

Reports on the March 19 demonstrations in France

A WSWS reporting team
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World Socialist Web Site supporters interviewed demonstrators and distributed thousands of leaflets at protest marches during the March 19 day of action, called by France's trade unions, against the economic crisis and French state policy. Several million workers and youth participated in the demonstrations.

The leaflet—handed out in Paris, Marseille, Nancy, and Amiens—was titled "What are the politics of the March 19 demonstration?" It insisted on the international character of the crisis, and the need to resolve it on the basis of revolutionary socialism, through the construction of a mass Trotskyist party in the working class.

Union leaders have ruled out another national day of action before the traditional May 1 day of demonstrations. Bernard Thibault of the CGT (General Confederation of Labour, close to the Communist Party) and Annick Coupé of the *Solidaires* trade union confederation suggested they might hold smaller, regional actions before that date.

The strike took place as the economic crisis engulfing the French and world economy deepens. Economic forecasts, issued the day after the demonstration, predicted a three percent contraction of the French economy in the year leading up to June 2009. *Le Figaro* commented, "Rare are the economists who do not predict a 10 percent [unemployment] rate by the end of the year."

Paris

According to the CGT, 350,000 participated in the demonstration in the country's capital. The vast Place de la République, the assembly point, was packed. There were many young people who came in groups of friends, and those coming on their own initiative outnumbered the official trade union contingents.

In their slogans, the unions sought to promote illusions that the impact of the crisis can be softened through appeals to the government.

Among those who spoke to the WSWS, there was a varied appreciation of the depth of the crisis.

Nicolas is studying Political Science and is unemployed. He said, "It shouldn't be the poor getting hit in the crisis. It was like that before but now it's worse. We need a drive to equality."

A high school student studying maintenance was upset by the cost of living and job cuts. "I'm disgusted that so much money goes to the banks and nothing is being done about the social security deficit. It was bad nobody moved in support of the Guadeloupe struggle," he added.

"Economic nationalism is for people who accept the system. We don't give a damn about the boss's profits. We want to keep our jobs. A one day strike is not enough. We need a week of demonstrations. Capitalism needs reforming."

An unemployed plumber told the WSWS, "The capitalist system is completely defective. There are those who toil and those who fill their pockets. The earth is dying." He said that he was not a member of any union and added, "The unions' message is not clear, there are too many ambiguities. I'm 100 percent for changing society internationally."

Martine is a teacher in a *college* (ages 11- 15). She came up to Paris from the provinces to see what a Paris demonstration was like. "We're fed up. It's always the same people who get hit. This is a profound crisis that unites people. It affects everyone and is not confined to just one category of workers. I'm here as a teacher, but also as the daughter of my mother and as the mother of my daughter. Raising salaries is not enough; it's limited. We need a deep change, a redefinition of society."

Martine said that she sees no political party that is fighting for this fundamental change, but added, "The perspective of the ICFI is what I would wish for. But for that the people must be educated, so money will be needed for that education. It would need those in the leadership to be honest and I'm looking for that...We need internationalism, yes, I agree. It stands to reason, it's not easy, but it stands to reason."

Marseille

The unions reported 320,000 participants, while the police said there were 30,000. The CGT was represented in many sectors, with workers from the steel maker Arcelor Mittal, the petrochemical company Arkéma, and nurses and health workers out in opposition to the retrogressive CC 66 collective contract. The main education union federation, the FSU, was well represented, and there were high school student union members also present, along with contingents from all the other unions. The unions kept a tight control over the protest. There were also Communist Party and Left Party contingents.

WSWS leaflets, unlike many others, were read with interest and few were discarded.

Caroline, 23, an educational assistant was with her friend Sylvie a nurse. She told the WSWS that working conditions for education workers are insecure. "The profession is not supported and this discourages people from taking it up." She opposed young workers being made to pay for the crisis. "To fight unemployment we're

going to have to change the government," Caroline said.

Caroline also said that she was opposed to economic nationalism. "All workers must unite. Just offering jobs to French people will increase unemployment, especially as most immigrants in France do jobs that nobody else wants; they're too hard." She thought protectionism was impossible "since we're in a globalised economy."

Stéphane, 47, an entertainment industry technician said people had to demonstrate to show the government that they were human beings. He was highly critical of media coverage of the struggles in Guadeloupe and Martinique and opposed to economic nationalism. He found it intolerable that 58 percent of French people had polled in favour of France's reintegration into NATO.

Mathias Amore, studying literature at university said he was demonstrating for decent public services and bitterly criticized Sarkozy's promise that he would get people to "work more to earn more". Mathias said this had become "work more and earn less." He was favorable to the ICFI's perspective of a planned socialist economy and knew of no other party that proposed such a solution to the crisis.

Nancy

There were more people demonstrating in Nancy than on January 29. At the end of the march, from a stage set up for a concert, the CGT shouted out the slogan, "25,000 on the 29th, 40,000 on the 19th, build the movement!" However, it offered no perspective to combat the economic crisis.

Frank and Nicolas, teachers at the vocational high school Jean-Prouvé, came with a delegation of their colleagues and students. They had come to protest the "smashing up of vocational education." They said, "The vocational baccalauréat is going to be prepared in 3 years, even 2, instead of 4 as now." They opposed "the cutting of jobs, the deterioration of what is taught, the complete unclarity about the curriculum and exam syllabuses."

Dorian, a student from an agricultural high school said he had come to protest the reform of the vocational baccalauréat. "We had the proof in Guadeloupe that people are fed up, everyone has had enough, even in small towns people are coming on demonstrations," he said. "We were in Mirecourt the other day [a town in the Vosges mountains of 1,000 inhabitants] and we had never seen so many people on the streets."

Amiens

The March 19 protest attracted around 50,000 people in the Picardy region of northern France, 15,000 more than on January 29. In the regional capital of Amiens, there were over 12,000, mainly local government workers, teachers and hospital workers. Many students also took part, protesting against a new law on university autonomy, the LRU. One banner expressed student frustration about the future: "Study is all that is left to us"

The issues of unemployment and defense of public services were uppermost in workers' minds, especially in relation to defending hospital jobs and conditions, which the new Bachelot law will hit hard. Hospital workers' banners demanded the withdrawal of the law, declaring that it "destroys health and hospitals."

Private sector workers were out in force, especially tyre factory

workers in Amiens, against the effects of the crisis on their industries. The Goodyear tyre factory workers are faced with the prospect of seeing their factory closed, as were the Continental tyre workers in Clairoux in the south of Picardy. Some 1,200 workers are to be sacked as a result of the economic depression. The Continental workers stopped the factory and demonstrated with over 12,000 others in the city of Compiègne, where only 3,000 took part last time. Goodyear is set to sack a thousand workers soon.

A delegation from the Méaulte Airbus factory in Albert threatened with job losses, along with other Airbus factories in Europe, was led by the *Force Ouvrière* union. Its banner underlined the union's parochial approach to job destruction: "Preserve, Develop and Support our Industry in Picardy."

More than half the protestors marched behind CGT banners, which concentrated on purchasing power with the slogan "It is time to hit hard to increase wages". Rail workers, tax office workers, customs department workers and school and university teachers and students were out in force. Many secondary school students joined the protest against the scheduled 13,500 teacher job cuts this year.

Four friends—Marielou, Marion, Marine and Adrien—all in the first year of different Amiens high schools said they were demonstrating against the reforms of education minister Xavier Darcos. They said that the reform was dumbing down the main core of the curriculum and making access to a full culture difficult for the less privileged.

Marion said, "If the reform gets through it'll get worse." He said that they were there "to get things moving and for a better tomorrow. The banks get rich from us. We're not here just for high school issues," he said, "but for everything—pensions, jobs, all the things we have to face after leaving school."

Adrian was opposed to France's militarism and membership of NATO. "They're trying to deal with the problems of France and imposing them on others."

Marion thought that the protest strikes were useless: "They don't change anything. They're just symbolic. Sarkozy doesn't give a damn." They all agreed that the rich and the profiteers should be made to pay for the crisis. Marion added: "But we need to at least to be informed so we can be active citizens." On being informed that the ICFI was a Trotskyist, Marxist organisation that opposed Stalinism and was for the overthrow of capitalism, he said, "If you're against Stalinism then that can be something for us."



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