

Struggle against Sarkozy's austerity measures requires a new socialist perspective

Alex Lantier

6 September 2010

Workers marching in the union-organized September 7 demonstrations against French President Nicolas Sarkozy's pension cuts are at a political crossroads. However many people join the march, it will by itself produce no effective political expression of their legitimate anger at being plundered by the financial aristocracy. Amid the greatest crisis of world capitalism since the 1930s, new forms of working class politics and social mobilization are required.

Repeated one-day actions against Sarkozy have not stopped him from cutting pensions, increasing the work week, and slashing social spending. As shown by his proposals for fascistic law-and-order legislation, including plans for the mass jailing and deportation of immigrants, they have also failed to stop a dangerous erosion of democratic rights that paves the way for large-scale police repression.

The role of one-day protests in politically disarming the workers was made particularly clear by the recent European financial crisis. The Greek unions and Social Democratic Prime Minister Giorgios Papandreou rapidly submitted to the orders of financiers represented by the European Union (EU) and International Monetary Fund (IMF). While the unions run by Papandreou's PASOK party organized impotent one-day protests, the government passed a series of attacks adding up to a staggering 30 percent average cut in Greek workers' living standards.

This is the EU-IMF plan not only for Greece, but for all the advanced countries, including France. Prime Minister François Fillon recently praised Bernard Thibault, chief of the Stalinist-linked CGT union, for "playing his part" in organizing the September 7 marches. Extending the metaphor, he could have added that Thibault's lines were read from a script written by Sarkozy and approved by France's creditors among the major banks.

Thibault is continuing to negotiate pension cuts with

Labor Minister Eric Woerth, while noting with regret that Woerth has been discredited by new revelations of his corrupt relations with billionaire Liliane Bettencourt. This is because the CGT supports Sarkozy's cuts, based on the cold economic logic of the CGT's defense of French capitalism. In the world struggle for profits and markets after the outbreak of the economic crisis in 2008, the only way for French capitalism to stay globally competitive is to slash wages and social spending.

Bitter experience is shattering illusions that one-day protests will pressure the state into abandoning right-wing policies. One June poll found that 58 percent of the population thought they would produce no results, though 67 percent supported a general strike. Every working class action in Europe that seriously threatened to disrupt the banks' austerity drive has been met with brutal repression. The military was used in Greece to break the truck drivers' strike. In Spain, strikes by the Madrid metro workers and air traffic controllers have been met with threats of intervention by the military.

The question facing workers is: what new perspective and what new forms of action offer a way forward?

Capitalism—both the "neo-liberal" Anglo-American version and its sclerotic European cousin, the "social market economy"—has failed. Workers must wage a revolutionary struggle for socialism, that is, for state power and democratic control of production by the working class internationally. The dictatorship of the financial aristocracy must give way to the rule of the majority.

The bankruptcy of the unions and their allies among the "left" parties forcefully raises the question of the historical legacy of Leon Trotsky, co-leader with Lenin of the 1917 Revolution and founder of the Fourth International, assassinated on Stalin's orders in 1940. His name is imperishably associated with the Marxist critique of the class-collaborationist policies of the trade unions,

social-democrats, and all brands of Stalinism, and to the struggle for world socialist revolution.

The struggle for Trotskyism in the working class is inseparable from the struggle to oppose and expose the petty-bourgeois politics of the existing parties in France claiming to descend from Trotskyism. They are experts at using pseudo-revolutionary phraseology to justify alliances with the political establishment, despite its anti-social policies.

The speech by Olivier Besancenot at the Port Leucate summer school of the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA)—founded by the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, which once claimed to be associated with Trotsky—is a typical example of this political genre. For Besancenot, it is not the pro-capitalist political leaderships but the workers who are to blame for the passage of Sarkozy's cuts. "The first reflex in the popular classes is not initially collective revolt," he declared. "Too often, it is getting by, each for himself, individualism and jealousy. People look at others' social gains and think they are privileges, or worse."

Besancenot repeated his long-standing proposals to ally with factions of the ruling class that are out of power, notably the Parti Socialiste (PS). He also noted criticisms of Sarkozy from within the right wing, saying that "potential splits in the possessing classes" might lead to victory. He drew a parallel between today's situation and "the big strike in 1936 with the Popular Front [in France]," calling for a "unitary campaign" of the unions and "left" parties.

Such comments make crystal clear why the NPA was founded on the basis of a rejection of Trotskyism as a political orientation. Trotsky's writings on the 1936 Popular Front—a political alliance between the bourgeois Radical Party, the social-democrats, and the Stalinist Communist Party—are an indictment of Besancenot's politics.

Trotsky mercilessly criticized the Popular Front as a cartel blocking the independent struggle of the working class. He wrote : "[W]e are told, not without indignation, the People's Front is not a cartel at all, but a mass movement. There is, of course, no lack of pompous definitions, but they do not change the nature of things. The job of the cartel always consisted in *putting a brake* upon the mass movement, directing it into the channels of class collaboration... Joint meetings, parade processions, oaths, mixing the banners of the Commune and of Versailles, noise, bedlam, demagoguery—all these serve a single aim: to curb and demoralize the mass movement."

Trotsky branded advocates of "united" struggles alongside sections of the bourgeoisie, rather than proletarian revolution, as political criminals. "Should the leadership of the People's Front (Herriot-Blum-Cachin-Thorez-Zyromsky-Pivert) succeed in remaining on its feet in the course of the entire approaching and decisive period," Trotsky warned, the existing regime would "inevitably give way to fascism." He continued : "The condition for the victory of the proletariat is the *liquidation of the present leadership*. The slogan of 'unity' becomes under these conditions not only a stupidity but a crime."

Trotsky's predictions were tragically realized. After organizing the sell-out of the revolutionary opportunity of 1936 general strike in exchange for wage increases, the Popular Front brutally repressed strikes by the working class until it collapsed in 1938. As fascist sentiment spread throughout the bourgeoisie, whose mantra became "rather Hitler than Blum," France was invaded by Nazi Germany in 1940 and quickly capitulated.

Europe and the world today stand on the brink of immense class struggles that will ultimately be no less explosive than those of the 1930s. The ruling class' drive to reduce workers to penury will be met with bitter resistance.

The critical issue facing workers and socialist-minded intellectuals today is what political perspective can lead these struggles to victory. The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the world Trotskyist movement, warns workers that they will suffer the most tragic defeats if they remain captive to the illusions spread by the PS, the CGT and the NPA. It calls upon workers to read its publication, the *World Socialist Web Site*, and join the struggle for Trotskyism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact