

French state, unions seek to disarm strikes against pension cuts

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After 3 million workers marched in the September 23 day of action against President Nicolas Sarkozy's pension cuts, the ruling class is concluding that it has vastly underestimated popular opposition to government policy. The cuts increase the minimum retirement age from 60 to 62 and the limit for obtaining a full pension from 65 to 67. The cuts are estimated to cost workers €4 billion a year, and are widely seen as dictated by oligarchic interests.

Politicians and union bureaucrats are now pushing for minor changes in the bill, amid calls for more toothless "days of action." These cynical manoeuvres aim to mask a basic truth: the only way for workers to oppose the cuts is through mass industrial action, organised independently from and against union leaders and the state.

The cast of right-wing characters calling for cosmetic changes to the cuts includes the government itself. At a meeting of the ruling conservative UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) on Friday, Prime Minister François Fillon insisted: "We will not take back the reform we've prepared, as it is necessary and reasonable." He said, however, that the Senate, which must still ratify the cuts, should "debate" changes and "evaluate all proposals."

UMP Senate leader Gérard Larcher has said he might, for instance, support leaving the full pension age at 65 for women who have had several children, ostensibly to make the impact of the cuts more equally balanced for men and women.

The only proviso, Fillon said, was that "the main parameters of the reform" and its "financial equilibrium" should not change. That is, the workers should collectively lose just as much to the financial aristocracy after the changes as before.

Like all the forces claiming to oppose Sarkozy, the bourgeois "left" Parti Socialiste (PS) has done an about-face. After its regional election victory this spring, it sent its accredited free-marketeers to speak on social policy. PS deputy Manuel Valls told *Le Monde*: "The left can advocate an à la carte pension system and increasing the pay-in period."

Now, however, the PS claims to firmly defend retiring at 60. During the day of action, PS secretary Martine Aubry did her best to recall the vague "radical" language of the 1970s: "My only goal is to show that another France is possible, more fair and efficient."

The unions are also changing their tune. Having negotiated the cuts—in July, CGT General Secretary Bernard Thibault denounced calls for a general strike against cuts as "stupidity"—they now caution against moving to implement them.

A September 24 joint trade union statement declared: "The unions warn the government of the consequences of ignoring the profound anger now being expressed.... They confirm the language of their unitary open letter to the President of the Republic and to parliamentarians: 'voting this bill in its current logic is not now on the agenda.'"

It called new days of action for October 2 and October 12. The decision of the unions to make the next mobilisation a Saturday demonstration and to postpone strike action for 19 days was carefully calibrated to stifle any move towards sustained industrial action.

Even ex-Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin—a rival of Sarkozy's in the UMP, and who still faces legal charges from Sarkozy in the Clearstream Affair—has called for the withdrawal of the pension cuts. An unpopular right-wing politician, forced out of office in 2006 by mass demonstrations against his First Job Contract (CPE) labour reform, he echoed the criticisms from the unions and bourgeois "left."

He said: "We can get a reform through, that's not the essential question. It is important that the reform be fair and good for all Frenchmen. I remembered a top union leader at the time of the CPE, who said I could get the reform through, but it will provoke a movement of the youth, and then no one knows where that will go. It's all the more reason to listen to them—more than I did at the time, in 2006."

Workers can give no confidence to this coalition of Stalinist union bureaucrats, recently defrocked "Socialist" high priests of the free market, and right-wing pseudo-nobles preaching the doctrine of "Do as I say, not as I do" to Sarkozy. They do not oppose social austerity—which they helped impose when in power—but seek to delay the cuts, to avoid provoking uncontrolled opposition in the working class.

The impetus for cuts comes not from Sarkozy's personal megalomania, but from the intense crisis of world capitalism. Facing competition from cheap-labour producers in Asia and Latin America, the old imperialist powers are trying to boost

profitability and reestablish their competitiveness by slashing wages and social spending. The French state, in particular, aims to cut its yearly deficit by €100 billion at the expense of the workers.

The CGT, other unions and their political appendages support the cuts, and have not organised industrial action against them, because they want to defend the competitiveness of French capitalism.

The corrupt ties of billionaire Liliane Bettencourt, owner of a L'Oréal fortune inherited from her ex-fascist family, with Labour Minister Eric Woerth—who is tasked with pushing through the cuts—have exposed the class character of this policy.

There is rising recognition in the working class that the one-day protests cannot stop Sarkozy's austerity measures. A June poll found that 58 percent of the population did not believe they would stop the cuts; 67 percent thought that a general strike would be the most effective opposition. The results of the repeated one-day protests in Greece—which did not halt social-democratic Prime Minister George Papandreou's massive cuts—are a warning to workers internationally.

The ruling class has also developed weapons against this development in the working class—notably, the petty-bourgeois Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA), which is redoubling its efforts to sow illusions in the unions and the political establishment. It has issued a September 24 statement applauding the unions' calling of more days of action.

Reprising its longstanding praise for the CPE struggle, it wrote that governments like Sarkozy's have many times been "forced to suddenly and ignominiously retreat. This was the case in December 1995 against the Juppé plan [for pension cuts] and in 2006 against the Villepin law for the CPE."

For the NPA, the very partial retreats carried out by the government in 1995 and 2006 are proof that collaboration with the bureaucracy and political establishment can be fruitful. This reflects only its indifference to the conditions facing the working class; the real lessons of these events are entirely different.

Since the 1995 and 2006 struggles did not evolve into political struggles against the ruling class and its agenda of cuts, they became opportunities for the bourgeoisie to reorganise its political personnel. They led to the 1997 election of a PS government that carried mass privatisations of public firms, and in 2007 to the election of Sarkozy on a free-market, austerity platform.

The only effective opposition will be mass industrial action by the working class, directed against the unions and existing parties, who support Sarkozy's cuts.

Such a struggle will transform political life, with revolutionary implications. Threatening the fundamental interests and world position of French and international finance capital, it will face the most determined resistance. We must recall that the army was used recently in an attempt to break

strikes by Greek truckers and that the Spanish government threatened to do so against Madrid subway workers and air traffic controllers.

That a coming mass radicalisation of the working class against the political establishment is the main issue today is tacitly acknowledged even by the ruling class.

In its Saturday editorial, France's "centre-left" daily of record *Le Monde* wrote: "Nicolas Sarkozy would be extremely imprudent to make people think that, on pension cuts, he has already won." It acknowledged that the cuts were driven by "financial considerations of satisfying the ratings agencies." It added that the unions did not have any "exaggerated illusions" in their chances of victory, as the Senate would vote the cut in October.

It explained, however, that the main risk was destroying the unions' ability to stifle the struggles of the working class: "Faced with Mr. Sarkozy, the unions have acted with great responsibility. Thus Bernard Thibault is resisting the temptations of over-activity in his base, and is careful not to demand the retraction of the reform. But if Mr. Sarkozy is inflexible and does not make substantial concessions, the unions—who will come out weakened and with no gains from their struggle—will not be able to keep the spectre of radicalisation at bay. Mr. Sarkozy's success will then resemble a Pyrrhic victory."

This is a devastating refutation of those who wrote off Marxism and the working class as a historical or political factor. More than 160 years since Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote in the *Communist Manifesto* that the spectre of communism haunted Europe, the ruling classes again fear that the working class will take on the political establishment and its "left" servants.



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