

The French strike wave: A new stage in the class struggle

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The strikes and mass demonstrations in France against pension cuts are the latest and most developed expression of a new stage in the class struggle—the entry of the international working class into mass opposition against the ruthless assault on jobs and living standards being carried out by the capitalists.

These events deal a shattering blow to all claims that the working class is a spent force and the class struggle is a relic of the past. Once again, the immense social power of the working class is beginning to find expression. The basic division of modern society, between the bourgeoisie and the working class, is asserting itself under conditions of a historic breakdown of world capitalism.

By all accounts, the strikes against legislation that would raise the retirement age are expanding. As the week began, petrol stations throughout the country were running out of fuel as a result of a strike by refinery workers. Truck drivers have joined in, slowing traffic on the country's major highways. Hundreds of high schools are shut down by student protests. Mass demonstrations are planned for Tuesday, following similar days of action over the past week that brought more than 3 million people onto the streets.

The expansion of strike action is the response of the working class to the repressive measures of the Sarkozy government, including the use of riot police to break up oil workers' blockades of refineries. The efforts of the workers to expand the struggle and exercise their social power bring them into ever more open conflict with the trade unions, which are looking to wind down the mass actions.

The strikes have the overwhelming support of the French population. Polls show 70 percent in favor of the strikers. Among young people aged 18-24, support is as high as 84 percent. The popularity of Sarkozy, in

contrast, is at record lows.

The events in France are world events. They are part of a growing mood of resistance in every country. In Europe, there is increasingly determined opposition to the austerity measures introduced throughout the continent following the debt crisis in the spring. This has included one-day general strikes in Greece and Spain. In Italy over the weekend, hundreds of thousands marched in Rome to protest austerity measures.

The reemergence of the working class into struggle is not limited to Europe. China has been rocked by strikes of auto workers; textile workers have staged mass actions in Cambodia and Bangladesh; and Foxconn workers in India have struck in defiance of police repression. In the United States, there is a brewing rebellion of auto workers against brutal wage cuts worked out between the auto companies, the government and the United Auto Workers union.

The ruling class is not backing down. The response of the Sarkozy government to the spreading strikes is to dig in its heels, insisting that the cuts must go forward. Behind Sarkozy stand the French and European banks, which have warned that failure to push through the cuts will call into question the credit rating on French debt. On a world stage, the financial and corporate elite is determined to impose the full cost of the crisis of the capitalist system on the working class.

These events show that there will be no peaceful restabilization of the world economy following the financial panic of September 2008. The breakdown of world capitalism has ushered in a new period of social upheaval and revolution.

The open conflict between the working class and the state, which represents the banks and corporations, poses in every country the question of power. In whose

interests will society be run? The continued rule of the capitalist class—on the basis of private ownership of the means of production—means the ever greater impoverishment of the population, the destruction of democratic rights, and ever wider and more bloody military conflagrations.

The alternative is for the working class to take political power and reorganize the world economy on the basis of social need, ending the dictatorship of the banks and corporations over every aspect of economic and political life.

This question of political power is not one for the distant future. It arises organically and necessarily out of the new stage in the class struggle. The demands of the French workers and the demands of their class brothers and sisters internationally cannot be met in any other way.

The biggest obstacle to resolving the crisis in the interests of the French workers is not the Sarkozy government, which is weak and isolated. It is rather the trade union leadership and its allies in the Socialist and Communist parties and the other supposedly “left” middle-class organizations that work to keep opposition confined within the framework of the capitalist system and its political representatives. By blocking the road to a political struggle for power, they work to demobilize the struggle and demoralize the workers.

Whether it is the New Anti-Capitalist Party in France—which claims in its most recent statement that as a result of the strikes, “the government will be forced to capitulate”—the Left Party in Germany, SYRIZA in Greece or the International Socialist Organization in the US, the aim of all these tendencies is the same: to prevent workers from understanding the situation they confront, mobilizing their strength and fighting for political power.

For the struggle in France to be successful, it will have to break free of the stifling grip of the unions and take an independent path. Workers need to build new, democratic organizations of struggle—committees of action—to fight for the broadest unity of all sections of the working class and the active participation of students, youth, professionals and oppressed middle-class layers in an industrial and political offensive against the government and the ruling class. The committees of action will campaign for the development of a general strike to bring down the

Sarkozy government and replace it with a workers government based on a socialist program.

The key issue is the building of a new leadership in the working class to arm the movement with a clearly worked out revolutionary program. What Leon Trotsky wrote 72 years ago in the founding program of the Fourth International applies with full force today: the crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of revolutionary leadership. The resolution of this crisis requires the building of the International Committee of the Fourth International in every country.

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