

# Who is French trade union leader Bernard Thibault?

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The experiences of the recent strikes and demonstrations by French workers against President Nicolas Sarkozy's pension reform contain a number of critical political lessons. Among the most important is the role of the trade unions in general, and the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) and its leader, Bernard Thibault, in particular, in defeating the actions.

Despite the massive popular hostility towards the austerity measures, Thibault insisted that the call for a general strike was “abstract” and “abstruse.” He abandoned the strikers in the ports, the refineries and the oil depots, refusing to mobilize the working class against the intervention by the police to break up their blockades. Stressing that above all he wanted to negotiate with Sarkozy, Thibault proposed a series of “days of action” that achieved nothing.

These actions refute the claim that Thibault leads a union confederation that “fights authority.” The political re-arming of workers for the struggles to come—which must develop independent of the trade unions—requires an historical and theoretical appreciation of Thibault's role. He is part of a social layer allied with the bourgeoisie against the working class. However, he presents a militant image in opposition to the government in order to cover up for the trade union's role in supporting the state.

Bernard Thibault was born on January 2, 1959 in Paris. After gaining a mechanic's diploma, he was taken on by the SNCF national state railway company at the Paris-la-Villette depot in 1976. In 1977, he joined the CGT and became a member of the union's youth commission. At 24 he was elected CGT railway workers' secretary for East-Paris.

In 1987, Thibault joined the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) and became a member of the CGT railworkers federation.

Thibault entered politics in the transition period between the Cold War and the post-Soviet era. His decision to stand for leadership positions in the CGT and the PCF, in a period when these organizations were inflicting defeats on workers, means that he envisaged a career as an apparatchik in the trade unions and the state.

The PCF in the 70s and 80s served as a tool of French social democracy in breaking strikes and disorienting the working class. In 1972, the PCF adopted the Common Programme for government with the Socialist Party (PS). It abandoned the “Soviet model” in 1976 in order to declare its support for the national economy. If the party had already proved itself as a servant of capitalism by betraying the 1936 and 1968 general strikes, its statements in 1970 gave official notice of its conversion to defender of the established order.

The PCF became a party of government alongside the PS. It participated in 1981 in the Mitterrand government with four Communist ministers. In 1983, the Mitterrand government turned sharply to the right, implementing a wave of austerity measures. One year later, the Communist Party ministers resigned.

This period saw big attacks on workers' conditions, notably with factory closures in the motor industry: at Renault, Citroën and in heavy industry such as the steel industry in the north, at Longwy.

In 1991 the Stalinist bureaucracy restored capitalism in the USSR with dire consequences for the Soviet and international working class. Trotsky's analyses of the USSR were confirmed. Trotsky had said about the future of the USSR, “The political prognosis has an alternative character: either the bureaucracy, becoming ever more the organ of the world bourgeoisie in the workers' state, will overthrow the new forms of property and plunge the country back to capitalism; or the working class will crush the bureaucracy and open the way to socialism.”

More obviously than before the fall of the USSR, the CGT and the PCF operate as tools of the state, hostile to the workers and vassals of the banks. This did not stop with the entry of Thibault into the Stalinist apparatus. From 1990 to 1993 he was a deputy secretary, then from 1993 to 1999 general secretary of the CGT railway workers federation. Finally, in January-February 1999, he succeeded Louis Viannet at the head of the confederation.

After the fall of the USSR, the CGT left the World Federation of Trade Unions (aligned with the Stalinists) and

joined the European Trade Union Confederation, dominated by pro-capitalist unions such as the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour). The CGT's allegiance to capitalism is certainly not new, however. The CGT acted as the PCF's agent when it betrayed the 1936 and 1968 general strikes. Indeed, under the leadership of Bernard Thibault the CGT took an ever greater part in the formulation of state strategy.

According to the political historian René Mouriaux, Thibault was one of the main figures in the 1995 strikes and became a symbol of the renewal of the CGT, which enabled him to enter the leading committee (bureau) of the confederation in 1997.

In 1995 the Gaullist government of prime minister Alain Juppé launched an attack on the social gains of the working class. A powerful movement of workers, led by the railway workers, broke out of the control of the unions. After having regained control of the demonstrations, the trade unions strangled the strike movement. In 1995, Thibault negotiated an agreement with the Minister of Labour who agreed not to touch the railway workers while pressing ahead with the social attacks on the rest of the working class.

To claim that this agreement represents a victory is an illusion. It kept most of the attacks on the social security system. The rest of Thibault's career has mainly consisted in negotiating reforms which equalize workers' pensions downwards. In a series of reforms—in 2003, 2008 and now in 2010—rightwing governments have prolonged the age of retirement by leveling down the conditions of various sections of the working class.

From 1997 to October 2001 Thibault was a member of the national council (formerly the central committee) of the PCF. He left his responsibilities at the national level of the PCF in 2001 to signal the end of the concept of the union as a transmission belt for the party. It was an important step. By putting into the background the historic ties binding it to the PCF, the CGT was able to more easily collaborate with the openly pro-capitalist forces at the service of the state.

In an article published in 2007, “Why Sarkozy wants to save Bernard Thibault's CGT,” the weekly *Marianne* detailed the relations developed in 2004 between Sarkozy (then Minister of Finance) and Thibault, while a reform of the EDF-GDF state owned electricity and gas utilities was being carried out in preparation for their privatization.

When threatening to reveal “the running of the workers' social fund of the works committee,” funds provided by EDF-GDF which the CGT uses as a slush fund, Sarkozy realized that Thibault preferred a “limited concession.” After months of well-controlled conflicts, a tentative agreement was reached. The status of the company was

changed, but the promise was made (and later broken) that the state would remain the majority holder of EDF-GDF's capital.

The rise to power of Sarkozy in 2007 led to a deepening of the relationship between the government and the CGT. Its congress at the end of 2009 aimed to confirm the policy of close collaboration between Thibault and President Nicolas Sarkozy that had been carried out since the beginning Sarkozy's term.

In a *Le Monde* article of April 2008, entitled “For strong unions” Sarkozy explained the logic of his collaboration with the unions: “I am profoundly convinced that, in order to explain and carry out the reforms our country needs, we must do it in close partnership with those who represent the interests of the workers and the businesses...”

This collaboration had been established early on, according to Sarkozy: “Just after the presidential election and even before arriving at the Elysée, I insisted on meeting the trade union and employers organizations to listen to them and have their positions on the first measures that I intended to carry out. Since then I have continued to meet very regularly with each of their representatives. I know them very well, sometimes we have differences, but our discussions are always frank.”

He added, “I'm thinking, for example, of the reform of the special pension schemes, which was achieved thanks to an intense period of consultations at the national level and negotiations in each of the enterprises concerned.”

This was the moment when the CGT and the CFDT were setting up an agreement called the “Common Position” with groups of employers and the state. The agreement comprised measures designed to increase the influence of the larger unions, giving the state a more centralized bureaucracy to police the working class.

Despite a broad popular opposition, the CGT and Sarkozy then got laws passed during the summer of 2008 signaling an important turning point in class relations in France: the lengthening of the working week, the reduction of unemployment benefit, changes in the laws regulating trade unions and strikes, and important concessions for big business and finance.



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