

# France: Break with the trade union collaborators of Sarkozy! Build an independent socialist movement of the working class!

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*The following statement will be distributed by WSWs sympathisers at demonstrations organized June 17 throughout France against the Nicolas Sarkozy government's policies of reducing pension rights and deregulating working hours.*

The day of action and demonstrations called by the CGT [General Confederation of Labour] and CFDT [French Democratic Confederation of Labour] for June 17 involve questions fundamental to the working class: pensions and legally-regulated working time.

These actions have been organised in an attempt by these trade union confederations to cover up for the betrayal of the working population that they perpetrated in signing the "Common Position" document with the employers April 9.

The document was designed as a guideline for government legislation on recognised union representation and also working hours. It proposed the "experimental" possibility of deregulated working hours, which freed the employers from national and industry-wide legal constraints.

This opened the way to the draft law on union representation and working hours published May 27, against which the protests are being organised.

The fraud is that the CGT (close to the Stalinist Communist Party) and the CFDT (close to the Socialist Party) are mobilising workers against policies which they themselves initiated and support.

The June 17 mobilisation is the latest in a series of strikes and demonstrations called by the unions in response to the massive popular anger against President Nicolas Sarkozy's attacks on pensions, jobs and job security, the social services, education, the health services, unemployment benefits and other democratic rights. The unions refuse to seriously challenge this programme of social regression and keep the various sections of workers and youth divided and every issue separate.

The draft law gives employers the right to negotiate and impose the abolition of the 35-hour week at a local company level. It heralds the relentless destruction of working conditions

with the abandonment of the previous framework of national and industry-wide agreements and any safeguards still provided by the labour code.

The "principal of favour" in French labour law, whereby local agreements cannot undermine national ones, but only improve on them, was given up by the "Common Position." What little protection was afforded by labour law and the role of the work inspectors is being destroyed. Now workers are to be pitted against each other in the same industry or plant in a competition to see which labour force will work longer for less money. This process has been systematically imposed in the US auto industry and throughout the world, with disastrous results for workers.

These changes are entirely in line with proposals for a working time directive at present being debated in the governing bodies of the European Union. A document drawn up in Luxembourg by representatives of the EU's 27 member states would permit a working week of 60 hours and more.

The deal made between the employers and the CGT and the CFDT on working hours was in return for conditions of official trade union recognition favourable to the latter. A threshold for recognition of 10 percent of the vote in representative elections gives these two confederations significant advantages over smaller rival unions and makes it virtually impossible to set up new recognised organisations representing workers' interests.

The agreement ensures CGT and CFDT officials the lion's share of positions as negotiators and participants in joint management and union committees, as well as lucrative positions on national joint employer-union and state bodies regulating labour relations, pensions, unemployment and other benefits. This is without mentioning the generalised under-the-counter "lubrication of labour relations."

The opposition of the smaller unions to the deal is not based on principles; the situation rather resembles thieves falling out over their respective shares of the loot. The main concern of the leaders of these well-endowed organisations, which enjoy little

credibility in the working class and represent only 8 percent of the workforce (the lowest rate in Western Europe), is the defence of their privileges and their bourgeois lifestyle.

Holding a nationalist outlook, the trade unions see it as their job to help implement French capitalism's broad programme of attacking the wages, working conditions and social and democratic rights of the working class to enhance its competitiveness on the globalized market. This programme has taken on extreme urgency in the context of the explosion of energy and food prices and the world credit crisis.

The latest betrayal by the unions is part of a strategy of preventing a united political offensive by the working class by organising scattered protests and impotent, one-day actions on separate issues. The aim is to wear down and isolate the militant resistance of workers and youth expressed in massive and in many cases tenacious struggles since the election of Sarkozy just over a year ago.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) has insisted since the mid-1990s that the trade unions were no longer in any sense organisations defending the working class. The unions are operated in the interests of the middle-class layers who lead them and serve to police the working class, disciplining their members and imposing the attacks of management and the government. The betrayals of all the struggles on pensions, jobs and wages in 1995, 2003 and 2007 demonstrate the correctness of the ICFI perspective.

The mobilisations organised by the CGT and CFDT are part of an effort to relieve social tensions by holding protests that let off steam in a manner that does not endanger the system, but eventually causes demoralisation and a sense that nothing can be done.

The unions have added to their historical ties with the social democratic and Stalinist parties a new level of complicity with the government and with Gaullism, a collaboration which has reached a new level with the election of Sarkozy. The CGT and other union leaderships are in constant weekly, even daily, contact with Sarkozy's administration, working out how to impose his programme of social regression.

"Far left" organisations such as the LCR (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire) of Olivier Besancenot hail every dispute and then, when they are not covering up for the union leadership, as they did with the sell-out by the CGT and the other trade unions of the rail and Paris transport workers last October-November, decry the inevitable betrayal. This only helps prepare further defeats. The LCR suggests on its web site that the signing of the "Common Position" had nothing to do with the CGT's fundamental relationship with the employers and the state, but resulted from the union being "duped."

The LCR and Lutte Ouvrière play an indispensable role on behalf of the trade union bureaucracy, seeking to encourage illusions that the unions can be reformed and struggles won by pressuring the union bureaucracies to fight. Since the early 1980s there has been an endless chain of betrayed strikes, year

after year—but for such groups no conclusions are ever to be drawn.

The "far left" insists that trade unionism—and its perspective of reforming capitalism—is still a viable perspective for the working class. For them, the need for workers to build a political movement to fight for a socialist alternative to the capitalist system is rhetorical, at best.

But this is precisely what is urgently needed. The fight to defend pensions, jobs, working conditions and wages is part of a broad struggle of the working class throughout Europe and internationally, occurring under conditions of an unprecedented crisis of the world capitalist system.

The CGT and the CFDT have demonstrated their utter worthlessness from the standpoint of defending the interests of the working class.

Workers must break from these pro-capitalist organisations and build new organs of struggle. Above all, workers must organize, not simply on a workplace-by-workplace basis, but as an international class whose common interest is to reorganize economic and political life to meet the needs of the majority of society, not the wealthy few.

For the working class to unite and fight for its common interests it must combine in a political movement aimed at a fundamental reorganization of society's priorities. The guiding principle must be the fight for social equality, the elimination of poverty and the raising of the living standards of the world's population through the conscious and rational use of mankind's productive resources.

The working class needs its own political party, based on genuine socialist and internationalist perspectives. This means building the section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in France.

We urge workers to study the history and programme of the Trotskyist movement as represented by the ICFI and its web site, the WSWs, and take the decision to help build it as the new revolutionary leadership of the working class.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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