

French strike movement at a crossroads

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The strike movement in France against President Nicolas Sarkozy's pension cuts is at a political crossroads. Despite Sarkozy's deep unpopularity and mass hostility to the austerity measures, the government is on the offensive, demanding that workers abide by the recent Senate passage of the pension bill.

The principal reason for this is the treachery of the unions and so-called "left" parties. Amid a media campaign to pressure workers into abandoning the struggle, trade union officials are signaling that they want to end the strikes. On France2 television Monday night, General Confederation of Labor (CGT) leader Bernard Thibault declared that from now on opposition "will take other forms."

French and Democratic Confederation of Labor (CFDT) leader François Chérèque added that Sarkozy's cuts are "still perfectible," and that as "the parliamentary debate draws to a close, we will be taking another point of view."

Economy Minister Christine Lagarde hailed the unions' comments yesterday, saying she thought the struggle was at a "turning point." Top state officials and union leaders all expect that the strikers—politically isolated and feeling the bite of lost pay—will be forced back to work.

The union bureaucrats are shamelessly betraying the strikes despite the fact that they continue to have a powerful economic impact. Ports remain closed, municipal and transport workers are continuing their walkouts, and most of France's refineries are still on strike despite repeated police raids to break blockades and force employees back to work. Over 70,000 youth protested against Sarkozy's cuts yesterday, and some 25 percent of France's gas stations are still empty.

The unions' abandonment of the strikers is entirely consistent with the bankrupt protest politics they have promoted from the outset, in conjunction with the so-called "left" parties.

These forces defined the strikes as an attempt to pressure Sarkozy and the Senate into renegotiating the cuts with the unions. They opposed mass industrial action aimed not at pressuring the government, but defeating it

and bringing it down. This is despite overwhelming popular support for the strike movement and the collapse of public support for Sarkozy.

The unions have undoubtedly been in constant contact with the government, discussing behind the scenes the best means of deflating the mass movement and bringing it to heel. They already signaled their readiness to capitulate when they refused to mobilize working class opposition to government strikebreaking against workers' blockades of oil depots and refineries.

Relying on the unions to hold the movement in check, Sarkozy held firm in open defiance of the popular will. Now the union leaders are counseling acceptance of the "inevitable."

If this treachery is to be halted and the fight against the ripping up of living standards taken forward, workers and young people must draw fundamental political lessons from these events. There is a political division of labor between the unions, the official "left" parties, and the so-called "far left" parties, the function of which is to strangle the class struggle and enable the ruling class to impose its attacks.

The unions, far from defending the working class, serve as the most critical bulwark for the bourgeoisie and the state. They consciously support the efforts of the financial elite to impose the full burden of the economic crisis on the workers, fearing above all the emergence of a revolutionary movement of the working class. That is why they resolutely oppose a general strike to bring down the Sarkozy government.

The workers have demonstrated their growing frustration and alienation from the unions and their desire to utilize their immense social power to fight the government. The tenacious strikes and blockades by oil and port workers have been largely carried out despite, not because of, the efforts of the unions.

The official "left" parties—the Socialist Party and Communist Party—work closely with the union bureaucracies, the CFDT and the CGT, respectively. These parties, too, have been badly compromised in the

eyes of the working class.

Hence the promotion by the bourgeois media of the middle-class, pseudo-socialist “far left” organizations, led by the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA). Their role is to block the development of political consciousness, insist that mass protest by itself will shift the government and the ruling class, and cover up for the treachery of the trade unions. As the “left” apologists of the trade union bureaucracy, they constitute an increasingly critical asset for the bourgeoisie in its war against the workers.

The full complicity of the NPA in the unions’ efforts to betray the strike movement is evidenced by the silence of the organization’s chief spokesman, Olivier Besancenot, over the past several days. This is entirely in keeping with the NPA’s role of politically disorienting and disarming the working class.

Meanwhile, the bourgeois media is promoting NPA “intellectuals” to preach obedience to the union bureaucrats and surrender to Sarkozy. After the CGT announced it would mount only “symbolic” protests against police assaults on refineries, NPA academic Philippe Corcuff told *Le Monde* that he advised workers to limit themselves to “playful” actions.

The strikes can continue and broaden only on the basis of a new, revolutionary political orientation—a repudiation of the Senate vote and a struggle to bring down the Sarkozy government and replace it with a workers’ government. This requires a rebellion by the workers against the trade union bureaucracy and the so-called “left” parties.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has called on workers to form independent committees of action to expand the strike movement and fight for a political offensive by the working class independent of all the parties of the bourgeoisie, those of the official “left” as well as the right.

The strike movement has, above all, raised the centrality of the fight to build a new, revolutionary leadership in the working class. The great weakness of the mass movement is the lack of a clear, thoroughly worked out program and perspective. While weak and isolated, the Sarkozy government has the advantage over the workers of a higher degree of consciousness as to its objectives and methods.

Sarkozy rules openly and ruthlessly as the instrument of finance capital, which demands that the trappings of democracy be tossed aside so that French capitalism can survive the global crisis of capitalism by impoverishing the working class.

As states across Europe run massive deficits to pay for bank bailouts and the impact of the economic crisis, they are ever more at the mercy of their creditors—that is, the major banks and billionaires who profited from the crisis. To boost competitiveness and avoid a run on its debt, each state competes with all others to trim its deficit by slashing wages and social spending. In this, it has the support in every country of the unions.

With new cuts in Britain expected to reach £81 billion and cost a million jobs, Sarkozy’s current cuts are only a down payment on coming attacks on the French working class.

Bitterly unpopular governments have been able to carry out such policies by relying on the unions and their “left” backers as a bulwark against the resistance of the working class. During the Greek debt crisis this spring, social democratic governments in Greece and Spain made massive cuts, while unions limited workers’ protests to a few national one-day protests. In Britain, the unions have made clear they will organize no opposition to Prime Minister David Cameron’s cuts.

The workers require their own revolutionary program to counter the counterrevolutionary program of the ruling class, and that means building a new revolutionary leadership.

The political tasks facing the working class—the bringing down of governments around the world and the expropriation of the financial aristocracy—entail the development of a mass socialist movement fighting for power. The only party fighting for this perspective is the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). We urge French workers and students to read and contact the *World Socialist Web Site* and take up the fight to build the new revolutionary leadership of the working class.

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