

France: More strikes, opposition to social austerity

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Continuing strikes in the airline sector and calls for student resistance to President Nicolas Sarkozy's pension-cutting law, after the defeat of the oil strike last week, pose more sharply than ever the need for an open and conscious political struggle against the government.

With his disregard for popular opposition—most prominently the oil strike by port, refinery and transport workers, some of whom struck for over a month—Sarkozy has made clear that he intends to push through the cuts, come what may.

Backed by the “left” parties, the unions have called off the oil strikes and made no move to protest police strike-breaking, despite polls showing 65 percent support for continuing strikes against the cuts. The pension cutting bill was officially voted into law last week and is now being submitted for a constitutional review.

Working class opposition has run into a wall of resistance from the state and the entire political establishment.

Significant sections of workers and students are continuing strike action. Air France pilots and flight attendants will strike from November 5 to November 8 against cuts in their benefits packages arising from the Bill on Financing Social Security in 2011 (PLFSS 2011).

The law will allow the state to tax benefits granted by airline or travel companies to airline staff. Reductions on flight prices—essential for staff who do not live in the main hub where they work and therefore rely on discounted flights to return home—would be taxed, as well as a range of other benefits. According to the National Pilots Union (SNPL), these include reduced rates for hotel rooms, rental cars and airport parking.

The SNPL added: “Such taxation would lead to supplementary costs for the companies providing the benefits, and thus would therefore inevitably and very rapidly provoke the elimination of all these benefits. The management of the companies involved have confirmed to us that this is the case.”

This weekend Brit Air—a subsidiary of Air France operating 250 smaller, regional flights in Bombardier or Fokker aircraft—went on strike to “express the general anger of the workers” and their “fear for the future.” According to trade union figures, 74 percent of Brit Air's 121 weekend flights were grounded by the strike.

Union officials cited workers' concerns that in the absence of

any “credible and promising development plans,” Brit Air management were using company revenue to fund skipper Armel Le Cleach's participation in the *Route du Rhum* regatta.

In 18 universities across France, students gathered in general assemblies to discuss the continuation of protest actions and university blockades against the Sarkozy government. This is also in anticipation of high school students' return to school on Thursday. Before they went on vacation last week, the high school students had been the most active in blockading their schools to protest Sarkozy's cuts, and it is not yet clear whether protests will resume once they return to class.

Four universities voted yesterday to resume blockades: Le Mans, Nantes, Saint-Etienne, and Pau. A total of 53 universities are expected to hold general assemblies of students this week to discuss future actions.

Students voted “massively” at Université de Toulouse-Mirail yesterday to return to the strike, together with the city's Capitole and Paul-Sabatier Universities. Speaking to *La Dépêche*, one Mirail student explained Monday: “We will discuss and vote Tuesday on whether to restart the movement, which is focused on the pension cuts though there is also a broader anger, which is more political than social, among students.”

Another student explained that even though Sarkozy and the unions had ended the oil strike, there was still profound opposition to cuts in the working class: “Of course the refineries and Marseille garbage workers are back at work, but that is after their strikes were broken by government injunctions, the workers are still very angry and they could go back on strike.”

Student unions indicated their lack of enthusiasm for continued opposition, however. Romain Boix, a regional leader of the National Union of French Students (UNEF) in Toulouse, said that UNEF was “favorable to blockades only on national days of action” called by the trade unions. That is, the unions which organized the isolation and sell-out of the oil strike are to be given control of student protests, as well.

Growing popular awareness of the role of the unions and the “left” parties in isolating and selling out strikes is provoking an increasingly political debate inside certain universities.

At Université Lyon-2, students gathered to vote on future

action and protest the detention of demonstrators at Corbas prison, according to an account in *Lyon-Capitale*. They criticized the unions and also bourgeois “left” parties such as the Socialist Party (PS) and its presumed 2012 presidential candidate, Dominique Strauss-Kahn.

Strauss-Kahn is currently the head of the International Monetary Fund, where he pressed for massive austerity policies and wage cuts to be imposed on Greek workers in exchange for an IMF bailout, during this spring’s Greek debt crisis.

One Lyon student said: “We’re in the street because we have had enough of Sarkozy. We had had enough of [ex- President Jacques] Chirac before and we will have had enough of Strauss-Kahn.... What we do not want anymore is Sarkozy, capitalism, and globalization.”

Another student added: “Today, we see the limits of the trade-union system ... Because capitalism is aging, the trade unions are aging also.”

The population confronts a historic failure of the capitalist system. Rising international competition for profits has long pushed the ruling class to slash social spending, with a long series of pension and social cuts in France as in other countries. Now, the current financial crisis—triggered by the reckless speculation and self-enrichment of the ultra-rich—is accelerating the drive for social retrogression, provoking far more dramatic attacks on the working class.

Workers and youth are quite correct in judging that the defeat of the oil strike has not ended popular determination to fight. A critical task, however, is to determine the political basis on which an appeal to further struggle can be made. The prerequisite for a successful struggle against Sarkozy’s cuts is a struggle to unify the working class in mass political strikes to bring down the Sarkozy government and halt the implementation of the law.

In this, workers and students will face the opposition of the entire bourgeois “left”—the PS or its political satellites, such as the French Communist Party (PCF), the Left Party of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, or the New Anti-Capitalist Party of Olivier Besancenot. By refusing to call for bringing down the Sarkozy government, or to criticize the unions for their silence at police strike-breaking against the oil workers, these “far left” parties have shown that they stand on the other side of the barricades from working people.

PS Secretary François Hollande gave an interview yesterday in *Le Monde* laying out the reactionary perspective underlying the PS’s participation in demonstrations against Sarkozy, and calling the other parties on the so-called “left” to order. The PS’s goal, Hollande made clear, is to use Sarkozy’s unpopularity to return to power and then push through the same type of social cuts planned by Sarkozy.

Hollande said, “The objective conditions for a defeat of Nicolas Sarkozy are present.” He called for rapid negotiations with other “left” parties, explaining: “In 2012 we will have

extremely hard problems to solve: a large public debt, altogether historic deficits.”

Hollande made clear that the PS would seek to resolve these deficits by cutting pension payments, just like Sarkozy: “Each time life expectancy increases, we must increase the pay-in period.” Implicitly abandoning the PS’s false claims that it supported leaving the minimum pension age at 60, he bemoaned the fact that “only 20 percent of those over 60 still work.”

Since the reason for this is often corporate decisions to fire workers with more seniority and higher pay, Hollande proposed to keep more workers over 60 at work by giving companies tax incentives to do so.

Hollande insisted that the other “left” allies of the PS had to clearly endorse the PS’s policies before the election: “The question posed to Jean-Luc Mélenchon, and the Greens, the PCF and to others is: do you want to govern France tomorrow? If so, you have to have a clear line.” He explained that the conditions under which these parties allied themselves with the PS had to be well known long before the final round of the elections: “Everything has to be settled in advance.”

The political bankruptcy of the existing parties and organizations is a historic challenge to the working class. In struggling to bring down Sarkozy’s government and block implementation of social cuts, the goal cannot be to bring to power a PS government. They must fight to build a workers’ government carrying out socialist policies, as part of an international struggle against capitalism in Europe and worldwide.

The WSWs has called on workers and youth to create their own committees of action to coordinate their struggles, independent of the unions and bourgeois “left” parties. Readers in France are invited to contact the WSWs to help build a party in France to lead the fight for this perspective.



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