For revolutionary socialist opposition to Sarkozy's austerity

Alex Lantier, Kumaran Ira
23 June 2010

Workers marching in France against pension cuts on June 24 are at a crossroads. Broad masses of workers are concluding that old forms of opposition—"days of action" called by the trade unions—will not halt the austerity policies of the ruling class.

Instead, after receiving hundreds of billions in public bailout money, the banks are using panics on government debt markets to relentlessly press for more anti-working-class measures. As the latest wave of cuts spreads from Greece to Portugal and Spain, and from Britain to France, it is obvious: the banks are prepared to attack workers of any and all countries, in a race to the bottom in living standards.

The rape of Greece is a warning of what the financial aristocracy is preparing internationally. Social-democratic Prime Minister George Papandreou is slashing wages and social spending by 20, 30, and 50 percent. Workers are to be set back generations amid a wave of ineffectual strikes, led by unions controlled by Papandreou's own PASOK party.

Society faces a historic failure of capitalism. Arguments last month between French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel over how to pay for the bailouts grew so heated that Sarkozy reportedly threatened to quit the euro. In response, European Central Bank Director Jean-Claude Trichet said that the world situation was the "most difficult" since 1939-1945, and perhaps since 1914-1918.

Trichet's remarkable reference to the two world wars is a stark warning of the intensity of the crisis. Workers face a situation unprecedented in France since the Great Depression, and the May-June 1936 general strike that broke out after the election of the Popular Front government.

Sentiment for a general strike is rising, as workers correctly conclude that the unions' one-day strikes bring them nothing. A recent poll found that 58 percent of the French population does not believe one-day union protests will stop the pension cuts. Asked to choose the most effective way to defend social rights, 67 percent chose a general strike.

The outbreak of mass strikes will be welcomed by every class-conscious worker: only resolute action will halt the onslaught of the financial aristocracy. However, a united strike of the entire working class will only make clear the more fundamental political problems facing working people.

A general strike inevitably poses the question of state power: who determines what happens after workers return to work?

Writing in 1920 against social-democratic opponents of the Russian Revolution, Leon Trotsky noted that the general strike "in itself cannot produce the solution of the problem, because it exhausts the forces of the proletariat sooner than those of its enemies, and this, sooner or later, forces the workers to return to the factories. The general strike acquires a decisive importance only as a preliminary to a conflict between the proletariat and the armed forces of the opposition" (*Terrorism and Communism*).

Trotsky's comments were fully confirmed by events. Surprised by the 1936 general strike, *Parti communiste français* (PCF) leader Maurice Thorez famously demanded: "One must know how to end a strike as soon as its demands have been met." As part of its pact to preserve French capitalism as a Kremlin ally against Germany, the PCF told workers not to strike except on trade unions' call, and quietly coordinated its actions with the government. The Popular Front government itself was soon mobilising troops against striking workplaces.

Four years later, the PCF and the rest of the Comintern were allied with Hitler under the Nazi-Soviet Pact, and pro-Nazi sentiment in the ruling class was hastening France's capitulation to Nazi Germany.

These historical questions, seen from the side of the ruling class, preoccupy leading trade unionists and the bourgeois "left" today. Detailing his meeting with European Commission President José Manuel Barroso, European Trade Union Confederation chief John Monks warned that "this is 1931" and that Europe "ended up with militarist dictatorship" in the 1930s.

Monks explained: "I had a discussion with Barroso last

© World Socialist Web Site

Friday about what can be done for Greece, Spain, Portugal and the rest, and his message was blunt: 'Look, if they do not carry out these austerity packages, these countries could virtually disappear in the way that we know them as democracies.' ... He shocked us with an apocalyptic vision of democracies in Europe collapsing because of the state of indebtedness."

He concluded, "Greece obviously does have to change. It does have to tighten up.… They haven't got a choice, Greece. They've got to comply with what they've been given." In short, social opposition must be manipulated and stifled, so the ruling class can carry out peacefully measures it would otherwise need dictatorship to enforce. This is the cowardly perspective of operatives totally loyal to the financial aristocracy.

Such perspectives dominate the trade unions and "left" establishment. CGT union leader Bernard Thibault is suddenly reconsidering his public support for Sarkozy's cuts. After spending the last four months arranging the details of pension cuts with Sarkozy, Thibault reassured RTL radio: "A government does not necessarily fall because one of its projects does not go through." Even if this cut is temporarily delayed, Thibault implies, Sarkozy can stay—to pass the cuts once the political climate has shifted.

The *Parti socialiste* (PS), the French bourgeoisie's left party of rule, has also done an about-face, claiming it would bring retirement age back to 60 if elected to the presidency in 2012. This is a grotesque lie from a pro-austerity party. The 1997-2002 Plural Left (PS-PCF-Greens) government ignored calls by sections of the PS during the election campaign to reverse conservative Prime Minister Edouard Balladur's 1993 pension cuts. This January, PS First Secretary Martine Aubry called for pension cuts and increasing the retirement age by two years.

The bourgeois "left" and the unions in fact play leading roles in planning the cuts. The state Pensions Advisory Council (*Conseil d'orientation des retraites*, COR) panel includes PS deputy Pascal Terrasse and senator René Teulade, the PCF's Maxime Gremetz and members of all the main unions, including the CGT's Jean-Christophe Le Duigou and the CFDT's Jean-Louis Malys. The COR helped plan the 2003 and 2007 pension cuts; its April report called for more cutbacks to deal with public deficits.

The most preposterous proposal came from the middle-class *Nouveau parti anticapitaliste*. Asked if he supported a general strike, NPA spokesman Olivier Besancenot said: "It's the only solution, faced with an oligarchy imposing an incredible relationship of forces. [Last year's strike in] Guadeloupe gives the example to follow, a united and radical movement."

Such claims testify to the NPA's political unseriousness. Aiming to obtain limited subsidies from the state, the small businessmen and local officials leading the Guadeloupe strike signed a rotten deal with Sarkozy to stifle and end the strike. Such political strangulation of workers' opposition has led to the current crisis—yet Besancenot holds it up as a "radical" example to follow!

The revolutionary tasks of the coming movement of the European working class make such a settlement impossible. Subordinating the financial markets to the needs of the working class means nationalising banks and major industries, under the democratic control of the working class—that is, the establishment of socialism. A confrontation with the ruling class is inevitable.

The outbreak of mass protests and strikes is on the agenda. It can proceed only through the creation of workers' committees, independent of the trade unions. The experience of the 1995 general assemblies—created to coordinate strikes and protests during France's rail strikes—is critical, however, to understanding the challenges this will pose to workers.

Politically dominated by the unions and middle-class parties, lacking a perspective of opposition to the government, those assemblies dissolved and workers were forced back to work, defeated. When workers are armed with a political perspective, however, such organisations can become centers of political power to rival and then replace the banks and the capitalist state—as did the Soviets of revolutionary Russia in 1917.

The International Committee of the Fourth International—the orthodox Trotskyist movement—calls on workers to join the struggle for socialism. It has the established the *World Socialist Web Site* as an international organ to report on and provide perspectives for the struggles of the working class. It invites socialist-minded workers and intellectuals to read and contact the WSWS, and fight to build the ICFI as the revolutionary party of the international proletariat.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site