

France: The struggle against Sarkozy requires a new political perspective

World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board
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The following statement will be distributed as a leaflet by supporters of the World Socialist Web Site at a demonstration in Paris on October 13 and at strike meetings and rallies on October 18 protesting President Sarkozy's social cuts.

The *World Socialist Web Site* salutes workers participating in the October 13 demonstration and October 18 strike called against President Nicolas Sarkozy's vast social cuts. This movement has a critical role to play, as the first organised expression of workers' opposition to the reactionary policies of the new government.

Despite the temporary aura of popularity created around Sarkozy by the corporate media, the promotion of social inequality embodied in these policies has already been repeatedly rejected by the French people. None of the currently announced measures—the ending of “special regime” pensions enjoyed by 1.6 million public sector workers, rewriting labour codes to facilitate hiring and firing, tax disincentives and the penalising of early retirement, to name only a few—are new.

Similar pension cuts proposed by Alain Juppé in 1995 and Jean-Pierre Raffarin and François Fillon in 2003 and Dominique de Villepin's First Job Contract of 2006 touched off millions-strong demonstrations that won broad popular support.

In Sarkozy, however, workers face a very different sort of political adversary, far to the right of his predecessors. He makes no secret of his determination to carry out his policies despite all opposition, in the name of a “rupture” with the previous social order.

To this end, Sarkozy is recruiting representatives of the Socialist Party into his government and collaborating with the trade union leaders in his attacks on the working class, while simultaneously courting the far right. Soon after his election, he extended the first invitation to neo-fascist National Front (FN) leader Jean-Marie Le Pen to the Elysée presidential palace. His Ministry for Immigration and National Identity has begun large-scale round-ups of thousands of immigrants and now forces foreigners seeking to rejoin relatives in France to submit to DNA testing—a measure violating basic human rights.

His ruthless insistence on law-and-order at home is matched by his chauvinism and militaristic foreign policy.

Sarkozy has swung behind the pyromaniacs of the Bush administration in their drive to extend the war in the Middle East. He declared in an August 28 foreign policy speech that if negotiations over Iran's nuclear programme failed, the alternatives would be either “an Iranian bomb or the bombing of Iran,” calling

the first an “unacceptable risk.” On September 16, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner confirmed that the French armed forces are planning attacks on Iran, saying it is “normal to make plans.”

The emergence of a regime as right-wing as that of Sarkozy cannot be explained simply as the product of personal quirks of ruling politicians. It is the collective response of the French bourgeoisie to massive changes destabilising world capitalism — the emergence of cheap-labour manufacturing powerhouses in the developing world, and the debacle confronting US imperialism in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the wider Middle East.

In traditional sectors, France is losing market share to European competitors, particularly Germany. The government Economic Analysis Council (CAE) notes “the unfavourable evolution of wage costs in France (particularly in relation to Germany)” and that “Germany's improved competitiveness has been accompanied by a spectacular gain in business profit margins” and “accelerated productive investment.” In short, the German bourgeoisie's successful attacks on German workers' living standards over the past several years give it a competitive edge.

As a consequence, all of the social gains won by the French working class—social programmes funded by a progressive tax structure, affordable medical care, wage raises, etc.—must be rolled back to re-establish French industry's competitive position on the world market. Smaller, less efficient firms must go under and be replaced by direct links between major French firms and the world division of labour.

As the French bourgeoisie orients itself further towards the world market, however, it is confronted with the geopolitical effects of US militarism's failed adventure in Iraq. French imperialism doubts its long-term ability to secure favourable terms for deliveries of developing countries' goods, notably Middle Eastern oil.

Le Figaro editorialises that the oil industry's “balance of forces promises to be increasingly unfavourable” to “democracies like France.” Sarkozy has responded to such concerns by calling for a European military build-up and lining up with the US imperialism in the Middle East.

The issues of social spending, jobs, and war may have been somewhat separate in the minds of many people striking against Chirac's ministers in 2003 and 2006. Today, the struggle against Sarkozy's cuts integrates these issues into a single whole. To war and the reorganisation of the economy based on the profit

principle—with plant closings, mass redundancies, pension cuts, and rising health and education prices—workers must counterpose the international solidarity of the working class and an international planned economy producing to meet humanity’s social needs.

It need hardly be pointed out that the current leaders of the French left do not stand for such a perspective. The Socialist Party, the main party of the French bourgeois left over the last 40 years, now sees its former top cadres—including Dominique Strauss-Kahn, Jack Lang, and most prominently current Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner—accept official positions from Sarkozy. They offer Sarkozy ideal political cover; who else, besides a long-time humanitarian “socialist” like Kouchner, could avoid popular revulsion as he announced plans for a Middle East bloodbath?

The leaders of the main trade unions have regular meetings with Sarkozy to discuss the social cuts. After one such meeting in early September, with CFDT leader François Chérèque at the exclusive Violon d’Ingres restaurant, Sarkozy commented that Chérèque “understands that France needs a powerful movement of reform.”

In line with its reformist politics, the trade union leadership views the destruction of the French working class’s social gains as unavoidable. It calls strikes only when it feels it must do so and openly announces its fundamental agreement with Sarkozy’s goals. Thus the CGT’s Jean Christophe Le Duigou indicated his willingness to discuss reforms of the “special regime” pensions, but only “one enterprise at a time, one industry at a time.” The goal is to avoid a collective mobilisation of workers on a political platform based on total hostility to Sarkozy’s austerity plans.

In keeping with this objective—and in line with their previous sell-outs of the struggles of 1995, 2003, and 2006—the unions did not organise a strike until a month after Sarkozy’s major speech on pension cuts, on September 18. The goal, as in the strikes of 2003 and 2006, is to wear workers down politically with a series of widely spaced, ineffectual strikes. In between the strikes, the regressive legislation will already have passed.

The political bankruptcy of the reformist parties and trade unions is an international phenomenon. The development of globalised production under capitalism has destroyed the basis for reformist policies based on national agreements with the employers and the state. The trade union leaders have thus been transformed into instruments of management and the state and become a privileged social layer completely alienated from the working class.

At the same time as French railwaymen are fighting to defend their pensions and jobs against the threat of privatisation, the German train drivers are striking to defend their living standards in the teeth of attempts to restrict their right to strike through court injunctions and the sabotage of their struggle by the major railway trade unions.

In America, the car workers’ union UAW ended a brief strike that shut down General Motors and negotiated a deal, which cuts wages for new hires by half, drastically reduces medical insurance and pension rights and makes the union bureaucracy managers of the workers’ pension fund and one of the biggest players on Wall Street.

It is necessary for workers to draw the lessons of the bankruptcy of the reformist organisations. The coming to power of Sarkozy

after 10 years of intensive social struggles was only possible due to the continuous betrayals of the Socialist and the Communist party and the trade unions. A political and organisational break with these organisations is the indispensable premise for a successful struggle against Sarkozy’s attacks.

No confidence can be placed in this current leadership and those who try to politically ally themselves with it. Instead, strikers must fight for the largest possible extension of the strike, organise strike committees and general assemblies in their workplaces, independent of the unions, and carry out an uncompromising political exposure of the bureaucracies’ collaboration with Sarkozy’s anti-social policies.

To successfully prosecute such a struggle, workers must form their own independent political party on the basis of socialist internationalism to co-ordinate their actions. In this epoch of spiralling war and social austerity, they must link up with workers from Europe and the rest of the world and revive the culture of socialist internationalism and workers’ solidarity that underlay the great revolutionary struggles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is the perspective fought for by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

The International Committee of the Fourth International aims to build a society that places the needs of the population above the profit interests of big business. We recognise that the interests of the large majority of the population are incompatible with a social system based on the private ownership of the means of production and the national state, and that the social crisis cannot be overcome within the framework of existing capitalist conditions. Not a single social problem can be solved within the limits of a national framework.

This means building sections of the ICFI in France and throughout Europe.



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