

Unions call symbolic protest as debt crisis spreads to France

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President Nicolas Sarkozy and the French union bureaucracy are preparing deep new cuts to satisfy the financial markets as the European debt crisis spreads to France. After Standard & Poor's downgraded the US's credit rating, there is mounting speculation that France will be the next economy to lose its AAA rating. France's banking sector is heavily exposed to hundreds of billions of euros in Spanish and Italian debt now facing speculative attack on world financial markets.

Having scheduled the announcement of an initial €10 billion in spending cuts on August 24, the French ruling elite is now maneuvering to present these cuts as reflecting a national consensus between the bourgeoisie and the working class. The CFDT's (French Democratic Labor Confederation's) François Chérèque demanded yesterday the organization of a "social summit bringing together representatives of the workers, of the employers, and the government."

Prime Minister François Fillon announced yesterday that his government would schedule such a meeting "in the coming days," to make a "thorough survey" of the economic policy together with the union bureaucrats.

France's largest trade union federation—the ex-Stalinist CGT (General Confederation of Labor)—came out of the silence it has kept since the betrayal of last year's oil strike, to propose a symbolic one-day protest for an unspecified date toward the beginning of the school year. Its communiqué, titled "We must end the dictatorship of the financial markets," said that such a one-day protest would allow the union to "make itself the messenger" of workers' demands.

The CGT's decision to call a strike undoubtedly reflects growing popular anger in France and internationally at the

attacks demanded by the banks in response to the latest financial slump.

However, the unions' claims to represent such opposition are lies. Union bureaucrats are not meeting Sarkozy and Fillon to halt—or even limit—the government's proposed cuts, but to discuss how to limit working-class opposition to toothless one-day protests.

By the very nature of the coming meeting, it is impossible for any union bureaucrat attending it to act as a "representative of the workers." In one of the few truthful passages of the CGT's communiqué, it notes that Sarkozy's policy of reassuring the markets "will deepen the crisis, as is shown by the example of Greece."

As governments in France, Italy, Spain, and beyond scramble to extract hundreds of billions from the hides of the workers, the policies they will pursue will resemble above all those pursued in Greece or the United States. In Greece, workers have lost an estimated 30 percent on average of their purchasing power amid deep cuts in jobs, pensions, wages, and bonuses. In the United States, auto workers have taken 50 percent wage cuts while the Obama administration prepares to enforce trillions of dollars in social cuts against the working class.

No legitimate representative of the working class can sanction such policies. The rush by the CGT and CFDT to negotiate the cuts with the unpopular Sarkozy government—either by direct participation in the talks, or by spreading illusions that Sarkozy can be "pressured" by a one-day street protest—proves that they do not represent the workers.

Leadership of the struggle against social cuts must be taken out of the hands of the unions and their supporters

in middle class, pseudo-left parties like the new Anti-Capitalist Party.

Critical political lessons have to be drawn from recent struggles of the working class, which have been betrayed by the unions. The CGT communiqué notes that “the policy of bailing out the financial markets, followed over the last three years, is counter-productive and opposed to the national interest.” These lines are, in fact, an indictment of the CGT and its political associates—who have played a crucial role in making these cuts possible.

Recent cuts in France were the product of intensive negotiations between Sarkozy and the union bureaucracy, including the CGT. The CGT called one-day protests when Sarkozy introduced pension cuts in 2007, again during his pension cuts of 2008, and throughout 2009 against Sarkozy’s bank bailouts and economic crisis. However, all of these measures passed, as Sarkozy and the unions simply waited for the protests to wind down and then rammed the cuts through.

The example of Greece, raised by the CGT itself, provides a further indictment of the CGT’s policy of calling isolated one-day strikes. In Greece, repeated one-day protests organized by the GSEE trade union—controlled by the ruling social-democratic PASOK party of Prime Minister George Papandreou—made no impact on the continual cuts Papandreou has rammed through.

The unions pursue these policies time and again, not by mistake, but because they are consciously hostile to the struggles of the working class—a situation made the more acute by the global economic crisis. As the banks and the rich insist that workers absorb the trillions in losses due to the banks’ reckless speculation, governments will not tolerate any opposition to the cuts they are proposing. Under these conditions, the unions rush to help impose the cuts and block struggles by the workers, which now have revolutionary implications.

Thus in France, the Sarkozy government was shaken by a powerful industrial struggle last fall, as strikes at oil refineries and ports that cut off the supply of petrol across the country, against Sarkozy’s latest pension cut. Though the majority of the population supported a general strike against Sarkozy, the CGT backed a government attack on the strikers. It insisted there should only be “symbolic” protests when Sarkozy sent CRS riot police to seize

control of the refineries and petrol depots.

The eruption of revolutionary struggles in the Middle East and North Africa, toppling dictatorial regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, fills the Sarkozy government and the union bureaucracy with even greater fears. Both the government and the CGT bureaucracy would become the targets of working opposition—as they did in Egypt—should a political struggle by the working class emerge in Europe along the lines of the mass protests in Egypt and Tunisia.

Preparing for such an event is, on the other hand, the central political task facing the working class. The political balance sheet of the one-day protest strikes held under the leadership of the unions in Europe is one of devastating defeats. Working-class opposition must be organized independently of the unions, struggling to bring down governments throughout Europe and replacing them with workers’ governments implementing socialist policies.

Such a struggle can only be successful, however, if a new political leadership is formed in the working class. The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), which defends the political independence of the working class and the continuity of Trotskyism in the struggle against revisionism, is the only organization fighting to organize and unify the workers in an international struggle against capitalism.

The urgent task confronting the working class in France and internationally is its political rearmament, based on the perspectives of the ICFI, in an irreconcilable fight against union bureaucracy and its political apologists, as they try to set a new trap for the working class.



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