

France: Thibault to stand down as CGT union general secretary

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In a letter to the national leadership of the union dated January 24, the general secretary of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) Bernard Thibault has announced that he will not stand for reelection at the CGT's 50th congress.

Who will succeed Bernard Thibault as CGT general secretary is not decided, but the press has raised two main candidates: Eric Aubin and Nadine Prigent, both of whom are close to Thibault.

Thibault is considering stepping down after being discredited in the working class by his collaboration with President Nicolas Sarkozy on negotiating social cuts—notably when he betrayed the strike against pension cuts in the autumn of 2010. The replacement of Thibault by Aubin or Prigent will in no way change the anti-working class character of the policies of the CGT, however.

Aubin and Prigent both played an important role in the CGT's betrayal of the 2010 strikes. Aubin is a long-standing bureaucrat, at present the secretary of the CGT's construction workers' federation; he became known as the CGT's lead negotiator during the pension reform. As for Nadine Prigent, a nurse and leader of the health workers' federation, she was a CGT representative in the *Intersyndicale* (joint union committee) during the movement against the pension reform.

The 2010 pension "reform," which aimed to lengthen workers' pay-in period, was highly unpopular among workers. Millions took to the streets to protest against it, in response to calls by the *Intersyndicale* for days of action. However, the *Intersyndicale* had no intention of blocking the cuts that it had itself negotiated with Sarkozy.

The government was weakened when the refinery workers started to occupy their workplaces, and port

workers blockaded the petrol depots, creating fuel shortages all over France. Thibault abandoned the strikers, however, refusing to mobilise the working class against police interventions which broke up their blockades.

Bernard Thibault insisted at the time that the call for a general strike was "abstract" and "abstruse," preferring to negotiate the pension reform.

The bourgeois "left," which is now rallying behind the Socialist Party (PS) presidential candidate François Hollande, is looking for a successor to Thibault who will be able to collaborate with Hollande, should he be elected. Hollande intends to increase France's competitiveness against its competitors by attacking the living standards of the workers, taking up the austerity policies that social democratic governments across Europe—Papandreou in Greece and Zapatero in Spain—have carried out since the beginning of the world economic crisis.

On François Hollande's official site, Aubin published an article dated August 28, 2010, entitled "The Social Issue at the heart of the Socialist Project," which deals precisely with this issue. Aubin explains that Sarkozy's pension reform was "unjust" and "inefficient" and that he wanted "another reform under the label 'choice of pension'."

Aubin does not explain why he negotiated an agreement with Sarkozy, while working class opposition to the reform was developing, to carry out a pension cut that he believes was "unjust." He lies cynically, implying that he was against Sarkozy's pension reform and that a PS plan to better social welfare would preserve workers' social rights. His aim is to help Hollande carry out another anti-working class "reform."

The bourgeoisie and the CGT, however, fear a too

obvious continuity in the union leadership between Sarkozy's presidency and a potential Hollande presidency. Speaking of trade union continuity, Thibault asserts in his letter: "However, we must be vigilant lest it becomes in time a handicap in the ability to perceive new issues."

Were they to take place, negotiations between Hollande and Thibault—who negotiated all the main cuts under Sarkozy—would too clearly demonstrate the fundamental continuity between Sarkozy's policies and those of the PS. Thus, Thibault's resignation from the post of general secretary is an attempt to conceal from workers the reactionary policies of the bourgeois "left."

Bernard Thibault's career in the CGT leadership and his 14-year term as general secretary marked a definitive end to the period in which the CGT functioned as a political arm of the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF). During the Cold War, CGT general secretaries had been members of the PCF national leadership. With the Soviet bureaucracy's dissolution of the USSR in 1991, however, the Stalinists' claim to a historical link to the October Revolution collapsed, the PCF declined precipitously, and the CGT publicly downplayed its continuing ties to the PCF.

Though Thibault remained a PCF member and his policies enjoyed the party's blessing, he functioned not primarily under the aegis of the PCF, but as a direct negotiating partner of the state in imposing social cuts on the working class. He first came to public attention as head of the CGT train workers federation during the first major strike movement after the collapse of the USSR—the rail strike against the 1995 pension cut, which he helped to strangle and betray. His most politically prominent role, however, was as a key negotiating partner for Sarkozy over the last five years.

This showed that the historic period in which one could consider the unions as organisations of the working class, even of a purely defensive character, was over.

In 2008, France's largest unions, the CGT and the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour, close to the PS), drew up an agreement known as the Common Position. It aimed to increase the influence of the main unions, giving the state a more centralised bureaucracy to police the working class and impose austerity programmes. This agreement facilitated the

passage of the first major social cuts of Sarkozy's term, in 2008. (See also "End of the 35-hour week in France: Sarkozy handed victory by the unions and 'left' parties")

When he was assassinated by one of Stalin's agents in 1940, Leon Trotsky was working on the draft of an article, "The Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay." In it he analyses the growing integration of the unions into the state apparatus, explaining: "The intensification of class contradictions within each country, the intensification of antagonisms between one country and another, produce a situation in which imperialist capitalism can tolerate (i.e., up to a certain time) a reformist bureaucracy only if the latter serves directly as a petty but active stockholder of its imperialist enterprises, of its plans and programmes within the country as well as on the world arena."

Trotsky's analysis concerning the role of the trade unions and their integration into the state apparatus is profoundly relevant today, for this integration has developed powerfully since this document was written. The union bureaucracy is a significant stakeholder in the major corporations, consciously acting to help impose the social cuts with which the ruling class is responding to the crisis—that is, to restore their competitiveness by massive attacks on workers' living standards.

This shows the necessity for the working class to break with the trade unions and create their own revolutionary organisation.



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