

France: How the unions broke an offensive of the working class

Alex Lantier, Kumaran Ira
30 June 2008

In the two months since his April 24 national televised interview, French President Nicolas Sarkozy has announced or passed a wave of socially regressive measures in the face of mass popular hostility, compounded by anger over state inaction on rapid inflation of food and fuel prices. However, the last demonstration called by trade unions against these policies on June 17 found a relatively small response, and no further national demonstrations are currently planned.

The fall-off in the size of demonstrations cannot be ascribed to growing support for Sarkozy. In a June 24 BVA poll for the financial daily *Les Echos*, 63 percent of those polled disapproved of Sarkozy's economic policy and 71 percent expressed no confidence in his ability to reduce inflation. Sarkozy's approval ratings stand at 36 percent. Banque de France director Christian Noyer and European Central Bank director Jean-Claude Trichet have both called for wage increases to be held below food and fuel price increases, thus helping impoverish workers. The popular mood in France is increasingly bitter and angry.

As is now widely acknowledged by numerous commentators, the treachery of the union bureaucracy played the main role in breaking up and isolating workers' opposition to government policies. In a coordinated struggle, the millions of rail, postal, education, industrial, port, restaurant, retail, fishing, trucking and ambulance workers who struck in recent months could easily have shut down the economy, directly challenging the existence of the government and its social programme. Such a struggle depends, however, on the existence of a revolutionary political leadership in the working class.

Sarkozy found no such opponent in the trade union

bureaucracy, which sought to dismantle and demoralise workers' opposition, all the while proclaiming its agreement and collaboration with the government.

In an April 18 *Financial Times* interview, CGT (Confédération générale du travail) union leader Jean-Christophe Le Duigou praised Sarkozy, saying, "He understands that we must give a place to social dialogue.... Everyone believes that things must change." Sarkozy, who had written an April 18 *Le Monde* editorial admitting that all his reforms had been worked out in advance with the trade unions, praised them in a television interview April 24: "I would like to pay my respects to the trade unions.... One cannot govern a country without responsible trade union forces."

At the time, the French bourgeoisie faced continuing demonstrations by high school students protesting job cuts and curricular reforms in education; undocumented immigrant workers in service, retail and construction demanding official papers; and strikes by machinery operators at France's major commercial ports. In an unusual set of private-sector strikes, workers at Coca-Cola and retail outlets Carrefour, Virgin Megastore, and La Redoute struck against inflation and for higher wages, and Airbus workers struck against the selling of plants in France and Germany.

After Sarkozy's TV address, in which he announced his determination to continue with his reforms, the unions felt compelled to organise a semblance of concerted opposition. However, they relied on tried-and-true tactics to divide the movement: calling one-day actions every few days on separate issues, dividing demonstrations between different union federations, all the while continuing to negotiate with state officials. The goal was to prevent the coming together of strikes that could both disrupt the economy and raise before

the working class the possibility of a united struggle against the totality of Sarkozy's economic programme.

On May Day, 200,000 workers marched in demonstrations around the country, though the Force Ouvrière and CFTC (French Confederation of Christian Workers) unions organised separate marches. The unions planned a joint May 15 demonstration by public service workers against job cuts in education and the public sector. When, on May 7, Labour Minister Xavier Bertrand confirmed plans to increase pension pay-in periods from 40 to 41 years, the unions did not call for other workers affected—including rail, airline, energy, telecom and postal workers—to join the May 15 demonstration, but rather called for a separate May 22 day of action.

On the May 15 demonstration, more than 300,000 people marched and 1 million workers struck; this was followed by the May 22 pension demonstration, where 700,000 marched nationwide.

The next day, the trade unions signed an agreement on “social dialogue” and employment conditions in the public service. By signing an agreement that public sector workers' strikes were designed to prevent, the union effectively torpedoed the public sector workers' mobilisation. A May 24 demonstration against education job cuts gathered only 7,000 people.

Amid gathering strikes by fishermen on May 26-27 over fuel prices, the unions decided not to call further demonstrations against education job cuts, citing the need to let students and teachers work on end-of-year exams. A joint statement by the education wings of the different French trade union confederations stated that they were putting off consideration of “a continuation of the movement until after the summer vacation.”

The June 10 mobilisation of civil servants and railway workers against job cuts, pension reforms and freight reform at the national railways took place amid strikes by workers at France's strategic commercial ports against privatisation, and by fishermen, truck and ambulance drivers, and farmers against rising oil prices. However, the trade unions made no attempt to organise a broader strike of the transport sector against privatisation and rising fuel prices.

On June 11, the unions signed an accord on “16 points of convergence” with Education Minister Xavier Darcos, torpedoing the relaunch of the student movement after summer vacation that they had falsely

suggested they were considering on May 27. On June 12 and 13, the French parliament passed labour market reform and deregulation laws, the former having been signed by the trade unions in January. These moves made it increasingly clear to workers that the unions were not seriously opposed to the government, which had no intention of giving in to isolated strikes.

The June 17 demonstration for pension rights and against the dismantling of the 35-hour workweek—which the unions had themselves agreed to in a “common position” with employers' organisations in April!—gathered 500,000 workers nationwide. Participants at the demonstration interviewed by the WSWS questioned the motives of the union and the usefulness of the struggles they led. After the demonstration, CFDT (Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail) leader François Chérèque explained he wanted to “get back to dialogue” with the employers, while CGT leader Bernard Thibault incredibly proposed a further mobilisation, which he proposed to put off until after summer vacation, in October.

The discrediting of the unions is a source of significant concern in Sarkozy's government, who worry that they risk losing their most effective method to break up working-class opposition. The daily *Le Monde* wrote on June 24: “[The Elysée presidential palace] is watching, as the president's counselor for social affairs Raymond Soubie told us, to prevent ‘a weakening of the trade unions and the appearance of uncontrolled movements.’ ”

Soubie's comment explains as well as any the role of the trade union bureaucracy—a straitjacket controlling the movements of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact