

The CGT comes out for bourgeois “left” in French presidential elections

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20 February 2012

The national meeting held by the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) union on January 31 in Paris on the issue of retirement pensions had all the signs of an election meeting. The trade union had prepared it weeks in advance, having invested considerable resources. No less than five presidential candidates of the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois “left” took part.

It was an unusual intervention on the CGT’s part in the French presidential election race for 2012, as the union has maintained the closest of relations with current President Nicolas Sarkozy.

The CGT had officially invited the Socialist Party (PS) and Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the Left Party (a split-off from the PS) who is the joint candidate of the Left Front—an electoral alliance between the Left Party, the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) and a splinter group from the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA). Also invited were Philippe Poutou of the NPA, Nathalie Arthaud of Workers Struggle (LO), and Eva Joly, the candidate for the Greens and Europe-Ecology (EELV).

François Hollande, candidate for the PS, was represented by the leader of the PS group of deputies in parliament, Jean-Marc Ayrault, and Harlem Désir, another leading PS official.

This was an unusually direct and open political intervention by the CGT. It showed that the union has unambiguously joined the camp of those sections of the French bourgeoisie that prefer the version of a “left” government to impose the coming avalanche of attacks against the working class.

The CGT general secretary, Bernard Thibault, officially showed that the CGT was changing sides, passing from Sarkozy to Hollande, in a demagogic speech delivered in a “militant” tone in front of several thousand participants.

Thibault thundered against the Sarkozy government’s policy, which he had supported as long as he was able throughout the last legislature, negotiating attack after

attack on workers’ social rights with Sarkozy. Thibault especially criticized the so-called “Social VAT” (sales tax) and “competitiveness agreements”. He denounced the Social VAT as a “confidence trick” and the factory agreements called “competitiveness-jobs agreements” as “a sabotage of Labour Law”. Referring to the government, he spoke of “an inglorious balance sheet” and “an anti-social” record.

The Social VAT was nevertheless an integral part of the issues discussed by the CGT at the government’s social summit on January 18, and the CGT is due to be a partner in the management of the “industrial bank” to be set up by Sarkozy.

This bank will play a role in the increase of productivity and competitiveness of companies, and the destruction of jobs and cuts in wages—a role similar to that played by the Modernization Fund for Automobile Parts Manufacturers (FMEA) and the Strategic Investment Fund (FSI), thanks to which the employers financed relocation and redundancies in the automobile sector in 2009. The CGT supported the setting up of these funds.

The CGT announced that it intended to distribute leaflets in all the factories where it is present to attack the Sarkozy government’s policy.

With this meeting, the CGT has officially endorsed the PS presidential candidature, but also that of the Left Front in the legislative elections that will immediately follow the presidential election and the constitution of a new government. This “anti-Sarkozy” political platform strongly resembles the announcement of a future bourgeois “left” coalition government, under the helm of the PS. All the parties present are intimately tied to the trade union bureaucracy and, in the case of the PCF and the Pabloites of the NPA and LO, overlap with it to a significant degree.

All the candidates of the parties present emphasized the

importance of the unions (which they refer to as the “social movement”). All understood that the role of the unions would be to help Hollande, if he is elected, to continue the anti-worker reforms as the unions did with Sarkozy.

Ayrault said in a message from the PS candidate that “nothing can be done to reform the country without social democracy being mobilized, not in a formal way at the end of the five-year presidential mandate, but being at the centre of [the government’s] method.”

Eva Joly asserted that “social dialogue in our country must occupy a much bigger place” because “there is not enough conferring ... For that the CGT plays a very important role”.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon declared, “The Left Front is going to mobilize ... by calling upon its members to follow their unions”. He claimed that Bernard Thibault’s speech was “a social event and therefore [was becoming] a political event”.

These parties see the unions as critical to preventing an explosion of working class discontent in the lead-up to the presidential election and the formation of a new government after the legislative elections in June. What is at stake is the capacity of the PS to be able “to reform the country”—that is, to impose its austerity program after the elections.

With the same concern, Thibault announced the holding of a “European day of mobilization”, called by the unions on February 29, to which the CGT is committed. The unions are presenting this “day of action” as an act of resistance “against generalized austerity”, which Thibault said was imposed “by the efforts of Nicolas Sarkozy and Angela Merkel”.

For this day of action, the NPA presidential candidate, Philippe Poutou, called the “unions, political parties and associations” to “fight” together. “We must organize together a political fight before the election to prevent the last attacks of Sarkozy”, he said.

In fact, the French PS offers the same program as its Greek sister party, the social-democratic PASOK of George Papandreou: Hollande has consistently campaigned on the basis of calls for budget cuts to impose extreme austerity measures against the workers. None of the political parties present at this meeting have any serious objections to this program.

When in the October 2009 elections in Greece, PASOK opposed the conservative government of Costas Karamanlis, the unions, the coalition of the “left” SYRIZA (an alliance of Stalinists, social democrats,

Pabloites and Maoists), the Stalinist Communist Party (KKE) and the ecologists supported the Papandreou candidacy. As soon as the latter took office, he sought to impose a wave of successive attacks over the opposition of the Greek working class. The result of the operation—the slashing of wages and living standards by 30 to 40 percent in Greece—constitutes a warning to the working class throughout Europe.

The French PS also depends on diverse parties to its left to give it credibility and allow it to pass in the eyes of the working class as a kind of “lesser evil”. This is the role played by organizations of the ex “left”, from the NPA to Workers Struggle (Lutte ouvrière, LO) in particular. They already played this role in the 1970s when they spread illusions in the “Common Program of government” of the PS and PCF, a “reformist” program that these two parties scrapped soon after taking office.

PS President François Mitterrand waited more than a year in 1981 to make his “turn to austerity” after taking office. Hollande will not wait nearly that long to begin implementing his program of attacks on the working class. With the social antagonisms between the trade union bureaucracy and the working class at breaking point, these organizations play an all the more crucial role.

The unions have for decades no longer had a working class social base and the interests that they defend are those of a layer of the petty bourgeoisie integrated into the state. The social layers that the parties that were invited to the CGT meeting represent are not those of the working population, but those of a privileged petty bourgeoisie who openly support imperialism.



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