

Millions march in France against austerity as opposition to Sarkozy grows

Antoine Lerougetel
4 October 2010

The growing mass opposition to President Nicolas Sarkozy's pension cuts was expressed Saturday on the streets of France—between a million and 3 million people participated in 240 demonstrations throughout the country.

Government claims that popular opposition to its pension “reform” legislation was subsiding were given the lie, with 71 percent of the population supporting the protests, according to opinion polls, up from 68 percent for the previous day of action September 23.

A TNS-Sofres opinion poll records that from a high of 63 percent of people having confidence in the newly elected president in June 2007, Sarkozy's rating has fallen at the beginning of October to 26 percent, its lowest ebb, and his disapproval rating is at 72 percent.

As it was on a non-working day the demonstrations had a high proportion of families—with babies and children—coming in groups, spontaneously, not behind trade union or political banners. WSWs reporters detected a sober, serious, rather quiet mood. Youth were often in their family group, though small numbers of high school and university students were present led by Socialist Party (PS) influenced organisations.

The numbers on the marches were similar to those on the September 7 and September 23 protests, which themselves were 40 percent greater than the ones in June. This is despite the unions' deliberate tactic of spacing out the one-day strikes to dissipate any momentum.

The protests are organised by a joint committee (*Intersyndicale*) of France's eight major union confederations, led by the Communist Party (PCF) influenced CGT (General Confederation of Labour) and the Socialist Party (PS) aligned CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour).

The *Intersyndicale* has the official support of the so-called left parties, who were all present on the protests: the PS, the PCF, the Left Party (PG), the Greens and supporters of the dissident Gaullist former prime minister Dominique de Villepin.

Saturday's protests took place five days after a one-day

general strike of 10 million Spanish workers against the Socialist Party government's savage cuts in wages, benefits and democratic rights. These measures are in line with the European Union's overall austerity policies: the reduction of government spending in order to reduce budget deficits and national debts at the behest of the banks and to save the euro at the expense of the working class. On the same day as the Spanish strike, September 29, 80,000 workers from 30 counties demonstrated in Brussels against EU policy.

Significantly, the French unions made no attempt to support this Europe-wide day of action organised by the ETUC (European Trade Union Confederation), not because they are opposed to this ultra-bureaucratic pro-capitalist organisation, of which they are all members. They did not want to expose the fact that the French Socialist Party had voted for the austerity programmes attached to the joint EU-IMF bailout for Greece, which has reduced wages by 30 percent, is destroying the social services and increasing unemployment. They are all terrified that the struggles of workers in Greece, Spain and throughout Europe will develop into a pan-European workers movement and threaten the existence of the capitalist European Union.

The fear of the movement's radicalisation is expressed by *Libération*: “The government will watch the students' mobilisation like milk on the stove....The issue of the radicalisation of the movement, already posed by some unions, will be more than ever on the agenda.” La République du Centre chides the unions and the left for inciting “the youth—you never can tell what they'll do,” as the unions and the political parties have little control over them.

None of the official union and “left” party leaflets and statements for October 2 expressed any solidarity with the Spanish and Greek workers. This includes the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA), which briefly in July had shown some interest in the ETUC initiative.

The unions and the bourgeois left maintain that Sarkozy can be made to abandon his assault on pensions by pressure from the streets. This is summed up by the September 28 NPA statement: “The determination to force the government back is well and truly there. It's possible to get it withdrawn, so we let go of nothing, we increase and harden the movement in the

coming weeks, to show Sarkozy that the street has power in this country.” Or, as Jean-Marc Ayrault the leader of the PS parliamentary group put it after the demonstrations on Saturday: “The government cannot ignore the extent of the mobilisation.”

However, prime minister François Fillon has made it clear that any modifications to the pensions bill will not upset the “equilibrium” of its financing: €70 billion must be saved by raising the retirement age to 62, the pension age to 67 and the years of contributions to 41.5 by 2018.

The entire focus of the unions’ campaign is concentrated on the person of Sarkozy. But he represents the interests of the entire French ruling elite in the face of competition from old and new global rivals, and the need to maintain France’s AAA credit ratings so as to hold down interest rates on its growing debt mountain of €1, 632 billion—the interest payment on which absorbs over 20 percent of the French budget, its largest component.

In the end, the bourgeois left and the trade unions in France share these same goals. Similarly, these forces treat the pension cuts as a single issue, thus avoiding the entire thrust of the government’s austerity policies. At the end of the Nice demonstration, CGT speakers drew easy applause by tilting at Sarkozy, but left unmentioned that their general secretary Bernard Thibault has been working consistently with the president since he was elected to help him impose his austerity measures and increase French capitalism’s competitiveness.

The intense hostility of workers and youth to the destruction of their living standards and rights also explains the administration’s turn to extreme right-wing and chauvinist policies, last seen at the government level in the 1930s, which are now being debated in the National Assembly in the teeth of protests throughout France and Europe: the revocation of immigrants’ citizenship and the persecution of Roma. This is designed to divide the working class, whip up the most reactionary elements, and build up a police state, already far advanced with the draconian legislation on terrorism and law-and-order, all supported in principle by the PS.

Former Socialist Party prime minister (1984-1986) Laurent Fabius, who played a key role in imposing austerity measures under President François Mitterrand, stated on Friday: “We need another reform which is based on the workers and revenue from capital, otherwise we’ll have to start again in three or four years.” Fabius is well aware that in fact the burden will be entirely on the workers and that increasing taxes on capital will endanger the AAA rating and that a PS government would go the way of the PASOK government in Greece and the Socialist Party in Spain.

If any further proof were needed of the reactionary policies another Socialist Party government would carry out, it is the party leadership’s support for International Monetary Fund

chief Dominique Strauss Kahn as PS candidate for the presidential elections in 2012.

First secretary Martine Aubry has said that she would not let her aspirations get in his way, as did another hopeful, former PS first secretary François Hollande. Strauss Kahn has been responsible not only for the imposition of the Greek austerity measures, but also, among others, for measures attached to the bail-out of the most poverty-stricken country in the European Union, Romania, where the government is implementing wage cuts of 25 percent and pension cuts of 15 percent to reduce the country’s budget deficit.

The NPA leaflet distributed on the demonstrations demagogically proclaims: “The success of October 2 must make it possible to build the general strike.” The NPA says nothing about the role of the unions, nor the PS and its satellites, the Communist Party and Left Party, with whom it is attempting to channel the working class and prevent it from developing its independence on a revolutionary socialist perspective.

WSWS reporters spoke to students in Paris holding a banner proclaiming: “I want to retire at 60—student at 20, unemployed at 25... still without a proper job at 67? No thanks!” One of the students, Jocelyn, said: “We live in a globalised world. Capital exploits without borders and creates these conditions, so we also need a perspective to unify the European and world’s workers to fight against their attacks.”

Armand, a pensioner, came with his family: “Of course there’s a link between austerity and the hounding of the Roma. He [Sarkozy] is appealing to the far right to use their support to do all that. The Roma are just a good opportunity for him.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact