

Lutte Ouvrière group defends union betrayal of French pension strikes

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Last month, the French middle-class left organisation Lutte Ouvrière (Workers' Struggle, LO) published its balance sheet of the October-November strikes by oil and port workers and students against President Nicolas Sarkozy's pension cuts. Its main goal is to cover up the unions' role in betraying the strike, and by extension the role of LO itself.

With Sarkozy's cuts now enacted, the role of the unions and their "left" supporters is clear: they opposed the full mobilisation of the working class, allowing historic attacks on living standards throughout Europe to continue. The union bureaucracies organised a number of one-day national protests while isolating workers' strikes and permitting police to infiltrate demonstrations and break the oil blockades. At the same time, they participated in joint protests with the Socialist Party (PS), helping promote that pro-business party for the 2012 presidential elections.

The Lutte Ouvrière group—many of whose members are active in the unions and marched in demonstrations with the PS—participated in this anti-working class effort. In falsifying these events, LO is whitewashing its own right-wing record.

LO begins by denying that the unions worked with Sarkozy in implementing the cuts: "The union leaders had a right to hope that, on such a social problem, they would be associated with the negotiations and that they could justify their role and their preference for negotiations with a few concessions they could use against the workers' discontent. Well, they were most certainly not associated with the negotiations!"

If LO here notes in passing the unions' cynical policy of justifying their role through false claims they might win minor concessions, it is only to then deny that the unions worked with Sarkozy. This is an absurd falsehood.

Despite Sarkozy's determination to make the cuts, the unions worked openly with the government, through figures like Sarkozy's social councilor, Raymond Soubie. During the October strikes, a Sarkozy advisor even told *Le Monde* that "the Soubie method is at its apogee." French Democratic

Labour Confederation (CFDT) union leader François Chérèque said: "No one should come tell me there was no Soubie for two months."

The goal of this collaboration was to pass the cuts over mass opposition. Workers Force (FO) union leader Jean-Claude Mailly explained that Soubie "thought that there would be the ritual of demonstrations, that no one would say yes, but eventually [the cuts] would pass." Noting that this had temporarily backfired in October, as industrial action and student protests broke out, Mailly added: "If you pull strings, you get knots."

Mailly, whose union also participated in this charade, clearly did not mind having his strings pulled. In this he is no exception: unions throughout Europe have called politically impotent one-day protests to "pressure" the state, during this spring's cuts in Greece, and this autumn's cuts in Spain and France. None of these events have changed state policy.

LO praises this corrupt political game, with the minor qualification that the unions were only doing this because of pressure from the workers. However, according to LO, by calling strikes "to preserve their own bureaucratic interests, the union federations opened the floodgates for workers to show they were fed up.... The first to charge through the breach opened by the union leaders were the trade unionists themselves."

LO's martial rhetoric, as if it were recounting heroic deeds of the Knights of the Round Table, is utterly absurd when applied to bureaucrats like Chérèque and Mailly.

It has, however, a definite political logic: encouraging workers and youth to believe that with some "pressure," the unions will lead social struggle and perhaps force a change in state policy. In fact, the lesson of the recent strikes is just the opposite: If the unions keep control of strikes, it is to strangle them. Sarkozy's cuts passed without any modifications.

During the October strikes, the government found itself

totally isolated, as more than 3 million workers repeatedly marched in demonstrations against his policies. Polls found 70 percent popular support for the strikes, which spread among mass transit, municipal services, trucking, auto, and commercial distribution workers.

Nonetheless, the unions called no further industrial action and refused to mobilise the working class to defend oil refinery blockades against police attack. Starved of a perspective for opposing the cuts—which would have required bringing down Sarkozy and fighting for a workers’ government based on socialist policies—the strikes died out, after the cuts were passed by the National Assembly.

LO sees the conduct of the unions as blameless: “It would be childish to criticise the unions for not having called for” a general strike. It blames the working class instead. Absurdly claiming that there were few strikes in other industrial sectors, LO absolves the unions of all responsibility: “They did not hold anything back because, in this instance, there was nothing to hold back.”

LO here takes its falsifications to their logical conclusion: if the unions betrayed nothing, it is because there was no opposition in the working class to betray. Only a party slavishly tied to the union bureaucracies, such as *Lutte Ouvrière*, and hostile to the interests of wide layers of the working population could put forward such a position.

Indeed, LO views the passage of Sarkozy’s cuts as a quasi-victory. It insists that no one should “imitate certain demoralised militants who speak of a defeat because Sarkozy did not retreat.” Having cut short any real discussion of the strikes, LO says that its tasks now involve “revealing the manoeuvres of reformist parties, like the Socialist Party.”

LO writes: “Socialist governments in other European countries do not behave differently from the others...the workers do not expect to be protected by a socialist government.” Noting that workers would vote for the PS only to beat Sarkozy, LO noted that “a bonus on this question [goes] to [International Monetary Fund chief and likely 2012 PS candidate Dominique] Strauss-Kahn, who has the most chances of winning.” However, LO added, “it is hard to say how he is a ‘man of the left.’ ”

LO’s tepid comments notwithstanding, the matter is not hard at all. Strauss-Kahn is a banker, corporate lobbyist, and long-time PS heavyweight who has overseen the imposition of IMF cuts in Greece and Ireland. He is not a man of the left or a reformist, but a financial hit man carrying out the mass impoverishment of the workers.

LO is aware of this, writing: “If the union leaderships hope to find a better place for themselves in a left [i.e., PS] government, their accord with the left government will take place not to the advantage of the working class, but to its detriment.”

This is a revealing comment. Though it debates whether individual PS officials are “of the left” and gives the union bureaucracy a pass for strangling the strikes, LO knows very well that these are right-wing outfits preparing historic attacks on the working class. This does not, however, lead it to reconsider its support for the unions.

This raises the question: is LO itself a party of the left? No doubt LO would point to the conclusion of its statement to prove that it is left-wing. It expresses the hope that workers will adopt forms of “politics that, by ceasing to respect private ownership of the means of production, the laws of the market, and the dictatorship of individual profit, will open a new perspective for society.”

This seems radical, even almost Marxist, save for one detail: while it calls for workers to cease respecting capitalism, LO maintains its boundless respect for the union bureaucracy that *actually enforces capitalist austerity* on the workers. Despite its hollow slogans, LO—like its fellow “far left” parties such as the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) and the Independent Workers Party (POI)—in fact has pro-establishment politics.

These parties routinely march with PS contingents in demonstrations, helping give a potential Strauss-Kahn candidacy wholly undeserved “left” credentials. Their presidential campaigns depend on obtaining hundreds of signatures from local PS officials to get on the ballot. They are not any more independent from the PS than they are from the union bureaucracies, whom they all treat as real leaders of working-class struggle.

LO’s pro-union assessment of the recent strike struggle is of a piece with its broader function, as pseudo-left defenders of a political elite thoroughly hostile to the working class.



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