The employment minister owed a debt of gratitude to the trade union based in Montreuil, which sought to prevent a general expansion of a movement threatening to get out of control."

This time, the subordination of the "far left" to the trade union bureaucracy was even more pronounced than in 1995. They rejected any broad political perspective. The LCR called for a "general strike"—without the least criticism of the trade unions that strictly rejected any confrontation with the government. For Lutte ouvrière, even such a call went too far. It explicitly rejected the demand for a general strike and contented itself instead with a demand for the "spreading out" of the strike.

To be continued

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