

# Mass protests shake French government

Alex Lantier  
13 October 2010

Over three million workers participated in a strike yesterday against the pension cuts of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, with workers in several industrial sectors voting to extend strike action.

Amid widespread fears in the press of “radicalization”—that is, that the strikes could escape the control of the trade unions and the bourgeois “left” parties—a confrontation is brewing between the working class and the entire political establishment.

The protests were called by the unions against a measure to increase the retirement age on a full pension from 65 to 67. The cut also increases the minimum retirement age from 60 to 62. While these key provisions have passed, the Senate is due to vote on remaining portions of the legislation this week.

Sarkozy is insisting that the government will not back down on the reforms, which are only the first step in plans for massive austerity measures.

The demands from the government have exposed the blatant class justice of state policy. Workers face cuts while the banks and super-rich are bailed out. In particular, Labor Minister Eric Woerth, in charge of pushing through the cuts, entertained corrupt relations with billionaire Liliane Bettencourt, helping her secure multi-million-euro tax refunds.

The overwhelming majority of the population supports the strikes and opposes Sarkozy’s reforms. A CSA poll for *Le Parisien* found that 69 percent of the population supports the strike, and 61 percent support continuing the strikes. Another poll found that 68 percent disapprove of Sarkozy.

State attempts to downplay the size of the demonstrations fizzled. In line with previous days of action, where they issued very low estimates for participation, police claimed that 1.2 million people had marched. Even a policemen’s union in Marseille denounced this estimate as a politically-motivated “travesty” that “made the police look ridiculous.” Police unions joined the protest march in Paris.

All sources agreed that participation was higher than in

previous days of action. According to the unions, 330,000 marched in Paris; 230,000 in Marseille; 145,000 in Toulouse; 130,000 in Bordeaux; 95,000 in Nantes; over 70,000 each in Rouen, Montpellier and Grenoble.

Workers in many workplaces will be meeting in general assemblies this morning to vote on whether to continue strike action. At Total oil refineries, the SNCF national railways, and the RATP Paris public transport company, workers voted last night to continue their strikes. With the ongoing Marseille port strike already blocking the resupply of oil refineries, and reports of panic buying of gasoline, a lasting strike of public transport would threaten to bring large sections of the economy to a halt.

High school students also participated in large numbers in demonstrations, with over 300 high schools going on strike.

The ruling class currently hopes that the unions will be able to contain mass opposition so that the government can keep the law on the books. Prime Minister François Fillon told conservative lawmakers yesterday that there was “for the time being” no more “room for maneuver” in modifying the law. Consequently, he explained, “What we need is to stay calm and not provoke anyone.”

However, the *Financial Times* wrote that sources at the Elysée presidential palace “fear the risk of radicalization and even of sporadic violence.”

The ruling class is well aware that it faces a major political threat. In one comment, *L’Est Républicain* newspaper said, “All the ingredients of social revolt are present: a very unpopular government, a reform that is considered unjust, public opinion that is disoriented by the crisis, chronic unemployment, and high school students who are tempted to demonstrate.” Citing “fear of violence,” the paper said the workers “are struggling to maintain their social gains while aware that an epoch is ending.”

The *Financial Times* wrote more bluntly that the French political establishment was “still traumatized” by the general strike and student protests of May-June 1968.

The unions have been forced to prepare industrial action

due to rising frustration in the working class. The repeated one-day protests have done nothing to halt Sarkozy's cuts. CGT official Jean-Pierre Delannoy, himself a high-ranking bureaucrat, explained that workers are "fed up with simply strolling through the streets."

Workers face basic political issues as they enter into struggle against the financial aristocracy's austerity policies. The working class has the objective social power to defeat the aristocracy, and must launch determined political and strike struggles against them. The principal difficulty facing the workers is, however, the bankruptcy of the existing unions and parties, whose pose of opposition to social cuts is a fraud.

Given mass hostility to Sarkozy, the unions and the establishment parties hide their support for the cuts under the mask of organizing episodic and ineffective protests. This underlies the bourgeoisie's main advantage over the working class in the coming struggles: its political control over the strikes, through the existing parties. It intends to use them to head off strikes and prevent them from evolving into a political struggle with the government by spreading illusions that the cuts can be "improved" through renegotiation.

The clearest example is the deceitful position of *Parti Socialiste* (PS). Its secretary, Martine Aubry, is now criticizing Sarkozy and warning of the "threat of confrontation." She is calling for more negotiations between Sarkozy and the unions over the cuts. However, during the Greek debt crisis earlier this year, Aubry openly called for two-year increases in the retirement age—a position that matches the right-wing record of her party when in power.

Indeed, the likely 2012 presidential candidate for the PS, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, now heads the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which released a report last week supporting Sarkozy's cuts. The report praised the cuts for lowering pension spending by 15 percent, thus limiting state budget deficits and increasing the profitability and global competitiveness of French firms. Strauss-Kahn and the IMF played a major role in imposing even more draconian cuts on Greece during the European debt crisis this spring.

The same defense of social austerity underlies the unions' public refusal to wage a determined struggle against them. In an interview with *Libération* last week, CGT secretary Bernard Thibault explained that the call for a general strike was "a slogan that for me is completely abstract, abstruse. ... This does not correspond to the way one increases the relationship of forces."

Thibault added that the current protests had allowed "tens of millions of workers to participate already, in various ways, since the month of May, in protest initiatives against the government."

Thibault could only propose, however, to "completely reopen discussions"—that is, to return to the negotiations with Sarkozy that produced the current round of cuts. His opposition to calls for a general strike is an important signal of his position: having helped formulate the cuts, he opposes prolonged strike action against them.

Thus *Le Monde* wrote: "There is a trap that Bernard Thibault wants to avoid at all costs, which is radicalization. Such an inherently uncontrollable radicalization would lead workers, with whom the CGT wants to build up credibility and legitimacy, into an impasse by making them think they can overcome the inflexibility of the head of State."

This objectively places the CGT in political opposition to the working class. Workers are protesting the law after it has been passed into law by the Senate precisely because they are not satisfied with "participating in protest initiatives" that have manifestly failed.

Such wider discontent underlies the rising anger and militancy in broad sections of the working class. The logic of this opposition is bringing workers into direct conflict with Sarkozy and all the defenders of the capitalist system—including the PS, the trade unions, and their "left" supporters.

The eruption of working class opposition in France is part of a broader radicalization of workers throughout the world. For this opposition to be successful, however, it must take an independent political form, one that is directed openly at the subordination of the world economy to the profit interests of the banks and giant corporations.

The social gulf between the workers and the whole political establishment shows both the necessity and the possibility of building a new party based on the fight for socialism. The *World Socialist Web Site* encourages workers in France and internationally to help build the International Committee of the Fourth International as the revolutionary party of the working class.



To contact the WSWP and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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