

France: Sarkozy embarrasses his allies in the trade union bureaucracy

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President Nicolas Sarkozy created a furore with remarks he made to the National Council of his right wing ruling Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party on July 5.

Sarkozy boasted, “These days when there is a strike in France, nobody notices.”

The trade unions leaders adopted an outraged pose. Maryse Dumas, national secretary of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT—close to the Stalinist French Communist Party, the PCF) warned that “the president is playing with fire”.

What exactly is the source of the outrage? It is because Sarkozy has done the unthinkable. He has told the truth about the degree to which the trade unions have demobilised and betrayed any and all struggles against his programme of counter-reforms.

A few days later, Prime Minister François Fillon made an attempt to pour balm on the wounded pride of the trade unions. But he only succeeded in indicating the reason for Sarkozy’s initial boast. After a year in office Fillon judged the results of Sarkozy’s policies as a “peaceful revolution”. Sarkozy’s remarks, he said, were in recognition of the fact that “France accepts the reforms... that the social partners [trade unions and employers] have accepted the idea that it was necessary to commit themselves to the path of reforms.”

He then gave a concrete example concerning the trade unions’ collaboration with the abandoning of the legal 35-hour working week. “Let no one mistake, each in his own way today salutes the work of the majority [UMP in parliament] in speaking of the unravelling of the 35-hour-week.” (*Nouvel Observateur* 9/7/08)

The response of the trade union tops to Sarkozy was to criticise him for endangering their collaboration with the government by making boastful comments that might provoke a backlash amongst their members.

Dumas warned that “if now the public has to make its demands heard by taking action that disturbs others, we risk falling into a dangerous spiral for our country.”

François Chérèque, leader of the CFDT (French Confederation of Labour) and an open supporter of government reforms, said that using strikes as a measure of “the efficiency of a government” was “an archaic vision of social dialogue.”

Jean-Claude Mailly, general secretary of Force Ouvrière

(Workers’ Force) advised that “not taking into account the dissatisfaction in public sector circles, is not to show realism.”

Jacques Voisin of the right wing Confederation of Christian Workers (CFTC) lamented, “The risk is to sweep away all that has been done in terms of social alarm signals, and to incite hardline conflicts, which is not desirable... there are no winners or losers... we cannot allow such things to be said.”

The strikes to which Sarkozy referred are overwhelmingly in the public sector. He correctly identifies the effect of the bureaucracy refusing to mobilise in defence of rail workers’ pensions, teachers’ jobs and wages, with only token strikes designed to wear down the militancy of their members.

As a result, membership of French trade unions is the lowest in Europe at eight percent, down from 21.7 percent in 1970. Most of these members are found in the public sector. Only five percent of workers in the private sector are in unions, and very few young workers are unionised.

The much-trumpeted militancy of the French trade unions is also unfounded. Between 2005 and 2006 the number of working days lost due to strikes fell by 23 percent. Between 1998 and 2002, the annual number of strike days per worker on the state railways SNCF fell from 1 to 0.2 days. The number of strike days per 1,000 workers between 1998 and 2004 was 37, against the European average of 43. (*Observatoire European des Relations Industrielles* 2005)

Even in the public sector, the token protest strikes called have been less frequent and have involved fewer people. The CGT/CFDT boasted a million workers would answer their call last June 18, but less than 500,000 responded nationally.

The description of the unions as “social partners” says it all. They are the partners of the employers and the government, not the representatives of the working class.

Examples of recent collaboration between unions, the state and the employers are numerous. Already in 1995 the CGT changed its constitution, dropping all reference to public ownership of the economy. In 2003 the CGT, CFDT and FSU teachers’ union accepted the imposition of reduced pension rights for the public sector after a long strike. The CFDT accepted Sarkozy’s pension cuts for rail workers, while the CGT and SUD (Solidarity Unity and Democracy) demobilised the struggle. The CGT leader Bernard Thibault now claims the

union is “not one of opposition but proposition”. This has led to the “common position” document signed by him and the CFDT with the employers organisation, Medef (Mouvement des entreprises de France), supporting Sarkozy’s assault on the 35-hour week and the labour code.

Falling membership, it should be noted, has not threatened the survival of unions because their incorporation into the state machine and bureaucratic presence in the workplace has become entrenched. As an example, the CGT had delegates in 27 percent of companies in 1993. This figure reached 35 percent by 2005, in spite of losing members.

Trade unions in the public sector, which account for three times as many members as the private sector, sit on most of the parity committees with employers and public bodies governing the social affairs of employees. The new law on “social democracy” at work will ensure the financial subsidies to the trade unions by employers and the state is guaranteed. This is in addition to the corruption of certain union negotiators revealed by the ex-boss of the Metallurgy Employers’ Federation Denis Gautier-Sauvagnac, who used 15 million euros of secret funds “to lubricate the social dialogue” between 2005 and 2007.

For their part, the political parties of the “left” were equally critical of Sarkozy’s comments regarding strikes. They work directly with the trade unions in policing the working class and recognise the importance of concealing the extent of their collaboration.

Stéphane Le Foll, spokesman for the Socialist Party leader François Hollande, commented, “When you are the head of state you must have concern for the unity of the country... Sarkozy has humiliated the unions, all the unions with this statement.”

The Communist Party denounced Sarkozy’s comments as a “provocation” that is “incompatible with the stated necessity of *social collaboration* [emphasis added] and respect for trade unions. This new attack against workers only confirms the total lack of credibility in the president’s discourse on social progress.”

Julien Dray, ex-student leader of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR) and now a leading figure in the Socialist Party, complained that Sarkozy had said too much, thus undermining the credibility of the trade union bureaucracy. He explained, “You cannot behave as a leader of a political clan [Sarkozy’s ruling UMP] and say, ‘You see, I have tricked the unions’.”

Dray knows that the unions didn’t need to be “tricked”, since they have been party to Sarkozy’s “social dialogue” even before he assumed the presidency.

The most duplicitous reaction has come from the LCR, which purports to be building a revolutionary alternative to the official “left” parties. In a July 7 press statement, it too came to the defence of the trade union bureaucracy.

The LCR wrote, “Sarkozy practises class arrogance while knowing full well that dissatisfaction is on the rise everywhere,

in many areas of society, notably on the question of the dramatic fall of the purchasing power. The strikes that have succeeded one after the other since October 2007 in opposition to the liberal [free market] counter-reforms have to all intents and purposes not ended. Already, some initiatives have been planned starting in September/October 2008. There could be a boomerang effect to this kind of provocation.”

There is a great deal of rank-and-file militancy and a readiness to fight back. A ministry of labour report reveals that between 2002/2004, 30 percent of companies employing 20 or more workers experienced some form of collective labour dispute, compared to 21 percent in 1996/1998. These are, it must be stressed, not national strikes called or led by the trade unions.

But the LCR misleadingly attributes workers opposition to Sarkozy to the parasitic layer of trade union bureaucrats. It refuses to say why workers’ actions on pensions and jobs have come to nothing, as this would require exposing the role of the trade union bureaucracy, which is anathema to a tendency that functions as the left apologist of that bureaucracy.

The leading cadre of the LCR occupy high-ranking positions within the union bureaucracy such as the FSU (Fédération Syndicale Unitaire) teachers’ union, with influence also in the SUD union and the CGT. It is within this milieu that they hope to win support for their new party, among those bureaucrats who feel overexposed by the betrayals of their colleagues.

An editorial in *Lutte Ouvrière* by Arlette Laguiller, which also claims to be Trotskyist, again seeks to portray Sarkozy’s remarks as a provocation against the working class and to shield the unions from criticism. “If Sarkozy doesn’t see them [strikes], it is because he is myopic. But let him continue to pronounce ‘one too many words’. For the contempt of workers that he demonstrates could well end up provoking a social explosion which would also force the union leaderships to go further than they want.”

The LCR and LO want workers and youth to believe that pressure from below is enough to force the trade unions to fight on their behalf. In reality, the more the social and economic crisis deepens and class tensions deepen, the more surely and swiftly have the trade unions moved to the right.

What workers require is the building of new rank and file organisations of class struggle, independent of trade union organisations that function as adjuncts of management. Above all, what is required is a new socialist party that is also genuinely independent of the “social partners” in the trade unions and their allies in the French Communist Party, Socialist Party and the radical left groups.



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