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

Part two

Peter Schwarz
15 June 2006

Peter Schwarz, a member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site, *delivered a lecture on the political situation in France at a seminar held by the Socialist Equality parties of Germany and Great Britain April 17-21 in Berlin. This is the second and final part.* Part one *was posted yesterday.*

The European Union referendum of Spring 2005

If previous movements in France had taken a mainly trade union form, the campaign around the spring 2005 referendum on the European Union (EU) draft constitution witnessed for the first time a broad political mobilisation.

Hundreds of thousands in France attended countless meetings at which arguments raged for and against the EU constitution. Televised debates reached audiences in the millions. The mood in the country was more akin to one usually generated by particularly important parliamentary or presidential elections. Many people had become convinced that their vote could put a stop to an unwanted social development.

The broader the political mobilisation became in scope, the more forcefully issues so beloved by the extreme right wing—such as immigration and xenophobia—receded into the background and social and political issues came to the fore. The "No" campaign was centred on the neo-liberal and undemocratic character of the constitution. It was directed not against "Europe," but against the anti-social and reactionary content of a draft constitution that represented the interests of big business. While the "Yes" camp called for a "strong France," the most popular slogan in the "No" camp read "For a different Europe."

Although President Jacques Chirac, the government parties, the major opposition parties and the media did everything possible to achieve a "Yes" vote, the constitution was finally rejected by a clear majority of 55 percent. The divisions between the two camps corresponded in general to the social divisions within the country. Three quarters of blue-collar workers, two thirds of white-collar workers and the majority of small farmers voted "No"; members of the middle and upper classes primarily voted "Yes."

One wing of the Socialist Party, the Communist Party and the so-called "far left" called for the constitution to be rejected. They did not do this on the basis of a socialist programme; their agitation was exclusively directed against so-called "neo-liberalism." They encouraged the illusion that an alternative policy was possible within the framework of the existing capitalist conditions, that through pressure from below ruling circles could be forced to return to the social reformism of the 1970s.

The purpose of this campaign was to prepare the return of a bourgeois left government, should the right wing prove unable to cling onto power. During the campaign, the various "No" currents came closer together and refrained from any mutual criticism.

Characteristically, Laurent Fabius, one of the most right-wing leaders of the Socialist Party, joined the "No" camp. Fabius had clearly taken a leaf from the book of his mentor, François Mitterrand. In the 1960s, Mitterrand, a bourgeois politician who had begun his political career under the wartime Vichy regime, becoming interior minister at the high point of the Algeria war, liked to present himself as a "left." He established the Socialist Party as a mechanism permitting the ruling class to deflect and neutralise the militant movement of the working class at that time.

In the referendum campaign, the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Communist League—LCR) played an important role in leading the working class into a political dead end. The LCR fully integrated itself into the bourgeois "No" camp, and has since sought to unite that camp's individual components into an all-embracing political movement.

During the referendum period the LCR's publications no longer differentiated between the working class and bourgeoisie, but only between the "Yes camp" and the "No camp." Its models for building such a catch-all movement include the Workers Party in Brazil, where the party forms the government and occupies the presidency to the satisfaction of international financial capital, and Rifondazione Comunista (Refounded Communists) in Italy, which has recently entered the government of Romano Prodi, the former president of the EU Commission.

The youth revolts of autumn 2005

At the end of October 2005, the deaths of two young people who died while trying to flee the police unleashed a revolt in working class suburban neighbourhoods that lasted for weeks. This clearly revealed the scale of social tensions in France. The unrest, which often took destructive forms, was a reaction to rampant poverty, youth unemployment and discrimination in the suburbs, as well as against the racist overtones of the law-and-order campaign of Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy. The latter insultingly called the protesting youth "trash" and "scum," who needed to be cleansed from the streets.

The "official left" (Socialist Party and Communist Party) and the petty bourgeois left groups bear direct responsibility for the untenable conditions in the suburbs and for the destructive form the revolt took. Not

only had these run-down districts in most cases been governed by Socialist or Communist Party mayors for years, the refusal of these parties to challenge the political status quo was also responsible for the disorientation of the youth. The reformists and Stalinists have abandoned the poorest layers of the youth who, for lack of a perspective, expressed their rage partly in the form of senseless violence.

The government answered the revolt by imposing a state of emergency, relying on a law passed in 1955 during the Algerian war that had previously never been employed in mainland France. This move hardly encountered any opposition from the trade unions and the left-wing parties.

In particular, Lutte ouvrière (Workers Struggle—LO) showed its political closeness to the state, denouncing the youth revolt at a national party congress that was held shortly afterward.

Some 97 percent of the delegates supported a resolution that described the events as an outbreak of rage, but one that was directed against their fellow citizens. The youth did not even differentiate between the police and the fire brigade, lamented the LO. The former undertook "actions that are directed against their own interests and which set the opinions of the population against them." For this reason, Lutte ouvrière denied they were even part of the working class: "Their actions show that the youth do not even have the consciousness that distinguishes the workers' movement in the eyes of Marxists."

This reaction to an elementary social explosion reveals a great deal about the mentality of this grouping, which has embedded itself for decades within the deeply conservative trade union milieu. It is only a small step from their pronouncement that the youth do not belong to the working class to open support for the deployment of the police against them.

Only 3 percent of the delegates opposed this view and supported a minority resolution that recognised the social roots of the revolt. According to this resolution, a section of the proletarian youth took to the streets, and only an offensive by the working class could provide them with an orientation. However, this offensive was not defined politically, but presented purely in trade union terms.

The movement against the "First Job Contract"

The movement against the "First Job Contract" (*Contrat première embauche*—CPE) in France was, in many respects, the culmination of the past 10 years of social and political development. The movement was broader and more comprehensive than those that preceded it and was more independent of the old organisations.

Its principal elements comprised school pupils and university students, who set the tone on demonstrations. Many participants were under 20 years old. Many had not been born when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, and were only infants during the mass strike movement of 1995-1996.

Venomous press commentaries tried to depict these pupils and students as "privileged youth" and counterposed them to the "casseurs" [those who break things], the rioters, the supposed embodiment of the more impoverished social layers. But this is a slander.

The "casseurs"—organised gangs of thugs who also attacked the demonstrators—were a peripheral phenomenon, and clearly played a role as state provocateurs. And today's university and high school students embody far broader social layers than the students of 1968, when the percentage of college graduates was relatively low. On demonstrations, the high portion of sons and daughters of immigrant and working class families could not be overlooked.

The movement brought to the surface a deep opposition to everything that in the official language of European politics is usually described as the "reform" and "modernisation" of the welfare state. The CPE came to symbolise a social orientation widely and fiercely rejected.

The first thing that became apparent on demonstrations was the boundless imagination with which the abbreviation CPE was used. There were innumerable hand-painted placards with just as many variations: "*Contrat poubelle embauche*"—garbage can contract; "*Contrat premières emmerdes*"—contract of the first vomit; "*Villepin cherche pigeon à exploiter*"—[Prime Minister Dominique de] Villepin seeks a pigeon to exploit; etc.

The message was unmistakable. The demonstrators rejected a policy judged by the entire political elite of Europe to be long overdue and indispensable: the transformation of working people into a homogeneous mass to be exploited by big business through the extensive flexibilisation of labour, without rights or against its will. Often, the term "précarité" was used, which means uncertainty or insecure conditions.

The support in the general population for the protests was overwhelming, as many opinion polls confirmed. Not only is the older generation affected by *précarité*, many are also parents and worry about the future of their children. In addition, many parents were active as young people in the 1968 protests.

The government was taken by surprise by the movement. The "law concerning equal opportunities" was enacted by Prime Minister de Villepin as a reaction to the revolt in the suburbs the previous autumn. It contains measures recommended by the European Commission that have been carried out in neighbouring countries: the dismantling of workers' rights, such as protection against dismissal, the lowering of the minimum age for certain forms of the work, etc.

Such measures are also supported by the reformist parties and the trade unions. An almost identical law, the *Contrat nouvelle embauche* (CNE—New Employment Contract), which applies to employees of all ages in enterprises with less than 20 staff, was enacted last year without evoking any protest from the trade unions.

Although the unions took part in the movement against the CPE, their aim from the outset was to throttle and keep it under control. On demonstrations, they played only a subordinate role. Strikes were organised in such a way that their effect remained limited. Thus, on March 28, despite an official strike by metro workers, it was quite easy to travel via the metro to the starting point of the big demonstration in Paris.

The role of the student coordinating committee was interesting. Some 300 to 450 delegates, elected at the striking universities, met each weekend in a different city. They held discussions lasting hours, sometimes talking right through the night, and adopted resolutions that were generally far to the left of the trade unions and political organisations, including the so-called "far left." They turned to the trade unions with the demand for a general strike and called on students to go directly to the workers in the factories.

When President Chirac delivered a television speech at the end of March proposing some slight changes to the CPE law, the student coordinating committee categorically rejected this. It decided to support "every demand formulated by workers in their struggle, like the call for wage increases and secure jobs" and called a day of action "to mobilise workplaces together with the workers and their local trade unions by means of flyers, blockades, factory and office occupations." In addition, it demanded the resignation of the government.

It would surely be wrong to idealise the student coordinating committee. The official student organisations, such as UNEF (Union Nationale des étudiants de France—National Students Union of France), members of various political organisations and anarchist elements were also represented at the meetings of the coordinating committee. Nevertheless, the work of the student coordinating committee is an indication that the

control of the old organisations is diminishing and that there exists a keen search for a new political orientation.

The building of a new revolutionary leadership

In my introduction, I already indicated that the central lesson of the French social movements of the past 10 years is the necessity for the working class to break from the bankrupt union and reformist apparatuses, and to develop an independent political movement.

This task is posed today in a much more direct form than a decade ago. The trade unions, the left-wing bourgeois parties and their petty bourgeois radical appendages (LCR, LO) have moved so far to the right that there exists very little left standing between the revolutionary socialist perspective of the International Committee the Fourth International and the political establishment. The degeneration of the petty bourgeois "lefts" has reached a new stage. They have become a component of the bourgeois apparatus of rule.

This is also an international phenomenon.

In Italy, most of the "left" petty bourgeois organisations, including the LCR's sister organisation, have dissolved themselves into Rifondazione Comunista, which is part of Romano Prodi's electoral alliance, Unione.

The example of Italy exposes the real significance of their rejection of "neo-liberalism." More than any other politician, Prodi, who headed the European Commission for five years, embodies the neo-liberal course of the European Union, which was so decisively rejected in the French referendum. An important component of Unione is the Margherita party, which collaborates within the EU with Germany's Free Democrats and the French UDF (Union pour la démocratie française—Union for French Democracy), both vehement defenders of the free market. But this does not prevent the petty bourgeois radicals in Italy from integrating themselves inside Prodi's alliance.

In Germany, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) has formed a grand coalition with the Christian Democrats. In close cooperation with the trade unions, the SPD has taken on the task of destroying all previous social gains. Under these conditions, it is simply impossible to differentiate between the SPD and the Christian Democrats. The claim that the SPD somehow stands to the left of the Christian Democrats is clearly absurd. The "Left Party" in Germany was formed as a reaction to this, and now includes nearly all the petty bourgeois "left" organisations.

The Left Party is an amalgam of dissatisfied social democrats and trade union bureaucrats from the west with the residue of the old Stalinist state party from the east, the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS). Like Rifondazione in Italy, the Left Party in Germany unreservedly defends the bourgeois order. To its own dismay, this was clearly visible even before it got off the ground. The Berlin state legislature, where the PDS has been in a coalition government for four years with the SPD, plays a pioneering role nationwide in dismantling jobs and cutting wages in the public sector, pushing through cuts in education and privatising public housing.

Wherever one looks it is clear: Such left catch-all movements, consisting of disgruntled reformists, trade union bureaucrats, post-Stalinists and petty bourgeois radicals do not provide an answer to the crisis of capitalist society. They are a mechanism for defending the existing order in its advanced stage of crisis.

Meanwhile, right-wing bourgeois circles are making their own political preparations.

The conflict within the Gaullist UMP (Union pour un mouvement populaire—Union for a Popular Movement) between Prime Minister Villepin and Interior Minister Sarkozy is more than simply a personal rivalry between two ambitious men. The ruling class is seeking to develop authoritarian forms of rule. Sarkozy combines traditional Gaullism with elements characteristic of right-wing regimes: law-and-order rhetoric, harsh actions against immigrants, encouraging ethnic and religious extremes.

He advocates a political line that combines a strong, authoritarian state with a nationalist economic and foreign policy, as well as corporatist elements. In contrast to Villepin, who cold-shouldered the trade unions during the movement against the CPE, Sarkozy endeavoured to include it, and finally succeeded in this. It was under his leadership that the agreement was negotiated that finally brought the movement to an end.

Sarkozy strives to integrate the trade unions and other social organisations into the state, and the former have eagerly followed his lure.

Under these circumstances, it is the responsibility of the International Committee and the *World Socialist Web Site* to establish the basis for an independent political movement of the working class and the building of a new revolutionary party.

Militancy and the pressure of the streets, even if they force the government into tactical concessions, cannot spontaneously resolve the fundamental problems of political orientation and leadership. The precondition for this is the raising and developing of political consciousness. The working class must understand its interests are incompatible with the entire bourgeois order. It must learn to look beyond the national borders and unite with its class brothers and sisters internationally. And it must organise itself independently of the bourgeois parties and their primary and secondary agencies.

This work of political education is at the centre of the efforts of the *World Socialist Web Site*. Our work in France over the last 10 years—the hundreds of articles that have appeared in our party press and, from 1998 onward, in the WSWS—represents an enormous wealth of experience, a multiplicity of political analyses and evaluation, which contributes to an understanding of the political tasks. It is on this basis that a section of the International Committee must now be developed in France.