

French unions, “left” allies undermine resistance to pension cuts

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On September 15, France’s National Assembly adopted the unpopular pension reform, which includes raising the minimum retirement age from 60 to 62 and raising the age for retirement on a full pension from 65 to 67. The bill was passed by a majority of 329 votes with 233 opposed. The bill is expected to become a law by late October.

The vote on the pension reform came after over 2.5 million workers and youth marched, and as many struck against the government’s cuts, in the union-organised September 7 national day of action.

On the day of the vote in parliament, hundreds of workers and trade union militants gathered at the Place de la Concorde—across the River Seine from the National Assembly—to protest the bill. Trade unions have called another day of action on September 23, after the event, to protest the reform.

The government is able to impose these cuts in the face of mass popular opposition only because there is no attempt to rally the working class for a political struggle against it. In posturing as opponents of the reform, the unions and pseudo-left parties like the Nouveau Parti Anti-Capitaliste (NPA) are cynically misleading the population. In fact, they are helping to pass the cuts by diverting workers’ resistance to austerity policies into one-day actions that are large, but impotent.

In fact, the unions support the cuts, and the petty-bourgeois pseudo-left parties support the unions. This is the political conclusion to be drawn not only from repeated one-day protest actions that have failed to stop social cuts in France, but from the statements of these organizations themselves.

In July, *Le Monde* columnist Michel Noblecourt quoted Bernard Thibault, the general secretary of the CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail, General Confederation of Labour, close to the Communist Party). He noted that Thibault “refuses...to call for the withdrawal of the planned reform, as he considers that ‘measures’ are necessary to ensure the pension system’s financial equilibrium. ‘I refuse to get into a strategy of all or nothing’, he says. ‘Speaking of a general strike is stupidity’”.

Bureaucrats like Thibault fully accept the government’s pro-capitalist premises. Thibault wants the cost of financing state deficits to be borne by the working class, in the form of social

cuts that will cheapen labour and help the French bourgeoisie’s competitive position on global markets. This only begs the question: why do the unions call strikes against measures that they support?

Top state officials—who negotiate the social cuts with the unions—see the one-day strikes as critical to passing the reforms, by making it seem that popular opposition has been taken into account. On France 2 television, Prime Minister François Fillon said, “With each past reform, there has been opposition, there have been demonstrations.... And finally, each past reform has been integrated into the social heritage of our country”.

In a September 11 interview with *Le Monde*, Jean-Marie Pernet of the Institute of Political Studies (Sciences-Po) bluntly called these protests “an episode in the process of producing the reforms”. Noting that determined strike action could bring the French economy to a halt and block the state’s cuts, Pernet added, “Raymond Soubie [President Nicolas Sarkozy’s social counsellor] pays more attention to strikes than to demonstrations”.

However, Pernet said, “French unions no longer seem to dispose of” the ability to call strikes. This is itself somewhat misleading, as the unions still retain legal authority to call strikes: the inactivity of the unions is for political, not legal, reasons. Unions do not call major industrial action because they would be directed against social cuts that the union leadership supports.

This is also the experience of the recent economic crisis in Greece. Last year, George Papandreou’s social-democratic PASOK government was elected with false promises that he would pass a €3 billion social program to improve workers’ living standards. Soon after taking power, he slashed social spending, cut public sector wages and raised the retirement age. The estimated average cut in Greek workers’ purchasing power has been a staggering 30 percent.

The PASOK-controlled GSEE and ADEDY trade unions worked closely with the PASOK government to disorient the working class, successfully implementing draconian cuts to wages and social spending. They called several national days of action, while negotiating the cuts with Papandreou. When an independent strike by Greek truckers threatened to halt the

Greek economy and throw Papandreou's cuts into question, however, the union bureaucracy supported Papandreou's use of the army to crush the strike.

The unions called protests not because they opposed the cuts, but to mask their collaboration with the state and the financial oligarchy against the working class. The current pension cut is part of a broad attack on workers' living standards by the European ruling class, as the banks and financial markets threaten to hold up lending to different national governments in Europe.

The French government has widely commented in the financial press on its fears that credit-rating agencies could take away France's top-grade AAA credit rating, unless it cuts spending. It plans to slash public spending by €100 billion, to bring France's public deficit down from 8 percent to the Eurozone-mandated limit of 3 percent by 2013. Combined with other planned pension cuts, the government noted that raising the retirement age will allow them to save €19 billion by 2018.

The pension cuts are being planned amid a financial scandal rocking the Sarkozy government. Sarkozy and his Labour Minister Eric Woerth—who is in charge of the pension reform—allegedly obtained illegal campaign funding from France's richest woman Liliane Bettencourt, who received €100 million in tax refunds from Sarkozy's tax breaks for the wealthy.

There are rising signs of popular opposition to the unions. In France, one poll found that after the September 7 demonstration, 62 percent of the population thought "there had to be follow-through" with more days of action. In another poll, however, 63 percent said they did not believe one-day protests would have any impact on pension cuts—a position borne out by bitter experience with many social cuts passed by Sarkozy after a few one-day protests.

Under conditions where the working class is objectively coming into confrontation with the unions, pseudo-left parties like the NPA play a critical role in disorienting the population. They present union-controlled protests as real social struggle. This is, however, an attempt to salvage the political establishment's credibility and thus block a movement of the workers against the oligarchic interests it defends.

The NPA works closely with the established bourgeois "left" parties—the Parti Socialiste (PS) and its satellite allies like the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) and the Greens. It insists that the unity of the entire left in support of the unions' day of action is vital to fight against the cuts.

At the NPA's summer university in August, the NPA's spokesman Olivier Besancenot said, "The social crisis may turn into a political crisis and then a crisis of the entire regime. But this will only be possible on one condition—that on the side of the left, no one trembles. We have to hold firm, demanding not the rewriting of the bill but its retraction". He then called for a "general strike as part of an overall movement".

Besancenot's call for a "general strike" is misleading and

false. He does not propose an independent movement of the workers against the political establishment's austerity measures, but a union-controlled movement in conjunction with bourgeois "left" parties. On LCI-RTL television, Besancenot explained, "With the PS, we can join forces, if not join our programs".

Were it to be successful, the inevitable result of such a movement would be a return to power by the PS on a Papandreou-style austerity program—that is, the continuation under conditions of the current economic crisis of the unpopular austerity and privatisation policies of PS President François Mitterrand and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin.

While this was openly admitted by leading PS officials earlier in the year, they are now changing their positions in order to facilitate collaboration with the NPA and PCF. They now claim to support returning the retirement age to 60, while temporarily halting debate inside their party on what other policies would be adopted.

Leading "left" officials who have adopted such positions admit that, in fact, the PS still supports social austerity. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a former PS member now politically allied to the PCF, explained, "I will answer as hypocritically as possible, we have decided to pretend we are in agreement amongst ourselves, and we are perfectly aware that such is not the case".

The precondition for a real struggle against austerity measures is for the struggles of the working class to develop independently and in opposition to the unions and the political establishment. The precondition for such struggle is the utter discrediting of the class-collaborationist views of the unions and petty-bourgeois parties.

The authors also recommend:

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