

French President Sarkozy moves to break strikes against austerity measures

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21 October 2010

President Nicolas Sarkozy promised to break strikes against his government's pension cuts and social austerity policies yesterday, sending riot police and army civil service units to disperse picket lines and end oil depot occupations. Workers and students have mounted mass strikes for more than a week while debate in the Senate has continued over provisions of the pension "reform" bill. A final vote on the bill is expected by early next week.

The government is pressing ahead with its cuts, defying overwhelming popular opposition to the austerity measures and support for strike action against them. There have been six one-day national protests since September 7 and strike action has continued in a number of industrial sectors, including at ports, oil depots and refineries, and in trucking, resulting in severe gasoline shortages across the country.

Nonetheless, Prime Minister François Fillon told the National Assembly: "This reform will be a law of the Republic in a few days... The current reform is neither a right-wing nor a left-wing measure, but common sense."

Sarkozy issued a statement after a Council of Ministers meeting yesterday morning, announcing that he had ordered police to break the blockades of "the totality of depots" so as to "reestablish a normal situation as soon as possible." Noting that "supply problems [had] affected some gas stations," Sarkozy denounced "disorders that seek to paralyze the country." The same day, his disapproval ratings hit a new high of 69 percent.

On the night of October 19-20, riot police broke the occupations of three oil depots in western France, a region that has been hard hit by fuel shortages. The police attacked depots in Donges, Le Mans, and La Rochelle.

Interior Minister Brice Hortefeux vowed that police forces would "unblock the refineries as much as necessary." However, figures cited by Energy and Ecology Minister Jean-Louis Borloo suggested that gasoline shortages were continuing to spread.

Yesterday, Borloo said that 4,000 of France's 12,311 gas stations were out of fuel. Today, he told the National Assembly that 3,190 stations were "temporarily empty" and 1,700 had run out of either diesel or gasoline. The national federation of bus companies warned that they might reduce their operations starting Saturday.

State threats have not intimidated the workers. Strikes spread across the energy sector yesterday, with all 12 of France's refineries on strike as well as the country's two largest methane terminals, at Fos-Tonkin and Montoir-de-Bretagne. Strikers at

state electricity firm Electricité de France reduced electricity production by 2,000 megawatts, turning off power to public lighting and city offices in municipalities held by Sarkozy's UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) party, as well as at regional police headquarters.

Strikes also continued in the transport sector, with dozens of highway blockades reported as well as strikes on railways and at airports. The SNCF national rail system reported that a third of high-speed trains were not running. Demonstrators partially blocked access to Roissy and Orly airports around Paris, as well as to airports in Toulouse, Nantes, and Clermont-Ferrand.

Municipal workers, including cafeteria, child care, and garbage workers, are also continuing to strike, especially in southern France. In Marseille, city authorities mobilized army civil service units wearing white overalls to collect garbage.

Agence France-Presse dispatches quoted Marseille inhabitants denouncing the move. One said: "To send in the army to clear up the government's mess, that's appalling." Another added that it was a "way to break the movement."

Six hundred high schools were blockaded Wednesday, according to figures published by student unions, as well as six universities. Four universities (Rennes-2, Lyon-2, Montpellier-3 and Toulouse-2) were closed by their administrations, citing security concerns.

Interior Minister Hortefeux traveled yesterday to Lyon, where police clashed with 1,300 youth (according to police estimates) in large sections of the downtown on Monday. He denounced demonstrators as "breakers, looters, and shooters," adding, "France belongs to honest people who want to work peaceably."

Lyon city authorities closed down the subway and municipal transport networks to prevent suburban youth from traveling into the city to protest Hortefeux's visit. Nonetheless, youth in the downtown area greeted Hortefeux with cries of "racist," "fascist," and "You're not welcome here." Three were arrested.

Lyon's Socialist Party mayor, Gérard Collomb, issued a statement criticizing Hortefeux for not discussing police operations with him. Stressing the support he and the municipal police had given to the government, he said: "The interior minister has decided to come to Lyon, for what I thought was a crisis meeting. It is unfortunate that the minister decided to turn it into a public relations operation."

Underlying the state's increasing use of repression is the growing awareness within the French ruling class that it faces a

serious political challenge. Jérôme Ste. Marie of polling firm CSA told the *New York Times*: “We are in a situation where government and the unions are losing control, and if something serious happens it will both weaken the unions and be a catastrophe for the government.”

Columnist Michel Noblecourt wrote yesterday in *Le Monde*: “Running out of steam is not on the program [of the demonstrations]... exiting from the crisis is difficult.” He added that union leaders had previously described the October 19 day of action as a “last gallant fight purely for purposes of honor,” before the cuts passed. However, these plans were thwarted by “radicalization,” that is, by “the unexpected mobilization of high school students and industrial action in the refineries.”

Noblecourt’s statement bluntly lays out the calculations of the ruling class. Having banked on the ability of the trade unions to limit public opposition to one-day protests and isolated strikes, France’s political establishment was taken by surprise by the scale of the militant and determined resistance of workers and youth and the impact of workers’ industrial action against key sectors of the economy.

He concludes by listing factors he thinks might cause “public support [for the strikes] to progressively dissolve.” These include union leaders speaking against strikes, unhappiness at a gasoline shortage during next week’s Toussaint holidays, and public fright at violence during high school protests.

The central issue that is rapidly emerging in the strikes against Sarkozy’s austerity program is the refusal of the unions to respond to the use of police repression to break occupations and attack picket lines. This strengthens the hand of the government and weakens the mass movement against the cuts. It leaves strikers, notably the oil workers, vulnerable to being isolated and victimized.

The unions refuse to respond to the state attacks by expanding the strike movement because this would encourage the development of a general strike, which would pose the question of power—the need to bring down Sarkozy and replace him with a workers’ government based on socialist policies. The trade union bureaucracy is implacably opposed to any challenge to the state and the corporate-financial elite in whose behalf the government rules.

The union leadership, in turn, relies on its allies in the official “left”—the Socialist Party and the Communist Party—and the so-called “far left”—principally the Pabloite New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA)—to cover up for its treachery and prevent workers from breaking free of the grip of the union apparatus.

The treacherous role of the union leadership is indicated by accounts of the riot police’s occupation of the Donges oil depot yesterday, where the unions intervened to help the police retake the plant.

CFDT member Eric Cristel told the *Journal du Dimanche* : “Around 3:30 AM, workers from the French Corporation of Donges-Metz (SFDM) joined us in support [of our occupation]. But around 4:30 AM, police forces arrived to expel us. At that time, the unions intervened to prevent any clashes. They told us to back down and let the police through. We were 400, even 500 people, on the site.”

Workers from around the region had arrived to defend the plant because of reports posted online the previous evening that the police would move against workers at Donges.

One worker commented on Nantes-Indymedia: “One doesn’t understand why the RG [General Information, the intelligence services] would warn union officials of a police operation... This episode forces us to consider the very great poverty of French trade unionism, which has been incapable of producing viable alternatives to the historically regressive and neo-fascistic plans of Sarkozy, or of organizing the operational unity of the magnificent mobilization of youth and workers to defend pensions.”

Another commented that there was “a feeling of total unpreparedness [and] the desire on the part of the union leaderships (even at lower levels) not to rely too much on those who are struggling.” He added, “It’s at times like these that one feels all the vacuity of the ‘far left.’”

The unions and the “left” are increasingly promoting the notion that workers should wait for a future Socialist Party government to modify the pension law. In a statement yesterday, CGT (General Confederation of Labor) chief Bernard Thibault suggested that he did not view the passage of the cuts as a major political issue: “When a bill is passed, it’s not the end of the world.” He added, “What one law does another law can undo.”

This statement foreshadows a crass sellout of the strikes. As the record of the French Socialist Party and other European social democratic parties makes clear, the Socialist Party would not make significant modifications in Sarkozy’s cuts even if it did return to office in 2012.

Asked about a possible alliance with the Socialist Party, Olivier Besancenot of the New Anti-capitalist Party told *Le Monde*: “There are two great political orientations on the left: one of them accepts the market economy, the other wants to escape from it. These two orientations are not compatible within one same government, but our forces may add up to resist the right, as in the pensions struggle.”

Besancenot’s statement is a pile of absurdities. It is impossible to be on the “left” and accept the free market economy. Besancenot suggests this only to advocate an alliance with the pro-free market Socialist Party. As for the claim that the NPA will “add up” its forces with the Socialist Party to resist pension cuts, this means not criticizing Socialist Party officials like Lyon Mayor Collomb, who deploy riot police against demonstrators, and opposing the independent mobilization of the working class against the Sarkozy government.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges workers to organize committees of action independent of the unions and the existing parties in order to fight for a general strike to bring down the Sarkozy government and replace it with a workers’ government.



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