

France: What are the politics of the March 19 demonstration?

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18 March 2009

The March 19 demonstrations organized by the French trade union bureaucracy against the global economic crisis pose in the sharpest manner the question of class perspective.

The legitimate anger of millions of workers who will participate in them notwithstanding, the demonstrations are a political fraud perpetrated on the workers by the unions and the left parties. Their overriding goal is to find a harmless outlet for popular opposition to the crisis and the policies of President Nicolas Sarkozy.

A class gulf separates the one-day strike, organized by the trade unions and supported by the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois left parties, and the social anger of the working class. An isolated, one-day strike, even if attended by millions of workers, is entirely acceptable to the bourgeoisie if it knows the unions will retain the political leadership of the movement.

On the other hand, what CGT (General Confederation of Labor) union leader Bernard Thibault calls a "general mood that people have had enough" is workers' profound opposition to any attempt to resolve the crisis at their expense. With tens of millions of workers losing their jobs worldwide, yearly industrial production and trade falling by 10 to 40 percent in every major economy, and \$50 trillion in wealth erased worldwide by stock and real estate market collapses, there can be no doubt that workers face an epoch-making crisis of capitalism. Workers' refusal to pay for the crisis sets them on a political collision course with insolvent banks, CEOs cutting jobs due to expectations of a collapse of business, and their representatives in the bourgeois parties.

The crisis deals a shattering blow to the legitimacy of French politics, which over the last decade has consisted largely of government negotiations of social cuts with the CGT and other unions.

The €360 billion bank bailout hastily arranged last year

by Sarkozy exposes the class-based character of these policies, which were dictated not by a lack of funds but by the profit interests of capital. It was, however, only one in a long line of provocations against working people—the latest being oil major Total's announcement that, despite making €14 billion in profits, it is laying off over 500 refinery workers due to expectations of falling economic activity in France.

The level of class tensions is demonstrated by the outbreak of a multi-week general strike in France's overseas departments, especially Martinique and Guadeloupe, against high gas prices, low purchasing power, and the continued domination of the economy by former slaveholding *béké* families.

In contrast to the explosion of opposition in the working class, the unions are adopting a fundamentally pro-capitalist policy typified in Thibault's performance in his March 11 television interview with TF1's Christophe Barbier. Despite the manifestly reckless and irresponsible conduct of banks and lending agencies in the lead-up to the financial crisis, Thibault refused to say if he supported nationalizing banks and other enterprises receiving state bailout funds. He denied that there were any plans for a general strike, saying only that there was a "movement."

The unions' reactionary policy stems from their close collaboration with the state. Having negotiated in private venues from the beginning of Sarkozy's presidency in 2007, the unions ultimately produced a Common Platform with Sarkozy in April 2008. In exchange for securing the financing of the CGT and other major unions, the unions agreed to pension cuts, the elimination of the 35-hour workweek, and other anti-social reforms, which were enacted last July. Workers responded with a record 74 percent abstention in last December's trade union elections.

The unions only announced the current March 19 strike after a February 18 social summit meeting with Sarkozy,

which followed the unions' last "day of action" on January 29. At the social summit, the unions deemed the government's policies on the minimum wage and public sector employment "too fragmentary."

The bourgeoisie well knows that the unions' refusal to organize a political struggle against the government is its main trump card in getting through the crisis. Writing in *Le Monde*, commentator Michel Noblecourt called the CGT "a giant with feet of clay," adding: "Before March 19, all [the unions] opposed a transposition of the Guadeloupean events to France. To organize and channel the 'generalized feeling we can't take it anymore,' the unions want to resist the political temptation that would turn them into an anti-Sarkozy front to capture the hostility to the politics—and sometimes the person—of the president, which acts as a spur to demonstrations."

The trade unions' collaboration with the bourgeoisie is not simply a policy decision, or only the reflection of their interpenetration with the French state machine, on which they depend financially. It is above all the expression of their political reformism, which seeks to obtain wage increases and defend jobs not through revolutionary struggle against capitalism, but by modifying the policy of the French state.

This orientation found a peculiar and distasteful expression in the joint appeal in favor of the March 19 demonstration launched by a coalition of parties, including the Socialist Party (PS), the French Communist Party (PCF), the Left Party (PG), and the newly formed New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) of Olivier Besancenot. The statement applauds the "victory of the Guadeloupeans" in obtaining a €200 per month wage increase—though the Guadeloupean employers' federation has still not formally agreed to the deal.

It then formulates an appeal to Sarkozy: "If the strike in Guadeloupe has finally been heard, the deafness of the president, the government, and the Medef [employers' federation] with regards to the demands of the January 29 unitary day of action and the strikes in the rest of the French West Indies and Réunion Island continues."

This statement reveals the objective political significance of the founding of the NPA, which replaced the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) and junked its previous references to Trotskyism. Through founding the NPA, the LCR has finished its transformation into a left bourgeois party. Its "anti-capitalist" label now provides the NPA with greater room for maneuver, as it cooperates with the PS and other elements of the French establishment to ask Sarkozy for wage increases and head

off working-class opposition to the crisis-stricken capitalist order.

Such a perspective places heavy bets against history. French history in particular offers no shortage of bitter demonstrations that the fundamental task of the working class is not to wage a utopian struggle for higher wages, but for workers' control of the economy on a socialist and internationalist basis.

The wage increases through which the French bourgeoisie, assisted by the betrayals of the Socialists and the PCF, stabilized revolutionary crises were inevitably followed by major defeats of the working class. The collapse of the 1936-1938 Popular Front government after the defeat of the final strike waves in 1938 was soon followed by the French bourgeoisie's surrender to and collaboration with the Nazis.

The 1968 wage increases led to an inflationary spiral, as employers raised prices to protect profits, which was finally ended by PS President François Mitterrand's 1983 austerity policy, which laid the basis for the deindustrialization of the country.

Protest demonstrations—even those mobilizing large numbers of workers or obtaining partial satisfaction of wage demands—will not lay the basis for economic prosperity. Workers must build a political party on Trotskyist, that is to say revolutionary Marxist, principles to fight for an end to the capitalist system. The International Committee of the Fourth International asks workers, intellectuals, and youth in France to read the *World Socialist Web Site* and to fight to build a section of the ICFI in France.



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