

France: Up to a million people on May Day protests

Antoine Lerougetel
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Up to a million people took part yesterday in May Day demonstrations in towns and cities throughout France. This was the third mass mobilisation this year called by what has been dubbed by the press “the G8,” or France’s eight main trade union federations. The protests took place under conditions of deepening social tensions, as the recession turns into a slump.

The largest French trade union, the CGT (General Confederation of Labour, close to the Communist Party), reported 283 unified demonstrations in France “to demand economic and social change, faced with the crisis.”

The police reported 450,000 demonstrators, as against their estimate of 1.2 million at the last day of action March 19. The CGT figures this time were half their estimate for participation at the March 19 demonstration, which was 2.4 million.

The unions predicted a lower turnout than the March 19 demonstration, explaining in justification that it was a holiday. However, despite being again a massive expression of hostility to the government’s policy of putting the burden of the economic crisis on the working class, the lower participation reflects growing scepticism among workers as to the effectiveness of such one-day actions, whose goals are ultimately to make appeals to the government.

According to the CGT, 160,000 marched in Paris (the police estimate was 65,000), a large decline from the last time, as in other towns. Demonstrators marched behind banners declaring, “They are the crisis, we are the solution”; “Sarko promised us, Sarko lied”; and “We won’t pay for the bankers.”

In Marseille, 35,000 demonstrated (police estimates were 10,000), in Lyon 15,000 (10,000 according to police), in Bordeaux 33,000 (13,500, according to

police).

Gilbert Tomasi, a local official from the FSU (the main education union), reflected the general perspective of the unions, telling the press: “We are in a mobilisation process to exert pressure. The government will not always be able to turn a deaf ear.”

Unemployment in France is due rise by a million in 2009, with reduced hours, mass sackings and closures of private enterprise plants, particularly in the motor industry and steel, many parts of transnational companies that are engaged in downsizing exercises throughout the world.

Workers are resisting through widespread strikes, occupations, and “boss-nappings,” which the trade unions are increasingly unable to control at Caterpillar, Continental, Molex, Freescale and other factories. There have also been a series of wildcat electricity shutdowns by the semi-privatised electricity utility workers.

Two opinion polls published April 30 found that over 70 percent of French people supported the May Day protest, and only 10 percent expressed hostility to it.

These one-day mobilisations are closely controlled by the trade unions, who work in close collaboration with the state, and receive generally favourable treatment in the bourgeois press. The French political establishment sees these well spaced-out “action days” as an important means to harmlessly dissipate the enormous hostility of workers and youth to paying for the crisis.

In its April 30 edition, the daily *Le Monde* noted, “The planning of big days of protests every two months, with or without strikes in the public and private sectors, does not necessarily meet with the expectations of the workers most affected by the crisis. The radicalisation of certain disputes with bosses being forcibly detained shows that the tempo chosen by the

national organisations does not correspond to the urgency with which some workers are acting.” The paper added: “A united May 1 does not settle the question of what come next.”

The position of the French political and financial elite is clearly expressed in the April 30 article on May Day in *Les Echos*, the main French business daily, which wants the “social fever” to be kept under control. It recognises that President Nicolas Sarkozy’s government has no intention of relieving social hardship by “increasing the cost of labour” or of increasing taxes on the rich.

The paper advises the French political and business elite on how to treat the May Day protests: “To give it little importance without humiliating the unions, [prime minister] François Fillon and [Minister of Labour] Brices Hortefeux have ceaselessly sung the praises of the ‘sense of responsibility’ of the trade union leaders. The whole strategy consists in trying to convince French people hit by the crisis that the government is ‘at their side’—notably by offering mediation as with the Caterpillar dispute—at the same time discrediting the perpetrators of kidnappings or ransackings.”

Les Echos is aware, however, that objective social tensions go far beyond what the government and the media are willing to admit. It describes the union bureaucrats as “great leaders,” praising them for having “the wisdom not to speak of a pre-revolutionary or insurrectional situation.”

Teams of WSWS supporters distributed thousands of copies of “Caterpillar workers in revolt against the unions” at demonstrations in Paris, Marseille, Nancy and Amiens.



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