

France: CGT congress confirms orientation to Sarkozy

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9 January 2010

The General Confederation of Labour (CGT) held its 49th congress December 7-11. The CGT is France's largest union and historically allied to the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF). Bernard Thibault was re-elected general secretary of the CGT for a three-year term—a post he has held since 1999.

The overall political aim of the congress was to confirm the policy of close collaboration between the CGT's Thibault and France's right-wing President Nicolas Sarkozy, which has been in place since the latter was elected in May 2007.

Coming into the congress, the main challenge for leading union officials was how to maintain an appearance of opposition without endangering the relations the CGT has been forging with conservatives. For this reason, the union confederation withdrew its invitation to François Chérèque, the general secretary of the right-wing French Democratic Confederation of Labour (CFDT), close to the thoroughly discredited Socialist Party. Thibault explained, "It is more than probable that his presence would have given a small minority of delegates an opportunity to shout out insults."

For its part, the CFDT stated, "This unfortunate hitch must not change the relations between the two general secretaries and the process of inter-union dialogue in operation since the beginning of 2009."

For the first time since 1947, there was an alternative candidate for the post of general secretary: Jean-Pierre Delannoy, a former Communist Party member and a leading official of the CGT engineering workers' union from Nord Pas-de-Calais. He was put forward by the *Où va la CGT?* (Where is the CGT going?) collective. This collective comprises, according to Delannoy, a collection of "left" political tendencies: "Around me I

have discovered that there are guys from the NPA [New Anti-capitalist Party of Olivier Besancenot], LO [*Lutte Ouvrière*], Maoists, comrades from the [Communist] Party, and even Socialist Party supporters."

However, the CGT rules did not allow his candidature, which he had submitted late.

Delannoy's principal role is to channel the discontent of workers with Thibault, while avoiding substantive criticisms of the cosy relationship between the CGT and Sarkozy. Thus, he told the magazine *Challenges*, "That a general secretary should have a relationship with the government and the president is one thing, but when 400,000 jobs are lost in a year, when the workers of Freescale, of Caterpillar, of Continental, and other companies are experiencing huge redundancy plans, at a certain moment you have to be close to those who are suffering. Nothing has been done in this direction."

Delannoy's opposition made little impact on the congress. The policy documents submitted by the outgoing leadership achieved majorities of 70 to 80 percent, and the new executive commission was elected by over 90 percent.

These results reveal that decisive sections of the CGT apparatus are solidly behind the policies of Thibault, who has become one of the main props of bourgeois political rule in France.

There is certainly nothing new about the allegiance of the CGT to capitalism, as it was the main instrument of the Communist Party when it betrayed the general strikes of 1936 and 1968. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the CGT left the World Federation of Trade Unions (the Stalinist-run union organization) and joined the ETUC (European Trade Union Confederation)—dominated by openly pro-capitalist unions such as the CFDT.

However, the election of Sarkozy in May 2007 inaugurated a new stage in the integration of the CGT into French state strategy.

Sarkozy's ability to remain in power is directly based on the unions, on the one hand, and on far-right nationalism, on the other. Even more than Sarkozy's efforts to siphon off the neo-fascist National Front's electorate, this nationalism is fomented by the Communist Party, the NPA, and other forces of the so-called "left," which more or less actively support the war in Afghanistan and a law against the Muslim burqa in France. The central role of the CGT is to organise a semblance of dissent, prepared with the agreement of the government, and thus to prevent the development of any threatening movement of political opposition.

The hidden side of this cooperation has been revealed in the press, notably in the weekly *Marianne*. In a 2007 article, "Why Sarkozy wants to save Bernard Thibault's CGT," *Marianne* reported the relationship that developed in 2004 between Sarkozy (then minister of finance) and Thibault, at the time of a "reform" of the state electricity and gas utility EDF-GDF, i.e., the preparation of its privatisation.

Threatening to reveal "the management of the social funds of the [union] works committee," provided by EDF-GDF, which is effectively a CGT slush fund, Sarkozy found that Thibault preferred to make "a limited concession." After "several months of well-controlled industrial actions, a *modus vivendi* was found: the legal status of the company would be changed but...the promise (later betrayed) was made that the state would always have the majority holding of EDF-GDF's capital."

After his election, Sarkozy remembered this precious collaboration with Thibault—notably during the rail workers' strike in the autumn of 2007 against the reform of their pension scheme. Sarkozy's councillor Claude Guéant said that, by accepting the principle of 40 annuities [40 years' service] and the penalty for failure to complete them, "Thibault ensured that the crisis could be resolved from day one." *Marianne* added, "Sarkozy appreciated the fact that the CGT general secretary berated the students who wanted to blockade the stations and even phoned Olivier Besancenot, the spokesperson of the LCR (now the NPA), to call on him not to politicise an industrial dispute." Of course, Besancenot and the LCR

complied.

What remains of the "militant" reputation of the CGT is dependent on its ability to hide what it does from workers. *Marianne* praises Thibault for being "too intelligent a politician to affix his signature imprudently to any agreement."

In another *Marianne* article, "When Sarkozy joins the CGT," the government expresses its gratitude. The minister of labour, Xavier Darcos, found Thibault "a very responsible, very reliable, very intelligent" individual. A colleague of the former minister of labour added, "It's an inexpressible delight to work with the CGT—it's forthright, you know where you stand." The economic analyst and consultant Alain Minc "speaks without reserve of the 'joint exercise' of power" between Sarkozy and the CGT.

The CGT has been invaluable in stifling workers' opposition during the present economic crisis. While hundreds of thousands of workers are being thrown out of work, an advisor to Sarkozy explains that "It has been a miraculous autumn...not a boss kidnapped, not a student on the streets, not a demonstration.... Sarkozy and Thibault have kept the discontent under control, together they have doused the fires, and so we have peaceably got through a dreadful period."

Apart from pointing out that such a policy has nothing to do with socialism and Marxism, which Stalinism has falsely claimed to embody, there is little to add to this portrait of the CGT. This union, sometimes characterised as "militant," is in fact one of the principal defenders of France's established order.



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