

# France: trade unions warn government against social explosion

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Two trade union leaders, Force Ouvrière (FO, Workers' Force) chief Jean-Claude Mailly and CFDT (Democratic French Labor Federation) chief François Chérèque, recently gave high-profile interviews warning of the likelihood of large-scale social struggles after the end of summer vacations. Working-class discontent is growing amid further falls in purchasing power and economic contraction in France and across Europe.

In its August 25 edition, *Le Parisien* began by asking Mailly: "Is the back-to-school period going to be socially hot?" He responded: "All the statistics are in the red. Employment, purchasing power, salaries, but also industrial production, economic growth, exports ... And workers feel their horizons are blocked. And that's without mentioning their fears concerning pensions and health insurance."

He added: "There's a general feeling that workers have had enough. It will not take much to set off a movement."

Mailly's announcements take place in a definite political context. In May and June, the trade unions broke up a wave of strikes and demonstrations against pension cuts and the abolition of the 35-hour workweek, limiting them to isolated, one-day protests deprived of any perspective of political struggle against the government and its anti-social agenda. This is part of the unions' close collaboration with President Nicolas Sarkozy ever since his election in May 2007. Their warnings about the explosiveness of class relations is thus not aimed at mobilizing the working class, but at warning the government of the risks posed by its policy.

Mailly noted that, despite workers' discontent, FO has no plan for a broad mobilization of the working class: "For the time being, there is no meeting planned with other trade unions. [...] Losing a day's pay and getting nothing, workers are tired of that. But the day when they move, it will be very tough."

Having just explained workers' frustration with losing

pay in isolated, useless days of action, he then announced that "FO has planned a day of action for October 2." He said the day of action might protest issues such as the upcoming privatization of the post office, health care reforms, and cuts in local government.

The *Journal du Dimanche's* August 30 interview began by asking Chérèque how he felt the autumn would go. He responded: "Workers went on vacation hearing all the phrases used in the last 18 months. They were told: we'll fix everything, everything's going better already. They are coming back and hearing: 'Things aren't going better.' It's a cold shower. But I don't know what it will end up producing: unease or even more tensions."

Asked how he planned to act on the reform of the 35-hour workweek, Chérèque said he would do nothing: "The law has been passed. I believe in Republican values."

Chérèque adopted the position of an advisor to the government on how to best present its social cuts to defuse working-class opposition. He said: "What did my old friends talk about with me, at Sisteron, in the Alps of Haute Provence [in southeastern France]? Of the future of hospitals, the Post Office, of local services, regional transportation. [...] One cannot engage such an important reform as that of the Post Office without a public debate. Without that, one cannot get the population to understand and accept it. And this leaves the way open to demagogues."

Chérèque's reference to demagogues is highly significant. The trade unions are painfully aware of the fragility of the political situation in France and fear that an independent movement of the working class could expose the utter treachery of the union tops.

Their collaboration with Sarkozy has become increasingly open as Sarkozy's term progressed. In September 2007, before the October-November transport strikes against pension cuts, the press revealed that

Chérèque and Mailly were regularly meeting with Sarkozy. Chérèque's preferred venue was apparently the prestigious "Violon d'Ingres" restaurant in downtown Paris. In an attempt to justify these meetings, the CFDT told Reuters that Chérèque's lunches with Sarkozy were "in no way exceptional, since the French president has already seen the general secretary of the Force Ouvrière (FO) trade union, Jean-Claude Mailly, under similar circumstances."

In April Sarkozy published a long editorial in the daily *Le Monde* titled "For strong unions," in which he wrote, "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." He added: "Right after the presidential elections and even before entering 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."

During the May-June demonstrations, the government watched with concern as strikers' frustration with the trade unions mounted. *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.'"

With this bureaucratic euphemism, Soubie was expressing the bourgeoisie's fears that workers will launch political strikes independently of the discredited union leaderships. Such fears are heightened by the economic slump in France and Europe generally, as well as by the government's determination to press ahead with unpopular reforms. According to the most recent statistics, the French economy contracted by 0.3 percent in the second quarter of 2008, part of a general 0.2 percent contraction of the overall Euro-zone economy.

The contracting economy will substantially curtail state expenditure. Alexander Law of the Xerfi market analysis firm writes, "The 2008 budget was based on a projected 2.25 percent yearly GDP growth. The government has already been forced to revise this down to 1.7 percent and recent calculations now put it at 0.9 percent, implying an enormous loss of expected revenues." France's budget deficit is already running close to the 3 percent limit required by the European Stability Pact.

The combination of economic contraction and inflation has wreaked havoc on workers' purchasing power. A study by the National Institute of Consumption (INC),

quoted by Law, found, "A comparison of the equivalent of a day's salary in 2000 and 2008 [...] reveals that workers can afford less food, housing, and fuel than eight years ago, due to inflation."

The INC report continued: "If a worker could buy 49 liters of diesel with a day's wages in 2000, this year he would have to make do with 38 liters. He will also buy fewer oranges (-14 percent), potatoes (-14 percent), less steak (-13 percent), lettuce (-11 percent), bread (-11 percent), and butter (-7 percent)."

Unemployment is rising for the first time since the second quarter of 2003. In the second quarter of 2008, 12,200 jobs were lost (0.1 percent of the total). This decline was largely due to a 6.8 percent loss of temporary jobs over the second quarter. In the service sector, job growth has come to a virtual halt, at 0.1 percent. The industrial workforce shrank by 0.3 percent in the second quarter.

The international housing crisis is also hitting France, with new home sales falling by 34 percent over the last 12 months.

On August 18, Prime Minister François Fillon again confirmed that the government's response to the economic slump would be to limit expenditure and impose social austerity. He said, "The government's objective, under the authority of the president of the Republic, is to re-establish the competitiveness of the French economy." He proposed to do this with further attacks on workers' legal rights, through "structural reforms of the labor market, the organization of work, and work legislation."



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