

French workers oppose “tax” on medical treatment

Our reporters
18 October 2007

Around 15,000 people marched from Montparnasse in Paris on October 13 in what was the first mobilisation of workers against the cuts in social security spending announced by President Nicolas Sarkozy’s government.

The protest was called by the National Federation of Handicapped and Work Injury Victims (Fnath) and the National Association for the Defence of Asbestos Victims (ANDEVA). An additional 100,000 sufferers are expected to die in the next 20 years as a result of employer and government criminal negligence. It was also supported by the Communist Party-led CGT (General Confederation of Labour).

Apart from large CGT contingents, several radical groups also took part in this poorly publicised event. Few young non-aligned or non-union members participated. Another element in the limited attendance was the blanket coverage in the media of the Rugby World Cup being held in France. The unions made no attempt to counter this attempt to drown out the class struggle with chauvinism and have given guarantees that matches would not be disrupted by industrial action.

World Socialist Web Site supporters handed out thousands of copies of the statement, “France: The struggle against Sarkozy requires a new political perspective”.

The demonstration was specifically protesting against the introduction of a fixed charge of 50 centimes for every item of medicine prescribed by doctors. This will come into force in 2008 and follows reductions of refunding for certain medicines and fixed charges for medical consultations over the last period. As yet, these charges are limited to 50 euros per year per person, but they open the door to far greater burdens for the sick.

These charges hit those workers hardest who depend

on the social security cover for what was a relatively universal access to free medical treatment. However, the biggest victims are those with long-term illnesses, those with diseases and the handicapped. The Federation of Accident Victims summed up the 50 centimes charge as “a tax on being ill.”

The government intends to reduce the social security deficit, forecasted at 12 billion euros for 2007 (8.7 billion euros in 2006), come what may. The CNAM (the government national insurance organisation for medical reimbursements), the medical arm of the social security system, opposes the measures: “They don’t correspond to any logic of making people more responsible, as the patients are not the ones who prescribe medicines; in the long run they will push patients to abandon medical treatment.”

The anger of workers at the tax on healthcare has been reinforced by the provocative tax breaks for the rich in Sarkozy’s July budget worth 15 billion euros. This insult has been further compounded by the insider trading scandal at Airbus where close friends of Sarkozy like Arnaud Lagardère offloaded Airbus shares to the government to make a 90 million euro profit. As many as 1,200 top managers at EADS (the Airbus parent company) are suspected of being in on the deal.

Trade union support for the protest against these inroads into public health insurance was limited. The trade unions in the transport system are concentrating all of their attention on the October 18 one-day protest strike for the defence of the *régimes spéciaux*, the pension schemes for 1.9 million railway, urban transport, gas and electricity workers and others. The protest is designed to let off the considerable head of steam building up against the entire programme of the Sarkozy government rather than to mobilise the full power of the working class to defeat it.

All the signs are that the October 18 strike will virtually shut down public transport on that day: it will be massively supported by transport workers on national and international systems as well as regional and municipal networks.

This separation of issues by the trade unions is part of a strategy of preventing a united working class resistance to the government and its attacks on democratic and social rights. In contrast, the government's intransigence could not be clearer: Sarkozy "is in a mindset of going to the end...there will be no retreat possible," announced Claude Guéant, his private secretary at the Elysée palace. While in 1995 the Alain Juppé conservative government was shipwrecked by mass resistance to the reform of pensions, Guéant insisted that "France has changed, and we are determined."

The ineffectiveness of one-day strikes and the desire to prevent any serious confrontation with the Sarkozy government have left the trade unions merely appealing for more talks. Bernard Thibault, the CGT leader, temporises on action, saying that "there will quite likely be other strikes after October 18," while complaining of a government that has "a tendency to decide reform...and after, to ask us to go along with it."

For its part, the government is trying to pass off the prescription charges as a humanitarian gesture to finance research into Alzheimer's disease and cancer treatments. Minister of Health Roselyne Bachelot explained the cuts in medicine refunds as "an effort for certain families, which is true, but it's a moderate effort which allows us to meet new needs." The cynicism of robbing the population of healthcare to pay for urgent medical research elsewhere is a contributing factor in the rapid erosion of the government's popularity. Polls reveal 70 percent of the population are opposed to the health reforms.

At the rally, CGT stewards asked WSWS supporters not to go to the points where their contingents were gathering. They objected to the WSWS statement's exposure of the unions' complicity with Sarkozy's social programme and tried to deny accusations of "union collaboration with Sarkozy." The WSWS statement was the only leaflet handed out at the Paris protest and that put forward the political issues facing the working class, proposing an independent movement of the working class based on socialist and

internationalist principles.

Marina from Argentina identified the Sarkozy regime as having "the same signs of governing as the neo-fascists. What makes me react is that this happens in a country like France with political and cultural traditions. The government will retreat perhaps, but only if the mobilisation is great and the unions organise it. The unions must absolutely not collaborate with the government. Once that starts, the whole thing is lost. The working class is the unemployed, service workers, etc. Solidarity must reign. In Argentina, there is a lot of wealth—we are exploited by both a part of the country's population and the rest of the world. We must stop all wars, civil inter-ethnic and religious."

Christiana expressed the "hope that the government will retreat... One thing is clear, which is to resist."

A technician at Montparnasse said, "All the elements of Sarkozy's program must radicalise us. Demonstrations are effective. There will be others. The unions must not collaborate with the government. We must not be in competition: the workers are one class, an international class; we must be in solidarity or we won't win. We must fight against imperialism. Fighting internationally is a historical necessity. We must build an international party, for which it will take time."



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