

French government, unions try to end strikes against pension cuts

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After the national anti-riot police, the CRS, broke workers' occupations at several key oil depots Friday, French union federations are aligning themselves with government moves to end strikes against President Nicolas Sarkozy's unpopular pension cuts. A final vote on the cuts will take place in the Senate Wednesday. Far from organizing broader strike action to halt the repression against workers, union spokesmen are signaling they will abandon opposition to the cuts.

Mass popular opposition to Sarkozy's policies has led to large-scale strikes and high school protests, as well as several union-organized one-day national protests. The government is hoping that the absence of any serious response by the union federations to the police operations at the Fos-sur-Mer, Courmon d'Auvergne, Lespinasse and Ambès oil depots will help demoralize and end the strikes. It is also seizing on the fact 3 million people marched in the latest October 16 protest—somewhat less than the 3.5 million strikers at the October 12 day of action—to declare the strikes defeated.

Frédéric Lefebvre, spokesman for the ruling UMP (Union for a Popular Movement), said: “the French people are beginning to take the measure” of Sarkozy's policies. He added, “We do not and will not accept the demand for the cuts to be taken back, or opposition to” increases in the pension age.

Agriculture Minister Bruno Le Maire told Europe 1: “I think we are clearly at a turning point. What I hope is that reason wins out, so this [pension] reform can be adopted in coming days and then definitively put into action in coming weeks.”

Financial analysts are signaling that continued strikes could lead to credit downgrades on France's debt, currently rated AAA, opening up the possibility of a Greek-style debt crisis in France. Consulting firm ACDEFI writes that “for ten years, almost all indicators suggested that an AA or A rating would be more appropriate [for France].”

ACDEFI explains that the country has retained its AAA

status “principally because ratings agencies know that if they cut France's rating the entire Eurozone could waver, reactivating a global crisis that is barely under control. But, beyond such geopolitical considerations, the ratings agencies are also warning France that its maintenance of a AAA rating depends on carrying out a basic minimum reduction of public spending cuts, especially on pensions.”

The threat of a nationwide gasoline shortage—as port, refinery, oil depot, and transport workers all strike—has emerged as the workers' main weapon against the cuts. As a result, government spokesmen have taken pains to deny there is a shortage. Labor Minister Eric Woerth said: “Law enforcement forces have cleared a certain number of oil depots, so there is no risk and the government is very vigilant.”

On Europe 1, Transport Minister Dominique Bussereau claimed “There are no stations without gas.” He also denied that French airports faced fuel shortages, although he admitted that airplanes have received instructions to take on extra fuel before flying to France, so they do not need to rely on French supplies.

The government's claim there are no shortages is patently false. France's leading oil corporation, Total, reported yesterday that 300 to 400 of its gas stations in France had run out of gas. *Le Monde* reported gas stations closed for lack of fuel in Paris, Le Havre, Caen, Rouen, Saint-Nazaire, Reims, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Nîmes, and smaller cities in Alsace.

Union leaders are insisting, however, that once the Senate passes the law Wednesday, they will oppose further strike action against the cuts. *Le Monde* explained that right-wing trade unions such as the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labor) and UNSA (National Union of Autonomous Trade Unions) “consider that the voting of the bill by the Senate will force them to consider other forms of action, that is, the end of the movement.”

Jean Grosset of UNSA told *Le Monde*: “We are in a democracy. At a certain point, politics takes precedence over social protest. When the Parliament votes a cut, even if it

does not make us happy, we cannot act as if nothing had happened.”

This argument is fraudulent on its face. It is not the workers opposing the pension bill, but the Sarkozy government itself that is trampling on democracy and the will of the population by ramming through its cuts. Recent polls show that 69 percent of the population supports strike action against the pension cuts, and 54 percent of the population wants the unions to organize a general strike if the government does not withdraw them.

In moving to wrap up strikes against Sarkozy’s unpopular cuts, the union federations are serving as agents of the ruling class, enforcing finance capital’s policies on a hostile population. The fact that they can and will not organize effective opposition—despite mass popular support for strike action against Sarkozy’s cuts—is an expression of their impotence and treachery.

This extends equally to the CGT (General Confederation of Labor), historically linked to the French Communist Party. CGT Secretary Bernard Thibault yesterday issued a statement asking Senators “not to vote [for the bill] in its current state,” but to “reopen negotiations with the unions” over the cuts.

This appeal to the Senate, controlled by the UMP and aligned right-wing parties who are determined to pass the cuts, is a cynical, meaningless gesture. The issue of the Wednesday vote is largely a red herring; the most socially retrogressive aspects of the pensions bill—the increase in the pension age and the pay-in period—have already passed. Indeed, all that Thibault is asking for is a minor modification to the bill, so he can claim the CGT-led struggles did not produce a total defeat.

Le Monde noted: “The CGT leadership has not pushed its forces towards lasting strike action; on the contrary. But it does not want to take on the political responsibility for calling off the mobilization, even if other trade unions joined such a call. It would be admitting that its struggles do not always win.”

Defeat and capitulation are, however, what the union’s policies are leading to. In an account of the October 14 all-trade-union meeting that planned tomorrow’s day of action, *Le Monde* commentator Michel Noblecourt explained that this day of action “could be the end of the movement.”

According to Noblecourt, the all-trade-union alliance could “evoke, to satisfy the CGT, continuing the movement ‘under other forms’...and solemnly declare that Sarkozy is politically responsible for imposing a reform over the opposition of the majority of the population, which is hence illegitimate. The main thing is to arrange it so Bernard Thibault can accept this scenario. [CFDT leader] François Chérèque should help him do this.”

This policy is setting the stage for a confrontation between the union bureaucracy, which is determined to organize a sell-out that will have devastating social consequences, and the working class, which is determined to struggle against the reactionary measures.

It is critical for the working class to develop its own, independent organs in the coming social confrontation with the Sarkozy government, the political establishment and its political agents in the union bureaucracy. For this reason, the World Socialist Web Site has called on workers to form Committees of Action to plan strike action, independently of the unions and the bourgeois “left” parties. (See: “Political issues in the struggle against Sarkozy’s cuts”.)

Under conditions where the government has made clear its determination to make huge cuts and use police to smash workers’ resistance, the only way forward for striking workers is a political struggle to bring down the Sarkozy government. A new socialist and internationalist leadership needs to emerge as the working class deepens its struggles.

These struggles in France are continuing, despite government claims to the contrary, with reports of strike action spreading to several sectors of the economy.

Unions at the SNCF national railways warned that the number of strikers would increase early this week. CGT Rail leader Didier Le Reste noted that 26.55 percent of the work force was on strike Sunday, while “tomorrow we’ll have a proportion of strikers well beyond the standard 30 percent.” Other union officials said workers planned blockades at strategic points in the rail network that would “cause economic damage.”

Strikes are continuing in other sectors, especially the ports and refineries. Truckers’ unions have announced renewable strike action beginning today. A regional CFDT truckers’ union leader in the Vosges, Denis Schirm, told *Le Journal du Dimanche*: “We can block oil installations, logistical platforms, and the entries of factory complexes...No sector is safe!”



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