

French social democratic unions, NGOs promote right-wing Social Pact

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French trade unions and NGOs met this weekend to discuss a new “Social Pact.” It was signed by social-democratic unions, the CFDT—the French Democratic Confederation of Labour, close to the Socialist Party (PS)—and UNSA (National Union of Autonomous Unions), as well as several student groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The manifesto they issued aims to boost illusions in the political establishment, amid growing popular discontent ahead of next month’s French presidential elections. It seeks to suggest that workers can still obtain social reforms under capitalism—even as governments throughout Europe carry out austerity policies to destroy the social gains won by the working class in the past.

The document begins by briefly acknowledging that these policies are undermining workers’ living standards and democratic rights. It writes, “Our development model is going through a lasting crisis that is increasing inequality and social exclusion. ... This is a factor weakening democracy [and] a political terrain favorable to every form of populism.” However, the union and NGO bureaucrats ask their readers to take heart, as “the presidential and legislative elections are a high point of democracy.”

In fact, the working class is totally disenfranchised in the current election, which takes place amid a deep capitalist crisis, including the euro zone debt crisis. Both major candidates, the incumbent conservative president Nicolas Sarkozy and his main rival, PS candidate François Hollande, are campaigning on the basis of budget cuts, attacks on social and democratic rights, and participation in NATO’s imperialist wars. Whoever wins the election will pursue these policies even more aggressively against the working class.

The petty-bourgeois bureaucrats advancing the manifesto are themselves key agents of social reaction in suppressing workers’ struggles against social reaction at home.

In 2010, the unions, including CFDT and UNSA, collaborated with Sarkozy in imposing pension cuts that raised the retirement age from 60 to 62 and imposed severe penalties for workers who have not completed a 42-year pay-in period. Popular opposition to the cuts, including a national oil strike, were isolated by the unions and smashed. Nor did they oppose measures like the banning of the burqa, mass deportation of Roma, and other attacks on democratic rights.

As the manifesto makes clear, moreover, the petty-bourgeois bureaucrats leading France’s unions and NGOs are preparing to for more such attacks on the workers after the election: “The profound transformations that must be carried out will be possible only if all society is in motion, if every citizen feels implicated. The immense challenges we face necessitate a true democratic renewal. All the forces of civil society must invest themselves in it.”

Significantly, the document does not spell out what “profound transformations” are being prepared. It simply makes a laundry list of vague measures, none of which are new and all of which can be applauded by any bourgeois politician who does not have to pay for them—including access to education, environmental issue, health and housing.

However, it explicitly endorses budget cutting as proposed by Hollande and carried out by every social democratic government in Europe since the outbreak of the global financial crisis in 2008. It advocates

“economic competitiveness,” while supporting “budget reduction to preserve social cohesion that is also guaranteed by public services.”

The document is silent on the devastating impact of such budget cutting, which the European Union (EU) and IMF carried out in Greece, Portugal, Spain, and beyond with utter contempt for public opinion. Amid deepening popular opposition in Greece, the EU and Greece’s social democratic PASOK party pushed through drastic cuts negotiated with the unions—including 20 to 40 percent wage cuts, slashing pensions and bonuses, privatising state assets, and slashing public sector jobs. This policy pauperised the Greek working class.

The EU—which the manifesto aims to “reform”—cannot be reformed, because it is a reactionary instrument of the financial oligarchy. For the European working class, the only viable policy is to wage mass political struggles to secure its social rights in a struggle to overthrow the capitalist oligarchy and the European Union. This requires the unity of the European working class based on a revolutionary socialist perspective to establish the United Socialist States of Europe.

The unions and NGOs promoting the “Social Pact” aim instead to disorient the working class, hiding plans to negotiate continuous cuts with the state behind empty promises of “social cohesion.”

Their document concludes, “We want the elaboration of economic and social choices, and of the rules and regulations that follow from it, to be the fruit of broad negotiations to allow the establishment of the necessary consensus.”

That is to say, the petty-bourgeois bureaucracies want budget cuts to boost French capitalism’s global competitiveness, negotiated in talks with the state and employers’ groups. They support the cuts and fear the emergence of class struggles by workers that would shatter the bogus “consensus” that the bureaucracies try to promote around attacks on the working class.

The goal the current “Social Pact” sets itself—building a consensus between capital and the labour

bureaucracy, while preparing attacks on workers’ social and democratic rights and trying to suppress the class struggle—is deeply reactionary. In its basic conception, it is far closer to the Labour Charter promulgated in 1941 by the collaborationist Vichy regime than to the social reforms granted during the economic upswing of the post-World War II period.

Laid out by René Belin, a union bureaucrat who had become Vichy’s labour minister, the Labour Charter aimed to establish social peace between capital and labour, detailing various social benefits and establishing a complex bureaucracy for management-labour collaboration. It outlawed strikes. Its title bore a cynical quote of Field Marshal Philippe Pétain decrying the “injustice of the proletarian condition,” while the bureaucracy it organised oversaw the systematic destruction of workers’ living standards under Vichy.

Attempts today to force through anti-worker cuts based on a fraudulent “Social Pact” only lay the basis for explosive struggles between the proletariat and the petty-bourgeois bureaucracies.



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