

French union leaders seek to strangle rail strike

Peter Schwarz, Antoine Lerougetel in Paris
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A number of commentaries in the French press on Thursday make clear that the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) is preparing a betrayal of historic proportions.

On Tuesday, on the eve of strikes by rail workers and gas and electrical employees in defence of the *régimes spéciaux*—special pensions for certain public sector employees—CGT leader Bernard Thibault asked for a discussion with French Employment Minister Xavier Bertrand in order to smooth the way for negotiations.

Since the outbreak of the strikes, which have shut down much of the country's transport system, the government of President Nicolas Sarkozy has responded to Thibault's initiative and offered the unions one month of negotiations at either an industry or factory level. The government has said that should there be no agreement after one month, it will unilaterally impose its pension "reform," i.e., major cuts in pension benefits.

Thibault's initiative is being treated by the press as a bid to effect a speedy end to the strike movement, which threatens to develop into the biggest social conflict in more than a decade. It is also being hailed as the herald of a "new social culture," in which militant strikes will be a thing of the past and the unions will cooperate "responsibly" with companies and the government.

The newspaper *Libération* points out that Thibault's initiative is unprecedented. It writes, "Never before has a general secretary of the CGT personally called the employment minister of a right-wing government, as did Bernard Thibault on Tuesday, to propose a meeting... and the beginning of negotiations while, as an indication of good will, making an important concession."

According to *Libération*, the leadership of the CGT "made a strategic choice with its opening to the government, i.e., the rejection of an 'all or nothing attitude.'"

The newspaper makes clear that Thibault's initiative has helped the government out of a fix. *Libération* writes that the team led by Sarkozy feared "that the crisis could go on for some time and the strike over the *régimes spéciaux* could coincide with the action planned by state administrators next Tuesday."

It continues: "Sarkozy's power has lost credibility with regard to economic questions. All recent polls demonstrate that the French do not expect his government to bring about any improvement in their living conditions. It was therefore necessary to prevent the current conflicts from expanding into other branches and a situation where all those dissatisfied layers of every variety took to the streets..."

Similar comments have appeared in other newspapers.

The editor-in-chief of the *Nouvel Observateur*, Jean Marcel Bouguereau, declared: "With his proposal to the government on Tuesday evening, the boss of the CGT has broken a taboo in a manner without precedent just a few hours before a major strike."

If one reads the editorials of the pro-government *Le Figaro*, one can almost hear the sound of champagne corks popping in the salons of the rich and powerful. The conservative newspaper is already celebrating the

"victory" of Sarkozy and calls it "an important stage in the development in our 'social model' and a crucial date in the history of social relations in our country—a diminution of the trade union strike culture, of the power to systematically say no and resort to the barricades." The situation provides proof, the newspaper continued, "that with will and method, one can reform France."

When it refers to "reform," this mouthpiece of big business means the dismantling of social security benefits and employees' rights and the removal of all obstacles to the unrestrained attainment of wealth by a small minority. According to a recently published social analysis, the richest ten percent of Frenchmen earn "only" 3.15 times as much as the poorest ten percent. That is less than ten years ago, when the factor was 3.35. In other countries, such as Germany and the US, the gulf between the earnings of the rich and poor is much greater.

The findings of this study seem to be belied by conditions in France, where the sharp disparities in wealth are very evident. Nevertheless, such a state of affairs is intolerable for the ruling elite. They feel handicapped in their quest for ever greater wealth by the demands made by workers, and now detect a chance to finally turn things around. This mood is shared by Sarkozy, who recently increased his own presidential salary by 172 percent and is friendly with some of the richest men in the country.

Figaro represents the views of such layers when it writes: "The French have changed. One sees the awakening of a genuine sense of responsibility instead of the simple repetition of outdated slogans—the French social model, the right to a pension, the unrestricted right to strike, free health care for all, an unchallengeable right to work. They know that one cannot evade a reality which our neighbours have already embraced."

All of the press commentaries are united in regarding the main problem for Thibault and Sarkozy to be the determined resistance of union members and strikers, who reject the capitulation being prepared by the CGT.

The CGT "must still convince its troops to follow its lead," *Libération* writes. "This is not clear in advance under conditions where a political culture prevailed for many decades over union realism."

Le Figaro declares: "To accept the negotiations proposed by the government at a factory level, without at the same time losing control of its own troops, is the challenge confronting the union leaders, and in particular Bernard Thibault and the railway workers [officials]."

The betrayal of the CGT comes as shock to many of its members, but it comes as no surprise to anyone who has studied the character and roots of this organization and followed its history.

The trade union federation first formed in 1895 came under the control of the French Communist Party (PCF) after the Second World War. The union's general secretary was usually a member of the PCF central committee.

The CGT organized the most militant layers of the working class. For a brief period after the war, it totalled four million members. (Today's membership is about 700,000). But in political terms, the CGT and the

PCF consistently defended the authority of the French state.

At the end of the war, the general secretary of the PCF, Maurice Thorez, sat in the French government. Thorez felt called upon to resign from the government only when a militant strike at Renault threatened to escape the control of the CGT.

In his memoirs, the French president at that time, Vincent Auriol, describes Thorez's resignation as follows: "Emotionally moved and red in the face with embarrassment, he told me, 'I cannot do anything more, I have tried everything, I am at my wit's end.' At this moment I saw tears in his eyes."

The CGT reacted with open hostility to the student revolt of 1968. It was the only union not to support the general strike in May, in which millions of workers took part. At Grenelle, it worked out a deal with the undersecretary of state at that time, Jacques Chirac, to strangle the strike movement and save President Charles de Gaulle's grip on power.

In the 1970s, the PCF formed an alliance with the Socialist Party led by François Mitterrand, and after the latter's election victory in 1981 participated in practically all of the Socialist Party-led governments, faithfully supporting a right-wing economic policy. The result was the disintegration and decline of the PCF from what was once the most powerful party in France to a small, conflict-ridden organization.

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought further problems for the PCF and the CGT. In 1999, the CGT joined the social democratic-dominated European trade union federation, which includes the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB). By this time, the union had long since lost its former core supporters in the mining industry, on the docks, and in the steel and auto industries. In all of these spheres, the CGT had played a central role in agreeing to the axing of hundreds of thousands of jobs.

Today, membership of the CGT is centred in state-run enterprises. The union has approximately 58 percent of the workers at gas and power stations and 40 percent of railway workers. The more radical union, SUD (Solidaires, Unitaires, Démocratiques), has the second highest rate of membership in these industries (15 percent). These sectors have played a key role in a series of labour disputes over the past twelve years.

The consequences of globalisation, however, have destroyed any basis for militant trade union activity combined with loyalty to state power. The French ruling class is under enormous pressure from the European Union and its international competitors to draw level in terms of dismantling social security benefits and workers' rights. In the recent election campaign, Sarkozy invested his entire political prestige in the "reform" of the régimes spéciaux, underscoring the fact that the working class confronts political tasks.

The leaders of the CGT, however, are adamantly opposed to a political fight against the government. They regard such a prospect as a nightmare. It is becoming increasingly clear that there is no difference between the supposedly more militant CGT and its social democratic counterparts in France or the German trade union movement, which is based on "social partnership."

Prominent representatives of the CGT have stressed again and again that they reject any political struggle. Jean Christophe Le Duigou, who is responsible for the pension issue in the executive committee of the CGT, stated: "We are not by our nature eager to go on strike. Our job is to state our demands. Sometimes a strike is necessary. But our goal is not to strike for the sake of it."

On Wednesday morning, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Claude Pierzalski, the general secretary of the CGT sector of the Paris Nord railway workers. While acknowledging the direct involvement of the president in the present dispute, he tried, in an almost bizarre way, to deny the political nature of the conflict.

"We are avoiding a political confrontation, but the president wants to impose austerity," he told the WSW. "He is an omnipresent and omnipotent president. *Libération* calls the members of his government

'the gang of ciphers.' We are in a fight with a president who is carrying out an extremely harsh action. They are attacking the special regime pensions and the freight division. We can't expand or develop the railways as a public service."

Pierzalski emphasized: "We are in a head-on fight with the president, against his choice of society. He defends the bosses, he attends the meetings of the MEDEF (Movement of French Enterprises—the main employers' association). He personifies a capitalist policy. His aim is to align the railway workers with the general pension regime. Then he will be able to say, 'I have beaten the railway workers.' They represent the main, or at least a very important, centre of resistance against his social programme. He is trying to develop a split between the private and the public sector workers."

If the railway workers are defeated, Pierzalski continued, "it will be a great disappointment for the railway workers and workers in all the social services: the doors will be open for Thatcherite policies. He would like the strike to drag on and be weakened by attrition, as with the miners and Thatcher. After that, it will be an ultra-capitalist policy, slashing the labour code, giving the bosses a free hand to do what they want."

But when asked by the WSW: "Is it not a political conflict then?," Pierzalski replied: "We are sticking to a social framework. We are going to show the way to defend social gains. We are not against Sarkozy and the government as such, but against a social model."

Asked what it will take to win, Pierzalski mentioned public support and the broadening of the struggle: "We'll have to carry forward our demands, try to win over the population and not be split from them. We'll have to broaden our action, to extend the struggle, that is, to the RATP (Paris urban transport), the EDF-CDF (electricity and gas utilities)."

He did not explain however, how such a broadening of the struggle is possible without taking up a political fight against Sarkozy and his government.

It is necessary to draw urgent lessons from the betrayal of the CGT. The period when workers could defend their social and democratic rights by means of reformist trade unions is long past. All over the world, these organisations have transformed themselves into direct partners of the employers and government in the implementation of new attacks on working class living standards and rights.

There are no easy answers or short cuts in the struggle against Sarkozy's social attacks. A new political leadership—in opposition to the existing "left" and "far left" parties—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. This means building a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in France.



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