

France: CGT's industrial policy means workers will pay for the crisis

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The October 22 national day of action, called by the French General Confederation of Labour (CGT), is part of a joint programme of the unions with the Sarkozy government to deal with the economic crisis at the expense of the working class.

This is the seventh call this year by the trade unions for a national one-day protest. The millions who responded to the January 29 and March 19 mobilisations dwindled by October 7 to less than 3,000 in Paris and barely 2,000 in Marseille. Workers are beginning to see that the unions, rather than being opponents of government policy, are its defenders.

The CGT (France's main trade union confederation, close to the Stalinist French Communist Party) claims that the day of action is part of a campaign against unemployment. This is entirely bogus. Its leaflets for the mobilisation stress the need for "a sustainable industrial policy" for French industry. This is an integral part of a joint initiative with the government—"a very good idea from Bernard Thibault [CGT leader]" according to Sarkozy—of meetings and consultations between industry bosses, the unions and government representatives. They will culminate next February in a national convention to establish a "new industrial policy for France."

A crucial element of the CGT/Sarkozy strategy is the attempt to bamboozle workers into a nationalist conflict with their class brothers and sisters abroad. The CGT Métallurgie (Engineering) leaflet for the protest begins with a quotation from Sarkozy that "a country could not be economically strong if it did not have a strong industry" and goes on to condemn "relocations or new plants in low-cost countries."

The current world crisis is the worst since the 1929 crash, and possibly worse. It has driven the numbers in the world facing starvation to 1 billion and many

believe that it is only in its initial stages. An International Labour Organisation report issued June 3 notes: "The last quarter of 2008 and the first quarter of 2009 have seen rapid and synchronized falls in investment, consumption, output and trade worldwide, leading to massive employment losses in very many countries." The ILO director general, Juan Somavia, said that the experience of past crises indicates that recovery of employment comes only after a "lag of four to five years." On October 5 he again commented: "For people losing their jobs, the crisis is not over."

The CGT's programme is not designed to address these issues, or to recover the 100,000 jobs lost over the past six months in the French motor and allied industries. Nor is it aimed at preventing the 300,000 jobs scheduled to go in the immediate future, or to address the 600,000 increase in overall jobless figures predicted for 2009. It is designed to force workers to accept the destruction of their rights and living standards in order to ensure the survival and competitiveness of French industry and big business in the cutthroat conditions of the world recession and the scramble for resources.

The CGT merely calls for tripartite negotiations along the lines of the Thibault/Sarkozy plan. At no point does its leaflet suggest that industry should be controlled by the working class as a public utility, or suggest a joint fight by workers internationally against the crisis.

The class war waged against the working class by Sarkozy is inseparably bound up with the intensification of trade war and imperialist militarism, represented by the interventions of the French armed forces in Afghanistan, Somalia and elsewhere.

At Continental Clairoux this year the CGT and other unions engaged in tripartite negotiations with the bosses and the government leading to a deal that closed

the factory, with the loss of all its 1,120 jobs. Hailed as a victory, the €50,000 redundancy payment for every employee came with a union guarantee not to mobilise against the sackings and closures at Continental's factories throughout Europe. It also left workers in firms supplying the Clairoix plant high and dry. Workers at Molex, Faurecia and Caterpillar can tell similar stories.

In 2007 the CGT and the other rail unions, in "round table" tripartite talks with management and the government, stifled the two national rail workers' strikes and negotiated the end of the railway workers' special pension schemes.

The CGT puts forward the need to increase salaries, pensions and reduce working hours. But the 35-hour week and statutory limits on the workweek were abandoned voluntarily by the CGT and CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour, France's second largest union, close to the Socialist Party) as part of the deal with Sarkozy known as the "April 9, 2008, Common Position on union representation, the development of social dialogue and the financing on trade unions." As a payback, the main unions achieved enhanced collaboration with management in company affairs along with improved career prospects for their officials.

The situation in the US motor industry is indicative of developments all over the world, including France. The decision by President Obama to allow GM to go bankrupt and to re-establish its profitable parts—having shed tens of thousands of jobs, halved wage levels, and destroyed health care rights, along with pensions—is part of a strategy of pauperising workers and bringing them into line with Asian rates of pay. The United Auto Workers union negotiated these measures in return for management of the workers' health benefit funds, which were converted into company stock, making the union a major employer of GM workers alongside the other shareholders.

This is what is in store for workers in Europe and elsewhere. The actions of the unions in cooperating with Sarkozy's recovery plan for industry will take the same route. War abroad in Afghanistan, Iraq and possibly Iran, and austerity at home are part of the same response to the capitalist crisis, which each government seeks to overcome through nationalism and protectionist measures, aided and abetted by the unions

in each country.

A left cover for the unions is provided by the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) and Lutte Ouvrière (LO). Both hailed the sellout at Clairoix as a "victory." The NPA has given written guarantees that it will offer no challenge to the CGT and other unions' betrayals. After the CGT refused to go to the NPA's summer school because it was attended by workers critical of Thibault (notably Xavier Mathieu of Continental Clairoix), the NPA met with the CGT on October 1 and told it—according to its own report—"that its fear of the building of an NPA faction in the CGT was groundless."

The unions and the traditional parties of the working class are entirely complicit with government and big business throughout the world as the conditions of workers and youth are being driven down to the level of the hungry '30s. The ex-radical left work to maintain the influence of the unions and the Communist and Socialist parties.

What is required is the construction, in a revolt against these organisations, of independent parties of the working class, armed with an internationalist programme for the socialist expropriation of the economy under the democratic control of the workers. We urge workers and youth to establish independent rank-and-file committees of action and to participate with the ICFI in building parties in France, Europe and internationally.



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