

# The New York Times' Roger Cohen attacks French workers

Alex Lantier  
18 October 2010

The mass strikes mounted in the last week by workers in France against the pension cuts of President Nicolas Sarkozy have attracted the ire of Roger Cohen, the *New York Times*' chief foreign affairs editor.

Cohen wrote a column last week while traveling to France, to meet with French Economy Minister Christine Lagarde and discuss the pension cuts and the strikes. His column ("Retirement at 62? Non!") is a prominent example of the hostility and contempt the struggles of the working class inspire in the upper-middle-class liberal philistine.

Cohen begins his column with his displeasure at being interrupted, on his arrival in France, by an announcement about the strikes. He writes, "Welcome to France! As my train emerged from the tunnel linking Britain to the European continent, the announcement came: 'As a result of the general strike, certain rail and other services will be disrupted.'" Cohen arrived safely at his destination in Paris, but he is still nursing a profound grudge against an announcement that took 15 seconds of his valuable time.

He rages: "The French now live 15 years longer on average than they did in 1950. They exist in a globalized economy where the Chinese don't get the notion of retirement... This reform is a no-brainer. Come on, France, get real!"

Mr. Cohen specializes in that style of writing which requires not a brain, but a sense of superiority and a sensitivity to the moods of the financial aristocracy. The position that the living standards of workers in different countries should be equalized upwards, not downwards, does not occur to him, even as something he would need to argue against. It is simply obvious to him that if workers in China do not have good pensions, workers in France and elsewhere should not have them, either.

In a brief attempt to prove that he is a generous man despite all appearances, Cohen puts in a disclaimer: "Europe's social solidarity is precious. Greed does not a society make."

Such empty "democratic" sentiment can be turned off whenever needed. The fact that Sarkozy is making his cuts despite the opposition of the overwhelming majority of the French people—after a campaign of ethnically-based deportation of the Roma that has attracted international condemnation—does not rate a mention in Cohen's column.

The disclaimer is, however, simply the prelude to another brainless assertion: "But reform will involve tough choices made in the knowledge that the alternative is collapse." Why is the reader supposed to believe that there are absolutely no alternatives to complete surrender to the demands of the banks? Cohen does not say.

Cohen traveled to France to commiserate with French Economy Minister Christine Lagarde. She is under consideration as a possible replacement for Prime Minister François Fillon, should Sarkozy be forced to dissolve the government. He sympathetically records her complaints: "[Sarkozy] is the one who decides. It's all a bit unsettling. You don't really know if at the end of the month you will still be around!" A more reflective writer than Cohen might note that worries about losing a job are more serious for working people who do not have Lagarde's salary and connections at top banks and law firms.

Cohen's hatred for the French working class was developed at some length in a previous column he wrote for the *New York Times*, "The Politics of the Shoe Shine." He wrote this piece while traveling in Paris in April 2008, a year into Sarkozy's term.

In this piece, Cohen describes his unhappiness at the

fact that, unlike in Chicago or Manhattan, he cannot find someone to bend down before him and shine his shoes in Paris. He writes: “Search Paris high and low for a seat to kick back and *se faire cirer les bottes*: you’ll search in vain. There’s something about the idea of having someone stooped at the feet of a client, applying polish to his or her boots, that rubs the Gallic egalitarian spirit the wrong way. It’s just not what 1789 was about.”

The reader is again left to rely on Cohen for his assessment of 1789, the French Revolution that overthrew King Louis XVI and Queen Marie-Antoinette. Cohen obviously considers himself an authority on France, as he drops dates and a few ostentatiously untranslated French phrases into his columns. However, one is left with the question: what is peculiarly French about not liking to be bent over, cleaning the shoes of an arrogant and overpaid *New York Times* journalist? Working people in America, China, and elsewhere would not enjoy it, either.

This is not particularly of concern to Mr. Cohen. He writes, “So, do I prefer shoe-shine or no-shine societies? I favor the former, because they give freer rein to the human spirit.”

It is unclear why shining shoes should liberate the human spirit. Therefore, the conclusion seems inescapable that Mr. Cohen prefers “shoe-shine societies” because they “give freer rein” to *his* “spirit.”

It would be unfair to Cohen to view this as a purely personal matter. He is speaking here not for himself, but for an entire social class of people devoted to reaping personal and financial benefits from other people’s labor.

Despite the reference to the “Gallic spirit,” the hostility to the working class transcends national boundaries. The sharp cuts in pensions in France are part of an attack on workers throughout Europe, the United States, and around the world.

Thus Cohen’s employers, the Sulzberger family that owns the *New York Times*, recently helped New York city mayor Michael Bloomberg throw a big party for Steve Rattner, the financier who US President Barack Obama appointed to oversee the restructuring of the US auto industry. While Rattner recently agreed to a \$6 million fine and a two-year ban from the securities industry to settle fraud charges, he still has many friends in the “liberal” establishment. His strategy of

cutting US auto workers’ wages from \$29 to \$14 an hour has won him the gratitude of the financial aristocracy.

During the “Green Revolution” in Iran in 2009, Cohen wrote unblushingly about the “rage” he felt when the police beat members of the Green movement—the US-backed attempt to overturn the election of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He feels no similar outrage as French riot police beat protestors in demonstrations, arrest hundreds of youth, and even shoot one of them in the face with rubber bullets. Cohen objects to the suppression of demonstrations that are in the interests of Washington, but not to the suppression of demonstrations that involve workers defending their living standards.

This thoroughly antidemocratic, aristocratic class instinct finds consummate expression in Cohen’s exasperation with 1789, the “egalitarian spirit” of the French Revolution. He returns to this theme in his current piece with Lagarde.

At the end, Cohen is won over by “French chemistry and culture and intricacies” —both in the form of Lagarde’s “elegant professionalism,” but more importantly the “gravestone of Coco, the ‘favorite dog,’ the inscription says, of Marie-Antoinette.” While admiring this gravestone, he ponders Lagarde’s words of wisdom about the global economic crisis: “We can collectively lose the moral compass without even knowing it.”

What sort of writer, in the middle of the greatest crisis of world capitalism since World War II, finds particular pleasure in admiring the canine remains of a doomed, despised monarchy? It seems Cohen is doing his level best to prove that—in this social order—the scum rises to the top.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**