Pseudo-left critics of French unions sow demoralization about strikes

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Last month's oil strike in France against the pension cuts of President Nicolas Sarkozy provides a critical measure of class relations in Europe. Besides overwhelming popular support for strike action against social cuts, it revealed the rottenness of the unions and "far left" political parties. Despite open police strike-breaking against oil depots, neither the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) nor the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) sought to mobilize industrial action to defend the oil workers and fight Sarkozy's unpopular cuts.

NPA spokesman Olivier Besancenot kept silent during much of the strike, while an NPA academic advocated "playful" protests against police.

The strike has also exposed the bankruptcy and charlatanry of various pseudo-socialist or anarchist groups, who were promoted around the "far left" parties, as more consistent "critics" of the union bureaucracy. Far from representing a socialist alternative for workers continuing struggle against social cuts, however, they either fled for cover or preached surrender at the first serious industrial struggle.

This is notably the case of two groups inside the NPA, the Clear Tendency and Prometheus. They criticized the CGT last year, as the CGT isolated strikes in the auto industry and prepared its 49th congress last December—from the standpoint of building more militant unions and strikes. (See "France: New Anti-Capitalist Party tries to channel worker discontent with the unions")

Clear Tendency, a tendency in the NPA affiliated to the Argentinean Socialist Workers Party (PTS), supposedly promotes "class-conscious trade unionism" and the need for a "revolutionary anti-capitalist party." It published a statement on August 3, declaring that in September it had "only one objective: a general strike to force the retraction of the pension reform." This was, however, the last statement they issued.

Once strikes were in fact taking place, in September and October, Clear Tendency was safely out of sight. To workers seeking a political perspective to struggle against Sarkozy's cuts, or help in fighting to build a general strike against Sarkozy, Clear Tendency had nothing to say.

The Prometheus group, however, makes even the Clear Tendency look bold by comparison. Having declared that its goal was "to affirm and defend, under all circumstances, the political independence of the proletariat vis-à-vis the bourgeoisie," its web site ceased releasing political statements in May.

One cannot say whether political unseriousness or political cowardice played a greater role in the decision of these unbelievably "revolutionary" groups to make no comment on the most effective strike workers have directed against Sarkozy's presidency. However, there is an objective political logic to their capitulation.

Their perspective of pressuring the unions, or revitalizing trade-union forms of activity, is bankrupt. Sarkozy has made clear that he will not sign anything besides a massive social cut. As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained, the task facing workers was to defend workers engaged in ongoing struggles and fight to organize mass political strikes to bring down the Sarkozy government. This would set the stage for a struggle to build a workers' government carrying out socialist policies.

The orientation of the anarchist "critics" of the unions was quite different, however. Those who summoned the courage to continue publishing cynically lectured the workers on how to hold meetings, while discouraging any struggle that would produce a

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confrontation with Sarkozy.

The International Communist Current (CCI) published an issue of its publication, *International Revolution*, devoted to the question of "How to get a grip on our struggles." The lead article noted: "Everyone feels that something is missing in this movement. This 'something' is the workers taking control of their own struggle."

For a Marxist, this would entail a merciless political struggle to break the workers from the unions and the rotten petty-bourgeois "left" parties, and to bring down the Sarkozy government. For the CCI—a group hostile to the Leninist theory of the revolutionary party as the political leadership of the proletariat—the issue was "attempting to self-organize ourselves in sovereign instead of trade-union general assemblies."

To aid its readers in understanding this difference, the CCI reproduced a text of the anarcho-syndicalist National Confederation of Labor (CNT), titled "How to struggle? For Autonomous Popular Resistance." The CCI released the statement on October 20, as the oil strike was ongoing and five days after the police first broke a workers blockade, at the oil depot of Fos.

Denouncing other unions as seeking only "the maintenance of social peace," the CNT added, "The reason for this is simple. They are part of the state machine, their staff is even a cog in it: enterprise committees, administrative councils, co-management of the health insurance system, pensions, various insurance schemes, big subsidies received for the most diverse reasons (trade-union training, congresses), and let's not forget outright bribery (by the black accounts of the UIMM employers federation for example)."

Nonetheless, it went on to propose the same activities as the established trade unions, whose role as cogs in the state apparatus it had just described. It called for the formation of assemblies "in which we must give time for debate and take decisions, decisions which are the proper and conscious expression of those who are in struggle." It proposed "noisy demonstrations sort of everywhere," and "deploying banners in visible places."

Such plans display not only a remarkable lack of solidarity—being unconcerned with the defense of the oil workers from police strike-breaking—but the profound disinterest in a political struggle with Sarkozy. In fact, the CCI proceeded to make clear that it thought the oil strike itself was a very bad idea.

In "Blocking the refineries: a double-edged sword," the CCI took up the arguments of the Sarkozy government against the oil strike, explaining: "workers face problems every day getting gas and getting to work." The CCI added that "paralyzing the transport system" therefore "threatens to divide and break up the dynamic" of building popular opposition to Sarkozy.

In uncritically echoing the Sarkozy government, the CCI omitted only one detail: the strikes were overwhelmingly popular, and the task was to win support for strike action in broader layers of the working class—not to discourage it. Had it been more honest in recognizing the logic of its arguments, the CCI would have argued against any strike whatsoever. As strikers always inconvenience the clients of the corporations against which they are striking, they run the risk of being criticized by the media and encountering opposition.

As the Sarkozy government panicked at the spreading gas shortages, the CCI optimistically informed its readers that workers can no longer "block their workplace and make their boss give in." The situation "is totally different" today, the CCI explained: workers "face not simply their bosses, but ALL of capital and above all the power of its State."

The conclusion was that workers should organize more meetings, to promote the "dynamic of extension of struggle which is the only thing that really scares the bourgeoisie."

These claims expose the right-wing charlatanry of the "left" parties and their various satellites. Their obscure terminological differences hide the need for a political struggle to bring down the government, while discouraging struggle and dispersing workers' energy in noisy, fruitless protests not fundamentally different from those organized by the CGT. They are simply the left flank of the state and its austerity policies.

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