For a socialist and internationalist perspective to fight French President Sarkozy's social cuts

The editorial board
13 November 2007

The following is a translation of a statement being distributed to French workers and students participating in strikes and demonstrations against the social attacks by the Gaullist government headed by President Nicolas Sarkozy.

The central question facing workers and students striking and demonstrating on November 13 and 14 and throughout the month against President Nicolas Sarkozy's attacks on pensions and basic social rights is that of political perspective. The powerful strike wave that began last month has broken through the media adulation of Sarkozy to reveal the true attitude of the French working class towards his political program.

Striking transport workers and gas and electricity workers are being joined by teachers, hospital workers, local government workers, postal and telecommunications employees and private sector workers, as well as students fighting university "reforms" leading to the privatisation of the universities—all in struggle against deteriorating living standards, the undermining of job security and a growing assault on social and democratic rights.

Resolute hostility to Sarkozy's plans will not suffice, however, to guarantee workers' pensions, jobs and living standards, and the access of young people to decent schools and a university education.

It is necessary to issue a warning: There are many signs that Sarkozy is out to inflict a decisive defeat on the working class. Speaking in Washington, Sarkozy declared: "I will hold firm. France has backed down too much in the past. She cannot back down any more."

Eric Le Boucher of *Le Monde* compared Sarkozy's stance to the anti-working class offensive of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and wrote that business circles "know that the president has no choice. If he yields, he'll be Chiraquised."

Sarkozy will rely on the cowardice and treachery of the trade union leaders and official "left" parties to isolate and undermine the struggle. No confidence should be placed in these bankrupt organizations.

Jobs, pensions and education can be defended only through the full industrial and political mobilisation of the entire working class aimed at bringing down the Gaullist government and replacing it with a genuinely democratic workers' government. This means taking up the struggle to build a new mass party of the working class based on a socialist and internationalist program.

Over the past decade, several mass strike waves have erupted in France—against pension cuts in 1995 and 2003, and in 2006 against labour law "reforms" making it easier to fire new employees. Whatever the partial successes in blunting the worst of the cuts, the result each time has been deeper inroads against the social conditions of working people, leading to the installation of a new government with more draconian plans for attacking social benefits and living standards.

In Sarkozy, the working class faces a resolute enemy, who seeks to scrap all of the social gains workers have realized since the end of World War II. He views the abolition of the *régime spéciaux* pensions of transport workers as a necessary prelude to massive cuts in pension rights for the entire population.

In his September 18 "Social Contract" speech, Sarkozy said: "If an engineering worker or a teacher sees his annuities go from 37.5 to 40 and tomorrow to 41 years, how can you explain to him that a worker in a big public enterprise should stay at 37.5, or even less?"

Further reactionary measures—rewriting labour laws to facilitate hiring and firing, user fees for access to medical care, job reductions in the public sector, etc.—are in preparation.

The trade union tops are reprising their roles from 1995, 2003, and 2006—trying to force the strikers into widely spaced protests to exhaust and demoralize them. Having organized a strike on October 18—a full month after Sarkozy's provocative social policy speech—the main union federations, led by the CGT (General Confederation of Labour, dominated by the Stalinist Communist Party), boycotted well-attended strikers' meetings calling for continuation of the strikes. CGT chief Bernard Thibault went so far as to announce that Sarkozy "has a legitimacy that no one contests." At an October 31 meeting, the union leaders postponed further strike action until November 13.

The union officials' nightmare is a political struggle by the working class that would cut across their attempts to negotiate rotten agreements on social cuts with Sarkozy. They seek to divide the workers and prevent the various strikes against Sarkozy's government—railwaymen and electricians striking against *régime spéciaux* cuts, Air France workers on wages, Airbus workers against the loss of jobs and conditions, public sector workers striking against job cuts, students fighting the university autonomy law, etc.—from coalescing into a unified movement against

© World Socialist Web Site

Sarkozy's policies.

As CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour, aligned to the Socialist Party) chief François Chérèque said, "If there is a mixture of movements, between *the régimes spéciaux*, the public sector workers and God knows what else, we reserve the right to pull out [of the strike movement]."

In fact, any serious struggle against Sarkozy's social program must combine all of the current strikes and protests into a unified movement directly challenging Sarkozy's rule. His much-vaunted "legitimacy" is a fraud, based as it is on an election won by default, against a Socialist Party (PS) candidate—Ségolène Royal—who proposed right-wing policies virtually indistinguishable from those of Sarkozy. As the strikes of 1995, 2003 and 2006 have repeatedly shown, there is mass popular opposition to such policies, whose main constituency is found among the ultra-wealthy.

Such a struggle necessitates an independent political party of the working class to coordinate and sustain the fight against the anti-social policies of the ruling class. This is the task to which the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International dedicate themselves. We stand for:

1. The political independence of the working class

A new party must completely reject the political influence of the establishment left—the Socialist and Communist parties and the trade unions—and of those who try to politically ally themselves with it. These parties' right-wing policies, notably the string of privatizations carried out under the last Socialist Party (PS) government of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, in the Plural Left coalition with the Communist Party and the Greens**,** played a key role in allowing the French right to return to power in 2002 and mount an ever more vigorous series of social assaults. As most recently demonstrated by the PS's 2007 presidential campaign, the PS is for all practical purposes in full agreement with Sarkozy's platform.

A political and organizational break with these political and trade union organisations, including an uncompromising political exposure of their collaboration with Sarkozy's politics, is the indispensable premise for a successful struggle against Sarkozy's attacks.

2. A socialist reorganization of society and the economy

Sarkozy's destruction of pension and other social rights, while he grants enormous financial concessions to the big employers, expresses the destructive logic of the increasingly uncontrollable accumulation of private wealth in the hands of major investors and CEOs. While the Bettencourts, Dassaults and Pinaults amass multibillion-euro fortunes and Sarkozy passes tax breaks for top income brackets, workers are told their modest pensions are too expensive for the public coffers.

Instead of allowing the government to dictate social austerity in the workplace, workers must subordinate the strategic heights of the economy to social control. By placing the largest corporations—banks, energy firms, major manufacturers, telecommunications companies and transportation—under public ownership and democratic control, workers would make possible the rational and planned development of economic activity.

3. Internationalism

The national bourgeoisies of Europe and the world compete with each other for investments and capital by seeking the largest possible profit rates and the most ruthless reduction in the living standards of the working class. The working class, however, is a truly international class: its interests are negatively impacted with each defeat it suffers anywhere in the world, as the bourgeoisie of each country bids its wages and living standards down in an effort to remain competitive with the enterprises enjoying the cheapest labour.

At the same time as French rail workers mount strikes to defend their pension rights, German train drivers are conducting a bitter strike battle against low salaries and privatization, over the opposition of the most powerful German trade unions. British postal workers are mounting wildcat strikes against privatization plans. The conditions are emerging for a truly pan-European movement against privatization and social austerity.

Under the Sarkozy government, which has sought to make immigrants scapegoats for social tensions in France, internationalism implies the resolute defence of living standards and rights for all sections of the working class, including the foreign-born, and uncompromising opposition to all forms of chauvinism, racism and backwardness.

4. Opposition to militarism and war

It is no coincidence that Sarkozy has swung behind the Bush administration's foreign policy and its plans for a wider Middle East war at the same time as he mounts an aggressive assault on French workers' living standards. Both developments indicate the increasingly desperate calculations of a French ruling elite seeking to seize a larger share of the profits available worldwide.

Workers must oppose the criminal plans of the various national factions of the bourgeoisie for a war that threatens to become a global conflict between the major powers—over oil and strategic advantage in the broader Middle East and, indeed, globally. Militarism is used as a pretext for cutting social spending and living standards to offset rising arms costs, even as it produces wars with terrible human losses and a horrifying moral and cultural regression.

There are no easy answers or short cuts in the struggle against Sarkozy's social attacks. A political leadership must be built that can coordinate the strikes, demonstrations and political activities of the working class against the machinations of the entire ruling elite and all of its allies and political representatives, and provide a revolutionary socialist program that corresponds to the needs of working people. We call on French workers and students to read the *World Socialist Web Site* and join the International Committee of the Fourth International in fighting to build such a party.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site