

France: 5,000 demonstrate in Strasbourg against Sarkozy

Our reporters

22 November 2007

A spirited demonstration of more than 5,000 marched through Strasbourg, the capital of the Alsace region in northeastern France, on Tuesday, November 20. The demonstration set off from the Place de la Bourse and ended at the Place de la Republique and included public servants, social workers, teachers, professors, scientific researchers, librarians, tax office employees, firefighters and employees of university clinics who had all taken strike action for the day.

They were protesting against the economic programme of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, in particular the loss in purchasing power, the destruction of jobs and the increased drive to privatisation. The demonstrators were supported by a delegation of 500 university students with self-made cardboard placards. French universities have been boycotted for weeks by students protesting against a new law that opens up the universities to private investment. A delegation of auto workers from the Strasbourg site of General Motors also attended the protest.

The slogans on banners and placards addressed central issues such as education, pensions and wages and read: “No to the destruction of public services!”, “Against Sarkozyism”, and “Exploitation calls for a renewal of resistance!”

One banner recalled the fact that, until 2003, all public sector workers—whether in the special regime pensions or not—only contributed 37.5 years towards pension funds. It read: “Restoration of pensions after 37.5 years of contributions for all!” Others read: “Save our equitable pension system—stop the robbery of the special pensions!” and “Private or public—we all are special pensioners.”

Others expressed their disgust over the situation at their work place and demanded: “Jobs and money for public research!” or: “I work, you work, he works, we work—and they profit!” This is an allusion to Sarkozy’s election slogan—“He who works more will in future earn more.”

A number of placards referred to the crisis in the school system: “Good quality education is the future for our children—Stop the cuts in jobs!” and “Children on strike—we demand more teachers!” Students on the protest demanded: “No selection based on income!” and “Education must take precedence!” A young student carried a placard which read: “Student for sale” and another: “Tuition fees are like petrol: expensive and highly explosive!”

Reporters from the WSWWS distributed the statement: “Workers need a new political strategy” and discussed political issues with many demonstrators. At the centre of the discussions was the ongoing deterioration and cuts in public services and the attacks on pension rights.

Michel works at the Alsace Road Maintenance Department and is a member of the Force Ouvriere trade union. He explained the consequences of government policies for him and his colleagues: “Since the 1980s we have lost 20 percent of our buying power. Official statistics are not relevant, because if you deduct petrol, heating and rent, then nothing is left of our wage. We have people who start with 900 euro per month and for that money drive trucks. When they have paid their rent they can’t make ends meet any more.

“I hope there will be a powerful mobilisation today, because it cannot go on like this. With the policies of the Sarkozy government everything is going up—except wages. Only [Sarkozy’s] own wages have increased—from 6,600 euro to 20,000 euro [monthly].

“We have colleagues who conduct the tests for driving licenses. Their jobs will sooner or later be privatised, as is the case with the technical safety inspection of motor vehicles. This work used to be done by state officials and nobody ever expected such a service to be privatised. We have already been informed that they want to cut 22,000 jobs by 2008. At the same time they say they want to stabilise the state budget. But even should the number of public employees be sharply reduced, there will still be the same taxes to pay, you can be sure of that.

“We have the same problems throughout Europe at the moment. That is why the international trains which travel from Paris to Germany are not reaching their destination. We have to organise internationally.”

Joël had come to the rally with a whole group of his colleagues. They work in a French school across the border in Villingen in the Black Forest in Germany. He explained: “We have come to the demonstration although we have good working conditions. But we have not forgotten our colleagues in France. Perhaps one day we will go to France to work or to spend our retirement. We want to express our solidarity.”

Joël reported that in the southern German state of Baden-Württemberg not only train drivers are on strike. Workers at the large supermarket Real chain are also involved in industrial action. Joël concluded, “When one talks about Europe, then we have no problem seeing ourselves as European workers.”

Henri Queisser is a senior Fire Brigade officer from the Bas-Rhin *département* and explained that his last pay raise in February amounted to just 0.8 percent. “That doesn’t even cover the rise in the cost of living,” said Henri. “Until 2003 we still got our full pension with 37.5 years of seniority. In 2003 this was raised to 40 years. In addition seniority will be increased to 41 by 2012 and even to 45 by 2050. But we are by no means prepared to accept firefighters who have to work until the age of 65 years!”

Many demonstrators did not agree with the attempts by trade union leaders to separate the different struggles of workers from each other. A couple of days before the day of action, the chairman of the CFDT (French Democratic Labour Confederation) trade union, François Chèrèque, declared that there should be “no mixing of the different disputes”—a blatant attempt to isolate the current strike by rail workers.

Alain is a delegate of the CGT (General Confederation of Labour) union and works at the homeless centre in the City of Strasbourg. He described the method of the trade union leadership as a form of “salami tactics” and added, “It is said: they are not at all the same struggles and they have to be split up into small sectional struggles. In this way one section of workers is pitted against another.”

Alain is confronted every day with the results of neo-liberal economic policies. He related, “We receive the most downtrodden social layers, outcasts and homeless people. I am in solidarity with the colleagues in Germany and all colleagues throughout Europe who are in struggle. It just is not right, what is taking place. Instead of creating more equal conditions by elevating the poor and ordinary workers from the poverty trap, so called ‘privileges’ are being picked on in order to depress incomes. And we are told: ‘They are all privileged,’ they have the finger pointed at them.

“If I had my way, we would talk instead about the tax privileges for the top 2,200 families, who monopolise billions of euros while the rest get nothing. Right now our brothers at the SNCF [state railway company], are being attacked, and next year it will be our turn. If the railway workers give in, then we will be swallowed up as well. It is one and the same struggle. We will not allow us to be divided.”

Students also participated in the demonstration with the express aim of breaking the isolation of the different struggles fostered by leading trade union officials.

François, an elected student representative from the Marc Bloch University of Humanities, told us, “In the general meetings so far all activists have taken the democratic decision that we want to join with all fighting movements, rail workers and civil servants alike, or whatever section of workers. Our premise was that we are confronted with the destruction of civil services, and that means the destruction of the universities as well. That’s why we are here today.”

Judging from his report, the students at his university are taking a different stance towards the new university law than the national leadership of the student organisation UNEF. He said: “Here in Strasbourg we are fighting for the defence of the masters degree, because many masters courses are threatened. That is especially relevant for our university. The Pécresse law threatens the masters degree in all subjects that don’t yield a profit. All humanities can be hit, and that concerns a lot of students, but also scientists. Certain research projects are no longer deemed profitable by the state because they don’t make money, although they are absolutely necessary. We are struggling for the defence of the university as a sphere of intellectual freedom. We say this sector must not be under the obligation to yield a profit. What must count in this sector is knowledge.”

François said that they had established contact with German students in Freiburg, who are also unhappy with their situation. “We have decided to join with everybody in struggle, and that should extend up to the international level.”

François Bonnarel, researcher at the French national research institution (CNRS) and its CGT Representative in Strasbourg, outlined the attacks on research during recent years. “For a number of years the

system of research institutions in France is being transformed on neo-liberal lines by all the French governments—under Raffarin, Villepin, Sarkozy, Fillon. It already started under Jospin and Allègre, but gathered speed with the Raffarin government after 2003.

“Even now the university administration is being liberalised. They must fend for themselves financially. The universities have very powerful presidents, who are not subject to any form of democratic control. The infamous LRU law [opening up the universities to privatisation], which students have opposed by public protest, also has consequences for CNRS researchers, because the new universities will have a big influence on research laboratories.

“The policies of the government are aimed at attacking all the rights of workers and the public service, which remains from the post-war era. Everything is being destroyed as the capitalists claw back all the concessions they had to grant in the 20th century. That’s the task of Sarkozy. And he is going about it very systematically and in brutal fashion. In a word, it is about the destruction of public services.”

The WSWs reporters asked all the participants their opinion on the current train drivers’ strike in Germany. There was a large degree of spontaneous support from many protesters. Others said they had heard very little about the strike. “I did not even know there was a train drivers strike in Germany,” was the comment by **Marie Félicienne**, a public service worker in Strasbourg. “I know there are strikes across France but there has been nothing in the news I watch about the strike by German train drivers.”

This silence on the part of the media was confirmed by **Olivier** who works as a journalist for a student television channel in Strasbourg. Olivier told us, “I must admit that I have not been informed about any strike taking place in Germany. It seems the media is concentrating entirely on what is taking place in France.”

Michel, (see above) also supports the strike by German train drivers. He told us, “It is about the same problems we have here in France—I am sure the situation is the same over there as it is here. We have already gone through the experience of the privatisation of the British railways. The result was a catastrophe, the track was run down and eventually the state was forced to intervene and undertake repairs.” Michel also referred to the numerous accidents which have taken place on the privatised railways. “Everything which has taken place there is no accident and we can see exactly the same looming for us.”



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