France: Sarkozy seeks confrontation with the working class

Peter Schwarz in Paris
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France faces a confrontation between its right-wing president, Nicolas Sarkozy, and the working class which could develop into one of the bitterest social clashes in recent French history.

On Tuesday evening employees of the national railway company (SNCF) stopped work. Seven of the eight trade unions represented in the SNCF have called an unlimited strike, the course of which is to be decided on by the unions on a daily basis. On Wednesday the staff of the Paris Metro, as well as gas and electricity workers, are to join the strikers.

A week from Wednesday, November 21, will see a day of action by public service workers to defend wages, and on November 29 employees of the French judicial system plan to demonstrate against a planned judicial "reform." French students have already been protesting in recent days against a "reform" of the universities, and several universities have been taken over by protesting students.

At the heart of the various disputes are the special pensions paid to state-employed workers. The so-called "régimes spéciaux" have their roots in the 19th century and allow state employees engaged in particularly arduous occupations to retire at either 50 or 55. Those with 37.5 years seniority are entitled to a full pension (i.e., 75 percent of the wage level at the time of retirement).

Such régimes spéciaux exist for a variety of professions in France, although the most significant groups of workers affected are the railway workers and employees of the gas and electricity companies. In the case of French Railways, a workforce of 164,000 is complemented by a total of 300,000 pensioners.

Gas and electricity companies have a total workforce of 145,000 and an equal number of retired workers. The Metro employs 45,000 workers and has an equivalent number of retirees.

The deficit arising from the special pension schemes is drawn from the national budget and it is reckoned that the state contribution this year to the pension scheme of just the SNCF will total 2.7 billion euros.

For the French ruling elite, the abolition of such régimes spéciaux is a crucial step in cutting back all forms of social welfare—even more for political than for economic reasons.

The railway, gas and electricity workers traditionally are among the most militant layers of the French working class. When former president Jacques Chirac and his prime minister at the time, Alain Juppé, sought to eliminate the régimes spéciaux in 1995 they were met with a strike wave that paralyzed France for a period of weeks.

Juppé was obliged to make a partial retreat and Chirac never again dared to challenge the special pensions. Even when the social minister at the time (now the prime minister), François Fillon, implemented an unpopular pension reform in 2003, he made an exception for the régimes spéciaux.

Sarkozy now wants to bite the bullet. In a clear allusion to the back-down by Chirac and Juppé, he declared last Friday, "I will not do what others have done before." He called the abolition of the special pensions to be a test case for the "rupture" he had promised in the election campaign, thereby investing his entire personal prestige in carrying through such a policy.

It is highly unusual for a French president to intervene so publicly and directly into a dispute relating to domestic affairs or industrial relations. This is usually the task of the prime minister. Traditionally, this gives the president room to replace the government should the planned confrontation not go as planned.

This is not the path chosen by Sarkozy. "It's either you or me," is his message to railway workers, and he has left little room for compromise or retreat.

"Victory or the premature end of Sarkozyism. It is in these terms and with a high level of risk for himself that the president has defined the framework of the first major social conflict he confronts," wrote *Liberation*.

During a visit to Germany on Monday, Sarkozy stressed his determination to remain firm. He praised the "great reforms" carried out in Germany as a model for France, and added that now was the time to be "cold blooded."

"We were elected to change France," he said, "and we are

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carrying out these reforms, because they have to be made."

One of the closest advisors to the president, Henri Guaino, was even more explicit. "If we are incapable of carrying out this reform then we might as well just give up, because we will be unable to carry out any sort of reform," he said.

One-and-a-half years ago, Sarkozy demonstrated a degree of flexibility following mass demonstrations against the "first job contract" (CPE), but now he is utterly unyielding. At that time, he had his eye on the post of president and, according to *Le Monde*, the issue "was to get rid of his image as an uncompromising advocate of law-and-order and win support from the left... Today the calculation is completely different. Even the smallest deviation from such a symbolic project as the régimes spéciaux would seriously weaken his ability to reform the country."

The conservative *Le Figaro* newspaper noted that in France, a president wins his "true legitimacy" only by confrontation on the streets. The newspaper added: "And through victory on the streets wins (or loses) his ability to push ahead further with his reforms and put into practice the rupture he announced more than a year ago."

Le Figaro continued, "If Nicolas Sarkozy is victorious in his first attempt, when everybody forecast a dead end, the way is free to challenge many of the outdated relics of the French social model."

Thus, there is much more at stake in the dispute over the régimes spéciaux than the pensions of railway workers.

Sarkozy is able to base his offensive against the working class on two factors: the bankruptcy of the Socialist Party and the treacherous role of the trade unions. His election victory in May was primarily due to the fact that the Socialist Party had completely discredited itself with its right-wing policies. Since the election, the party has drifted even further to the right and is rent by internal divisions.

Six months after taking over as president, and in the absence of any serious opposition from within the political establishment or from the unions, Sarkozy has been able to maintain a certain degree of popularity. According to a recent poll by *Libération*,59 percent of those polled supported his stand against the régimes spéciaux.

Libération also pointed out, however, that the tide is shifting against Sarkozy. More than half of those polled declared he had failed in the spheres of employment and budgetary policy. With regard to purchasing power, 79 percent expressed criticism of the president—a clear consequence of rising inflation, which has created problems for an increasing share of the population. In total, just 54 percent expressed a positive opinion about the president—his lowest rating since the election. In September, the figure had stood at 66 percent.

The trade union leaders are aware of the fact that the dispute over the régimes spéciaux constitutes a struggle against Sarkozy and his government. This is something they wish to avoid at all costs, and all of their comments have stressed this point. They bitterly deplore the way in which the government has worked to exacerbate the conflict for political purposes, and they plead for an opportunity to sit down around the negotiating table.

In an interview with *Libération*, the leader of the Communist Party-dominated CGT (General Confederation of Labor) railway union, Didier Le Reste, declared that he "regretted this instrumentalisation for political purposes." There were "possibilities for resolving this conflict situation at a leadership level," he said, but it was necessary "to put an end to all the secretiveness and bilateral meetings" and "call a national round table."

The general secretary of the Force Ouvrière union federation, Jean Claude Mailly, stressed to *Le Monde* that his organization did not want any "a priori connection with the strike by state employees" on November 21, nor with the protests by students. "We are not an anti- Sarkozy movement with a political character," he stated. In addition, he said, there were clear differences between régimes spéciaux applying to Metro and electricity workers—meaning every company had to carry out separate negotiations.

The leader of the Socialist Party-influenced CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour), François Chérèque, went even further and threatened: "If it comes down to a combination of movements against the régimes spéciaux involving state employees and who knows what, we reserve the right to withdraw [from the strike movement]."

The trade union leaderships are gripped by panic at the prospect that the dispute over Sarkozy's "reforms" could broaden into a mass movement which could challenge the authority of the government and the president. This would inevitably lead to a political crisis and rock the entire political system upon which the power of the ruling elite is based.

But, in fact, there is no other way for workers to conduct the struggle. Sarkozy has long since transformed it into a question of power.

It is already clear that the trade unions, with the backing tacitly or openly of the Socialist Party and Communist Party, will do everything in their power to sabotage the movement as it grows in strength.

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