

French unions call further one-day strike to contain opposition

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France's all-trade union alliance announced yesterday that they would call for a one-day national protest sometime during the week of November 22-27, amid continuing opposition to President Nicolas Sarkozy's pension cuts. The parliament voted the pension cut into law on October 27, but unions called further one-day national protests for October 28 and tomorrow, November 6. The unions said the date and "modalities" of the action in late November would be specified next week.

With this move the unions are signaling that they will organize no sustained opposition against the cuts, which were passed in the face of overwhelming popular opposition. Though polls showed 65 to 71 percent of the population supporting strike action against the law, the unions isolated a powerful strike by oil workers, organizing no sympathy actions while Sarkozy sent riot police to smash the strikes. Nevertheless, the union leaders face continuing protests organized by workers and students throughout the country.

In the lead-up to the meeting, union leaders were divided over whether to capitulate immediately to Sarkozy's cuts, or mount further action on the basis of the bankrupt perspective of pleading with Sarkozy to renegotiate the details. Sarkozy has made no significant changes to the pensions law during the strike movement.

General Confederation of Labor (CGT) leader Bernard Thibault said: "We are favorable to another day of national inter-professional mobilization," adding: "We see that the government intends to move on. We are going to show that the government will be dragging this burden behind it, as long as it does not accept to renegotiate."

Several other union leaders, while unwilling to state outright their hostility to striking, made clear they were pressing to end the protests. French Confederation of Christian Workers (CFTC) leader Jacques Voisin declared: "We are not going to continue to demonstrate every eight days the way we did this autumn."

French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT) leader François Chérèque had already shown his opposition to further strike action, by proposing discussions on

employment of youth and retirement-age workers with the Movement of French Enterprises (Medef), the main business trade group. The Medef is preparing "bilateral social deliberations" with various unions. The CFDT, CFTC, and Force Ouvrière (FO—Workers Force) have already accepted Medef's invitations for discussion.

Hostility to further strike action was shared by all the unions, however. *Le Point* noted that "in private, trade union leaders recognize that it is time to move on to something else." It quoted CGT official Nadine Prigent, who proposed "decentralized forms [of action], work stoppages, and separate initiatives"—that is, ruling out any unified response by the working class.

The deliberations took several hours. Pascal Pavageau of FO noted, "We saw clearly that in terms of methods of action, we are not in agreement." FO did not sign the communiqué issued by the all-trade-union alliance.

In a sign of disenchantment with the unions' right-wing line among significant layers of the population, workers and youth gathered near the meeting place, chanting: "General strike! Thibault, Chérèque, Mailly, the strike is not over!"

Significant sections of workers and youth are continuing to struggle against the Sarkozy government and the pension law. After the defeat of the oil strike, their struggles—isolated by the unions, and given no political perspective by existing parties in France—are being increasingly limited to militant workplaces and schools.

There were protests at several universities around the country. Several hundred students from University de Lyon-2 demonstrated in the center of the city. Marchers demanded the release of protesters imprisoned after the October 21 protest in Lyon, and called on high school students to join protests.

High school students have not joined protests in large numbers since going on vacation last week. Together with the oil strike, their mass mobilization, blockading hundreds of high schools around the country, previously played a major role in the protests. The National Union of High School Students (UNL) has called upon students to

participate in tomorrow's demonstrations.

Marchers told *Lyon-Capitale* that another important goal was to "give a shove" to the all-trade-union alliance, which they called "bureaucratic." Administrators subsequently shut down the university.

Roughly 120 St. Etienne students held a march yesterday, according to *Le Progrès de Lyon*. Wednesday morning police forces had attacked students blockading buildings at the University in St. Etienne, a city near Lyon. University President Khaled Bouabdallah had criticized the blockade as "dangerous to the security of persons and property."

Students at Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail voted yesterday to blockade the university to demand the retraction of the pensions law. Students said they would reconvene next Tuesday to decide whether to continue the blockade. Roughly 400 students marched through downtown Toulouse with slogans denouncing unemployment. Two other universities in Toulouse (Capitole and Le Sabatier) also voted for strikes against the cuts.

Toulouse students told *La Dépêche* that they aimed to provide "new life" to opposition to the pension cuts.

Students at University of Montpellier-2 (sciences) and -3 (arts and literature) are blockading their universities, and planned a protest march for last night.

Numerous workplaces are still on strike and blockaded. These include Marchant Hospital in Toulouse, garbage incineration facilities at Saint-Ouen and Ivry-sur-Seine near Paris, and bus and public transport facilities in numerous cities. Several airports were partially blockaded by protesters, including Toulouse-Blagnac, Nantes, Charles de Gaulle airport near Paris, Clermont-Ferrand, and Lyon.

The Jobs Pole unemployment assistance office called a strike for November 9, to protest cuts in staffing levels and poor working conditions.

The state and the unions are struggling to prevent protests from breaking out again in other industries previously hit by strikes. CGT sources reported the possibility that oil terminal workers in Marseille might go back on strike. Though the CGT has refused to make any statement on the conditions under which they negotiated the return to work, it is thought they have obtained nothing, save possibly that workers will be paid for strike days.

Sarkozy denounced Marseille port workers in a vicious outburst yesterday, saying he was "unhappy to see that Antwerp [in Belgium] has become the largest French port, because of the problems we have in the French ports." He denounced striking workers as "a tiny minority who do not understand that the ports do not belong to them."

There is also the risk of protest actions spreading to France's hard-hit auto industry, which has seen numerous plants close after the outbreak of the world economic crisis.

The negotiator named by the state to supervise talks between unions and the management of Continental, the auto parts supply firm, announced yesterday that he was stepping down. Continental is pushing through an 8 percent wage cut at three factories in the Midi-Pyrénées region around Toulouse, which employ 2,500 workers.

The critical issue now facing workers in struggle against Sarkozy is to build organizations and make a political appeal to mobilize broad sections of the working class in a struggle to bring down the government. It is becoming increasingly clear to masses of people that the trade unions and other existing organizations do not play such a role and are hostile to the working class.

One workers' assembly at the East Train Station in Paris posted a statement denouncing the unions: "The strategy of the all-trade-union alliance of not relying on striking industries to broaden the movement is a defeat for all workers. Instead, the all-trade-union alliance has limited itself to calling a few one-day festivals on October 26 and November 6"—the dates of the most recent union-organized days of action.

They warned that the unions "will not hesitate to isolate new industries coming into struggle the one after the other, to try to demoralize us, to wear us down, and to prevent the emergence of a mass movement."

The critical task facing workers is to build committees of action to organize struggles independently of the unions and "left" parties. The goal of such a movement must be mass political strikes against the Sarkozy government, aiming to bring it down and replace it with a workers' government fighting for socialist policies, in France and internationally.

This perspective—which can emerge only from a ruthless political struggle against the influence of the existing organizations—is the only viable basis for bringing the entire working class into struggle against the austerity policies in France.



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