

# The CGT and Sarkozy's pension "reform"

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4 February 2011

Last month, the leader of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT), Bernard Thibault, rejected an invitation to the traditional New Year's presidential ceremony at the Elysée Palace, which Nicolas Sarkozy extended to unions, employers and charities. Although other unions replied favourably the CGT general secretary refused and criticised Sarkozy for ignoring union proposals last year when the government was gutting retirement benefits.

As AFP news remarked, "2010 was marked by the united social mobilisation to oppose the pension reforms based on injustice and inefficiency. The CGT noted in a press statement that 'it is in this context that the usual gathering of society's "active forces" at the Elysée Palace takes place'.... The CGT leadership reminds us that 'faced with an exceptionally huge movement over several months' against the pension reforms, 'it was the intransigence of the President of the Republic and the contempt for the trade unions' positions...which has determined the future for millions of people' ".

The rebuff of the president's invitation was a cynical manoeuvre to bolster the illusion that the CGT is a militant opponent of the government. In reality, the CGT—which has long been under the influence of the Stalinist French Communist Party—devotes itself entirely to the defence of French capitalism and is committed to helping reduce the country's debt at the expense of the working class.

After months of negotiations with Sarkozy and the employers over the details of pension reforms, the CGT called strikes to save itself from being overwhelmed by angry workers. Whatever actions were called were quickly isolated and betrayed.

When the police moved to break the strike of oil refinery workers, the CGT insisted resistance could only be "symbolic". The strikers, whose struggle was a direct challenge to the Sarkozy government, were

abandoned to their fate. Nevertheless, large sections of the working population opposed the reforms, with opinion polls showing 71 percent against them and 63 percent in favour of launching a general strike against the government.

The working class suffered a heavy defeat due to the betrayal by the unions and by the various ex-left parties, including the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA), which provide a political cover for the unions. The central problem facing the working class is the absence of a mass party aimed at mobilising workers' opposition to bring down the government and fight for a socialist programme. Under these conditions, the CGT was able to control workers' opposition by encouraging illusions in the possibility of negotiating an agreement with Sarkozy.

This has enabled Sarkozy to escalate his attack. The French bourgeoisie expects 2011 to see an acceleration of its right-wing programme, including lengthening the work week and gutting health care provisions. Like their counterparts throughout Europe, the CGT and other unions will collaborate in imposing the burden of the capitalist crisis on the backs of the working class.

In 2008, the CGT helped the government pass a series of laws aimed at eliminating the 35-hour week, limiting strike action in schools, and "reforming" unemployment benefits. In exchange, the Sarkozy government passed laws that increasing the number of workers under the jurisdiction of the CGT and French Democratic Labour Confederation (CFDT) at the expense of smaller unions.

In an April 2008 *Le Monde* article, entitled, "For strong trade unions", Sarkozy defined the logic behind his collaboration with the unions. "I am profoundly convinced that to explain and lead reforms to a successful conclusion, which our country needs, we must do it in close partnership with those who represent the interests of workers and companies...."

In the same article, he made an indirect reference to extensive government budget cuts, which were partially withdrawn due to the massive strikes between 1995 and 2006. He wrote, “Our social history is sufficiently punctuated with projects which were rushed through without discussion, and which ended in total failure, so now let’s finish once and for all with the idea that a state by itself would be enough to know what is good for the country.”

He counterpoised his own method of close collaboration with the unions to these past methods: “Just after the presidential election and even before I moved into the Elysée Palace, I insisted on inviting the trade unions and employers to listen to and note their positions on the first measures that I intended to carry out. Since then, I have continued to host regularly each of their representatives. I know them well, we sometimes have disagreements, but our dialogue is always frank.”

Referring to the gutting of so-called special pension rights of rail workers and others in 2008, he added, “I think, for example, of the special pension rights, which were successfully carried out in the autumn thanks to an intense period of consultation at the national level and negotiations in each of the companies concerned.”

While he was writing this article, Sarkozy was working through the concessions proposed by the CGT and CFDT in their “Common Position”, which gave the government the green light to destroy the 35-hour week and attack pensions.

As the WSWS noted in its July 2008 article, “The end of the 35 hour week in France,” Sarkozy’s success was guaranteed by the unions and “left” parties. “The last event, which highlighted this ‘Common Position,’ was the reform of trade union representation on which the Employers’ organisation (the Medef), the CGT and the CFDT found agreement. The reform of the legal criteria that determine which unions can negotiate binding agreements at an industry-wide or company level will increase the influence of the biggest trade unions like the CGT and CFDT, giving the state a more centralised and efficient bureaucracy to police the working class.”

The CGT and the government have officially maintained the 35-hour week but put in place a law authorising factory-level agreements gutting overtime protections. Workers can work 48 hours a week, while the overtime would be paid at 10 percent more than the

base rate instead of 25 percent. Some of the more draconian measures include reduced holidays and rest days. The law also eliminated rest periods automatically granted to workers labouring more than the normal amount of overtime. In addition, instead of hourly rates, daily wage rates could be paid to specific workers up to 282 days a year, instead of the current 218.

The government now wishes to formally repeal the 35-hour week, which was established by the Socialist Party (PS) government in 1998. The magazine *Le Point* (January 19, 2011), in an article entitled “35 hours: an agreement PS and the UMP governing party [the Union for a Popular Movement]”, noted National Assembly member Manuel Valls (PS) calling for the “abolition of the 35-hour week”

Thibault and the CGT play a central role in the implementation of the reactionary measures being demanded by the capitalist class and the Sarkozy regime. Thibault’s symbolic refusal to accept Sarkozy’s New Year’s invitation cannot conceal this fact.



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