

France: Union reforms highlight Sarkozy-CGT alliance

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A remarkable exchange took place last week between French President Nicolas Sarkozy and the CGT (General Confederation of Labour) union. In April 18 articles in *Le Monde* and the *Financial Times*, Sarkozy and top CGT official Jean-Christophe Le Duigou praised each other for helping push through what they presented as necessary social cuts. The exchange, shortly after Sarkozy and the CGT agreed on a major reform of trade union law, gives an insight into how they are collaborating to police the working class into accepting Sarkozy's regressive social policies.

Sarkozy's lengthy *Le Monde* column, titled "For strong unions," praised the trade union reforms and spelled out the logic of his collaboration with the unions: "I am absolutely convinced that, to present and carry out the reforms that our country needs, we must partner with those who represent the interests of workers and of employers."

To understand this comment, one must recall the most politically significant reform Sarkozy has carried out—last fall's cuts to state transport and energy workers' "special regime" pensions, in the face of large-scale rail strikes. In October, the CGT, the dominant trade union in the rail sector, called a series of one-day strikes and prevented their extension to an indefinite strike, in the face of mass hostility of rail workers. After 10 days of strikes in November, the unions used the argument that strikes were not affecting the government's determination to carry out the reforms to politically bludgeon workers into returning to work.

Sarkozy clearly understands that the trade unions alone provide the manpower and political credibility to force workers into accepting his social cuts. In a veiled reference to planned cuts partially turned back by massive strike waves in 1995, 2003 and 2006, he wrote: "Our social history is filled with enough plans made hastily and without coordination, and which ended in resounding

failures, to finish once and for all the idea that the State can decide alone what is good for our country."

To this method, he contrasted his own close collaboration with the trade unions: "Right after the presidential elections [of May 2007] and even before going to the Elysée [presidential palace], I met with trade unions and business groups to listen to them and ask for their positions on the first actions I was planning on taking. Since then, I have continued to very regularly meet with each of their representatives. I know them well, we sometimes have divergences, but our dialogue is always frank."

He wrote that "the reform of the special regime pensions [was] successfully carried out last fall, thanks to an intense period of coordination at a national level, and negotiations in each enterprise affected by the reform."

In short, the entire top layer of the trade union bureaucracy was quietly meeting with Sarkozy and collaborating with his pension-cutting plans—at the same time as it presented itself to workers in affected enterprises, and to the broader public, as resolute organisers of strikes against Sarkozy's plans. One must add that the unions' silence, in the week after this major editorial appeared in France's newspaper of record, is a tacit admission that what Sarkozy says is true.

In fact, the CGT expressed its approval of Sarkozy the same day in an interview Le Duigou gave to the UK-based *Financial Times*, titled "Union praise for president's stance." Le Duigou, the CGT's number-two official and head of its pensions portfolio, said of Sarkozy: "He understands that we must give a place to social dialogue. We are at a turning point in the social situation of our country. Everyone believes that things must change."

To refute Le Duigou's cynical comment, one must ask the question: If the CGT is satisfied with Sarkozy's "social dialogue" and thinks "everyone" agrees with

Sarkozy's reforms, why did it organise strikes and protest marches against Sarkozy's policies last year, gathering millions of people?

The answer is that as massive opposition and anger built up in the working class against pension cuts, the CGT leadership decided to set a political trap for the workers: calling strikes designed to let off steam, while posing no serious political challenge to the government. Since no revolutionary party exists in France to give a political orientation to the strikes, the CGT ultimately succeeded in wearing down the workers, convincing them that their opposition was hopeless and that they had to return to work.

Despite the workers' defeat in the special regimes struggle, it has had many important consequences. It began Sarkozy's rapid fall in the opinion polls, where Sarkozy now receives 40 percent support or less, and led to large-scale resignations of workers from several CGT locals in the transport industry. It also convinced the currently dominant factions of the French bourgeoisie that the CGT is a reliable guarantor of its class interests.

It is this last event that underlies the "common position" on reform of trade union representativity recently agreed to by the Medef (the main French employers' organisation), the CGT, and the right-wing CFDT (Democratic French Labour Confederation) union. The reform of representativity—the legal quantity determining which trade unions can negotiate binding contracts in enterprises and industries—would increase the weight of the larger CGT and CFDT federations inside the French trade union landscape, providing the state with a more centralised and efficient bureaucracy for policing the working class.

Currently, representativity is governed by a February 11, 1950, law setting five criteria a trade union was required to meet: independence from employers and political parties, size, funding received through member dues, experience, and a patriotic attitude during the Nazi Occupation of France. With French trade unions in crisis—only 8 percent of the workforce is unionised, including 5 percent of private sector workers, and unions face massive financial difficulties—and most trade unionists born after the Occupation, these criteria are widely viewed as obsolete.

Four trade unions were designated as "representative" in 1948—the CGT, FO (Workers Force, a split-off from the CGT created with US government funds after the Liberation), the CFTC (French Confederation of Christian Workers) and CGC (the General Confederation of Cadres,

for managerial staff). The CFDT was added to the list in 1966, shortly after it split off from the CFTC. These trade union federations were granted automatic representativity, allowing them to present candidates to union local elections and negotiate accords with bosses, regardless of whether the federation in fact had any members in the company.

Commenting on these laws, Michel Noblecourt writes in the April 19 *Le Monde*: "The goal was to get around the dominance of the CGT, which was then controlled by the [Stalinist French] Communist Party" (PCF). Despite the PCF's submission to capitalism at the Liberation—it disbanded workers' committees in factories, ordered its Resistance militias to disband or join the French army, and adopted a no-strike policy under the slogan "Strikes are the weapon of the trusts"—the French bourgeoisie were highly mistrustful of the CGT, throughout the post-war period.

With the political and electoral collapse of the PCF in the 1980s and 1990s, and now the CGT's eager collaboration with Sarkozy, these calculations have changed.

The current agreement between the Medef, CGT and CFDT deliberately favour the larger unions. It would require a union to get at least 10 percent of the vote in union local elections to be considered representative, require the coalition of trade unions negotiating an accord with bosses to represent at least 30 percent of the workers at the company, and modernise the conditions for representativity. The government is expected to take the "common position" and work on turning it into a bill for consideration at the National Assembly.

Le Monde commented that it is a "system that consolidates strong unions and challenges the weak ones, which doesn't eliminate anyone immediately but in the longer term prevents the breaking up of unions." This judgment was confirmed when smaller unions, such as the CGC and UNSA (National Union of Autonomous Trade Unions), began negotiations for a merger as the measures were announced. CFTC chief Jacques Voisin denounced the agreement as "union-killing."



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