

Rail workers, public service employees and students demonstrate in Amiens, France

Our reporters

22 November 2007

Up to 700,000 people took to the streets on Tuesday in 150 towns and cities all over France in opposition to the austerity policies of President Nicolas Sarkozy's administration. Often led by contingents of railway workers, who were in the seventh day of their strike to defend their pension rights, massive contingents of teachers and student and high school youth made up the bulk of the marchers.

In addition to the students and railway workers, there were also important delegations of, postal, hospital, municipal, gas and electric company workers, accompanied by small contingents from factories and the private sector.

Teams of WSWs supporters distributed thousands of leaflets of the WSWs editorial board statement "French workers need a new political strategy" in Paris, Amiens, Strasbourg and Nancy.

A WSWs reporting team covered the Amiens demonstration and interviewed those participating. An estimated 8,000 protesters marched through the Amiens town centre. Railway and other state enterprises were at the head with banners and stickers of the *Confédération générale du travail* (General Confederation of Labour—CGT) and *Solidaire Unitaire et Démocratique* (Solidarity, Unity, Democracy—SUD-RAIL), with teachers and university and high school students providing well over a quarter of the numbers.

The lead banner read: "For jobs, for purchasing power, for quality public services."

Delegations of workers from local factories in disputes over jobs, restructuring and relocation plans could be seen. These included workers from Valeo, Goodyear, and Airbus. Although many other trade union banners and flags were in evidence, many demonstrators were marching with groups of friends and colleagues independently of the trade unions.

There was a Communist Party group of about 20 and a handful of students wearing MJS (Young Socialist movement, the youth wing of the Socialist Party) stickers. Members of the *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (LCR), *Lutte Ouvrière* (LO), *Parti des Travailleurs* (PT) and the Socialist Party marched without political identification and gave out trade union or student general assembly leaflets. They did not sell their papers.

Apart from the WSWs statement, there were no political leaflets except one from the MJS calling for the abrogation of the LRU University Autonomy Law, which the students are fighting, and for opposition to the repression being carried out against immigrants. It did not point out that the Socialist Party supports the LRU and has an immigration policy that is substantially similar to that of Sarkozy.

There was a handmade banner calling for the convergence of the struggles reading: Education - Culture - Health - Social Rights: Same struggle". This is clearly directed against the divisive position of union leaders who seek to pressure the government on issues perceived to particularly affect specific sections of workers. For example, a CFDT (Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail) union militant is quoted in Wednesday's *Libération* saying of the railway workers: "We don't have the same demands: for us it's the cost of living, raising salaries, the non-replacement of one out of three public service workers. If it's all merged, everyone will lose out: the message won't get a hearing or the government will make a selection."

WSWS reporters raised this issue in discussion with two school teachers, Stephanie and Juliette, marching together, neither of whom are unionised. Stephanie told the WSWs that she was marching for wage rises

against the cost of living but “the main issue for me is the cuts in jobs. We are losing auxiliary staff,” she said. “We had a young auxiliary looking after our computer room. Now it is empty, we do not have the skills or the time to sort it out. One thing is certain, the cuts in staff will hit the deprived families the hardest.”

Stephanie was not sure whether the day of protest would be enough to stop the cut backs in staff, but she strongly opposed the bringing together of the special regime struggle of the rail workers with the issues facing civil service workers (including those working at hospitals, in education, in municipal services, in the post, etc).

“When we were fighting to defend our pensions in 2003, the railway workers didn’t come out on strike with us,” she said. This reporter pointed out that it was the constant holding back of the CGT and FO union leadership that had prevented a united struggle in 2003. This had, in fact, paved the way for the isolation of the railway workers today. Stephanie was still dubious.

Her friend Juliette did not agree with her. “If the struggles are not combined, I don’t think we can push Sarkozy back. If he wins this one I can’t see where he will stop on all the other issues.”

A group of high school pupils from the Robert de Luzarches Lycée told the WSWS that they opposed the University Autonomy Law and all of Sarkozy’s policies. One pointed out: “His policies only serve the rich. We need a proper left to get rid of him.”

Lionel, a hospital worker said: “We’re here on the issue of the cost of living and staffing.” Suzel added: “Our deputies have just voted a salary rise to Sarkozy. We have to face the fact that our salary scales are not keeping up with economic realities. It’s hard to live on 1,500 euros a month when you’re starting your working life.”

Pauline Catty, a history student said: “The time has come to link up all the issues”.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact