

WSWS speaks to French workers on protests

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In the latest national day of action against President Nicolas Sarkozy's programme of pension cuts and austerity, millions of workers and students took to the streets in France October 16 in demonstrations in over 250 cities and towns.

In Paris, police put the number of marchers at 63,000, against 310,000 according to union estimates.

In Nice, there were 25,000 in the protests; in Marseille, 180,000.

The marches took place as railway workers were on the fourth day of their indefinite strike, an action that was severely disrupting train services. Dockers' and refinery workers' strikes and blockages were threatening to bring the country to a halt with petrol stations running out of supplies; the provision of fuel to the major Paris airports of Roissy and Orly was choked off and threatened to ground air transport. Tens of thousands of high school students have struck and closed down schools over the past week.

Early Friday morning, massive riot police interventions forced the dispersal of pickets blocking access to fuel depots and preventing petrol lorries from filling up and replenishing supplies at petrol stations. The CGT, the majority union at the supply depots and refineries, made no request for mass action in defence of the refinery strikers and merely told pickets to disperse quietly. The issue of state intervention and police violence against a section of workers was not brought into the Saturday demonstrations by the trade unions and the bourgeois left parties.

The WSWS spoke Saturday to several railway workers from Amiens, a railway town in northern France with train maintenance depots and workshops located in the vicinity. The discussions made clear the need to expose the role of the unions and ex-lefts in downplaying the depth of the capitalist crisis and limiting the strike to the single issue of pensions.

Many workers still have illusions, or would like to believe, that Sarkozy can be made to "withdraw the bill". No one in the unions or on the "far left" has raised the demand that Sarkozy should be driven out by the action of the working class, or that workers need a political perspective based on their independent social interests.

Arnaud, 24, a signalman, was on the Amiens march. He has been a railway worker for six years, since becoming an apprentice at 18. He's a CGT member, but recognises that the trade union leaders are "cut off from the rank and file. We have to block the economy. All workers must understand that we must change the system. I'm in complete solidarity with the dockers and the refinery workers in Fos."

Expressing anarcho-sindicalist conceptions popular among some workers in France, he rejected the need of the working class to take on the capitalist state, despite the use of the national police to break the refinery workers' pickets, for example. "The workers don't have to take the power, just to take control of the economy," he argued.

Geoffrey, marching with the railway workers' contingent, told the WSWS that he was a student and that his father was a railwayman. Discussing the austerity measures as a means by which French capitalism seeks to compete with its economic rivals, he said: "I'm against economic nationalism. I don't want to be cannon fodder in a trade war."

WSWS reporters went to the picket at the entrance of the SNCF (national rail company) depot in Amiens. The workers have erected barricades to block the road and lit a bonfire with tyres and railway ties in the middle of the road to express their determination. There is another bonfire inside the gate.

Aurélien has worked for the SNCF for nine years. He does maintenance. "We're going to work to spread the strike. It'll need a general strike to make Sarkozy give

in. The unions won't call it. It's us workers who make the country function. [Bernard] Thibault [CGT general secretary] is a turncoat."

He added: "Sarkozy won't discuss anything—his reform is unfair."

When WSWS reporters pointed out that there had been no call on the demonstrations for the resignation of the government, Aurélien thought a moment and said, a little shaken: "You're right, we should. The problem is we don't have much of a choice, the choice in 2012 [the presidential elections] between Sarkozy and Dominique Strauss-Kahn [the likely Socialist Party candidate, now the director general of the International Monetary Fund] for president is not promising for the working class. I'm a revolutionary and an anarchist. I'm not in the union—they don't reflect my ideas."

Jonathan is an apprentice railway worker. He had to leave his hometown Calais to find work. "There was no work to be had there."

"My future seems bleak. In this strike, we're fighting to keep what we've got. The people in the private sector should join us. The blockade of the refineries is a good thing. The police action to break up the pickets will only make things worse. I don't know why the unions have not made a call for solidarity action with these workers. We should fight together with them, that's what we're doing here. My message to them is that they mustn't give in. Sarkozy won't back down. It's true that there are practically no demands for him to resign.

"The working class should take the power, I agree. We'll have to unite across the frontiers. It's not the Chinese who're taking our jobs, it's big business."

Loïc put in: "The Socialist Party goes on our demonstrations now. But they agree with prolonging the pay-in period [for pensions]. They should be thrown off the demonstrations."



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