

French workers need a socialist perspective to fight the economic crisis

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The following statement is being distributed by supporters of the International Committee of the Fourth International at the January 29 one-day strike and national day of action called by France's trade unions to protest the government's policies in response to the economic crisis.

The central question facing workers in the January 29 one-day strike and national day of action called by France's trade unions is one of political perspective: On what basis can working people defend their jobs and living standards in the face of the economic crisis?

The €360 billion bank bailout organized last October by President Nicolas Sarkozy, part of a series of bailouts that pumped trillions of euros into banks worldwide, represents a colossal failure of capitalism. Aimed at stabilizing a shattered global financial system while leaving intact the ruling elite's riches, amassed over decades of financial recklessness and social attacks on the working class, these bailouts have failed to prevent a collapse of lending and industrial activity.

Workers' interests can be defended only through the industrial and political mobilization of the entire working class for the purpose of converting the banks and other major industries into public utilities—democratically managed and overseen by the workers—in France and internationally. The defense of private property only provides a blank cheque for the hoarding of trillions of euros in the accounts of the super-rich. The task facing the working class is to maintain and expand economic activity and prevent the pauperization of the population—workers, retirees, and small business owners.

The most basic requirement of this struggle is a political break with the trade union bureaucracy and the French political establishment, which are promoting unviable, nationally-based responses to the crisis, and the building of a new political leadership in the working class on the basis of a revolutionary socialist program that places the economy under the democratic control of the working class.

The state's bank bailouts have exposed the class arrogance of Sarkozy's insistence that hospitals, pensions and other social programs must be cut to save money. Sarkozy is hardly alone in making such claims. President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin of the Socialist Party (PS) have both advanced such arguments before him, to justify their own

austerity and privatization policies.

When the wealthy and the banks need money, the government quickly finds it. Only the basic needs of the working class are deemed too expensive.

The bailout helps neither credit nor industry. According to central bank data, bank credit to companies has fallen every month since September, and consumer credit fell 7 percent in November. The latest monthly data show industrial production in France fell at a yearly rate of 9 percent, and *Le Monde* reported that small industrial enterprises are reporting a 25 percent fall. In November, there was a record loss of 64,000 jobs.

It must be stated bluntly: The unions' objective in calling this strike is not to spearhead the resistance of the working class to the impact of the capitalist crisis, but rather to contain and dissipate it. As *Le Monde* recently wrote, "At the Elysée as in the Socialist Party, in the trade unions as in employers' circles, everyone dreads an explosion of the social cauldron." All of these paragons of the French establishment fear the eruption of a social movement they do not control.

This is why the unions waited until December to call a strike—instead of calling it immediately—when it became clear that the financial crisis would have massive economic consequences in September, with the collapse of credit and share markets following the bankruptcy of the American investment bank Lehman Brothers. In particular, the unions were silent when mass rioting erupted in Greece following the shooting of 15-year old Alexandros Grigoropoulos, for fear that such mass protests would spread throughout Europe.

The unions' delaying of the strike until late January was also calculated to isolate the high school students' protests against the Sarkozy government's school reform.

Fear of an independent movement of the working class is mounting again in the French establishment. The conservative daily *Le Figaro* wrote, "The fear of popular insurrections caused by the crisis is starting to work its way into the minds of European leaders." Citing mass demonstrations and rioting in the Baltic countries, Iceland, and Bulgaria, the newspaper added: "As no solution is readily at hand, does not this oppositional movement risk spreading, as the crisis deepens, to all of Europe?"

Taken on its own terms, the unions' January 5 Common Statement for a strike, to influence the formulation of "public policy", is shot through with contradictions. It calls for the defense of jobs, while asking firms facing business slowdowns to negotiate short hours or layoffs "with the objective of preserving jobs and salaries." It issues a call for government regulation to put an "end to speculation, tax havens, the opacity of international finance and to control capital flows." It is unclear how Sarkozy would—even if he wished to—regulate his friends among France's billionaires, such as Bolloré and Lagardère, let alone the financiers of New York, London, Tokyo, or Hong Kong.

The nationalist perspective of the Common Statement is both reactionary and unviable. The French state cannot single-handedly shield France's economy from a global crisis, any more than Sarkozy could contain the surge of inflation caused last year by massive price increases for raw materials on world markets. If the crisis was initially more concentrated in certain countries—during the US subprime mortgage collapse in 2007 and the collapse of credit and housing bubbles centered in the US and European countries such as the UK and Spain—it is now a world phenomenon. A global seize-up of credit and a collapse of asset values and world trade are hitting each national economy.

The incoherence of the unions' program is not accidental. The bureaucracy dares not explain what they are doing, because they are junior partners of the French ruling elite seeking to impose austerity measures on a hostile working class. This is, however, increasingly hard to conceal. On January 25, Sarkozy's general secretary, Claude Guéant, gave an interview in *Le Parisien* in which he said he was "not worried, but attentive" to the January 29 strike. Asked if Sarkozy wanted strong unions, Guéant replied, "Yes, as their role is extremely important. Initiatives will be taken to make the unions more representative, stronger, and even better partners."

This comes on the heels of a January 13 meeting at the Elysée presidential palace between Sarkozy and the leaders of the five main official trade union federations (CGT, CFDT, FO, CFTC, and CGC). According to the Elysée's press briefing, Sarkozy proposed "a schema to inform and consult with the trade unions about corporate restructuring" and to collaborate on "forward-looking management of employment." In the context of economic collapse, this can only mean collaborating with the state in imposing job cuts and wage cuts.

With this strategy, the unions are reprising their collaboration with the government in the strikes of spring and summer 2008. At that time, the unions negotiated a Common Position and a basic agreement with Sarkozy—a program of cuts in pensions and a weakening of labor law rights, including the 35-hour work week law. They then cynically called a series of widely spaced strikes to let off steam and demoralize the workers. As a result, all the government's social cuts were passed. In disgust, workers responded with a record abstention (74.35 percent) in

the December 2008 union elections.

If the unions dare to simulate renewed opposition to Sarkozy, by calling for mass demonstrations, it is because they feel confident that no established political force in France will challenge their leadership of the strike, let alone mount a political campaign to resolve the crisis through the establishment of workers' control of the economy and a workers' government. In their calculations of where the political loyalties of the leaderships of the so-called "left" parties in France truly lie—that is to say, with the ruling class—they are quite correct.

The official left parties—Socialist Party, Communist Party, Green Party—all support the trade unions and promote the notion that mass pressure from below can alter the economic policies of the French ruling elite. As for the "far left" parties, their occasional criticisms of the trade union bureaucracy in no way lessen their determination to channel the struggles of the working class behind the trade union bureaucracy and block the emergence of an independent political movement of the working class. All of these parties—Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Communist League), its New Anti-Capitalist Party, Lutte Ouvrière (Workers' Struggle) and Parti Ouvrier Indépendant (Independent Workers Party)—oppose building a political movement to bring down the government.

French workers urgently require a party that fights to unite the working class throughout Europe and internationally on the basis of a socialist program. The International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site*, appeal to workers and young people looking for a socialist alternative to mass unemployment and poverty, to read the WSWWS, contact the ICFI, and fight to build a section of the ICFI in France.



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