

French CGT union chooses new leader

Anthony Torres
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The leadership of the CGT (General Confederation of Labour) accepted the candidacy of Thierry Lepaon to replace Bernard Thibault at the head of the union Federation on October 16, and the CGT's "parliament" approved this choice on November 16.

In March 2012, before the presidential elections, Thibault had announced that he would not seek reelection in 2013. Thibault had been discredited among workers because of his collaboration with former president Nicolas Sarkozy, with whom he worked on many "reforms" attacking workers' social rights, especially pensions.

Thibault had sought a successor who would help the next president attack the social gains of workers without giving the impression of too great a continuity with Sarkozy's term in office. The CGT is preparing for intense class struggles, as the social democratic president, François Hollande, puts forward measures to pauperise the working class.

The CGT therefore embarked on the difficult quest of finding a leader who would have a good relationship with the bosses' organisations—needed to keep up "social dialogue" with Hollande—and who at the same time could attempt to contain workers' anger. The search for such a successor produced an internal crisis within the CGT.

When the candidacies of Eric Aubin and Nadine Prigent were announced, Thibault publicly favoured Prigent. The selection of Lepaon, apparently largely by default, serves to bring together the different tendencies within the CGT hostile to the other two candidates.

Aubin and Prigent had distinguished themselves in the struggle in 2010 against the pension reform by betraying the strike. Aubin negotiated the reform in person with employers' representatives, while Prigent represented the CGT in the joint trade union committee that isolated the refinery workers' strike, abandoning strikers facing police repression.

The CGT leadership rejected Prigent. An article in *Les Echos* titled "Thibault will leave the CGT at the beginning of 2013" reports that "this former leader of the Social Health Federation, a pure product of the public services sector, is said to have a disagreeable character which has created ferocious detractors within the organisation. 'If it's her, there'll be serious differences', the union federation bosses have been warning for several months."

As for Aubin, certain CGT industrial branches judge him to be too "reformist", that is to say, too openly associated with the implementation of reforms that the CGT cynically claims to criticize.

Lepaon is less well known than Aubin and Prigent, who received substantial media coverage during the strikes against the pension reform in 2010. Nonetheless, he has considerable experience in backstage negotiations.

Lepaon was a coppersmith at Moulinex before his factory was shut down in the 2000s. Since 2010, he has been a member of the Economic, Social, and Ecological Council (CESE), where austerity packages are decided in negotiations between the unions, business lobby groups, and the government.

The France 3TV-Normandy web site commented: "It is on the ruins of the biggest industrial catastrophe in the region, after the closure of SMN, that Thierry Lepaon founded his union career, taking over the reins of the Normandy Calvados union federation in 2001 before heading the CGT Normandy, and then arriving at the supreme office where he was appointed on October 16. Lionel Muller, his CGT colleague at Moulinex, believes that "at the least" he's "an opportunist" who "will not make the employers' organization shake in their shoes."

Lepaon maintains good relations with the representatives of the French bourgeoisie, who seem to consider him, with some contempt, to be harmless. The

business magazine *Challenges* reports: “‘Thierry Lepaon was very awkward,’ according to a leading light at the Medef [employers’ organization] who is a member of the CESE. ‘I think he is less astute than his rival Eric Aubin, but he is warmer, more cordial than Bernard Thibault. He’s an agreeable person’.”

Challenges also quotes a member of the conservative Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), Jean-Marie Geveaux: “There were a few smiles when we were appointed joint commissioners, but we work well together. He’s friendly, not doctrinaire, and has sufficient stature to replace Bernard Thibault.”

The relations that Lepaon maintains with the CESE, which is unanimous in his support, show that his nomination to head the CGT will change nothing about the organization’s politics. It will continue its ever closer integration into the state and its ever more damaging sacrifice of fundamental social interests of the working class.

The CGT has experienced a continuing erosion of worker membership since the 1970s due to its repeated betrayals after the general strike of 1968. Thibault, whose 14-year mandate was the first to occur entirely after the collapse of the Soviet Union, ended the strategy according to which the CGT acted as a transmission belt for the Stalinist Communist Party (PCF). The strategy of Thibault was to orient himself directly towards the employers’ organizations and the state.

The Common Position negotiated with President Sarkozy in 2008 deepened the integration of the CGT into the state machinery. In exchange for their support for austerity measures, the CGT and the French Democratic Labour Confederation (CFDT) made an agreement to further integrate their unions into the committees for joint management with the employers and the state. This gave the state a more centralized bureaucracy to police the working class and impose social cuts.

Retrenched around a shrinking base among the minority (7 percent) of French workers who are still union members, the CGT has become an empty shell. Its leading confederations are piloted by minor bureaucracies in accordance with the needs of the state and the employers. As the recent Perruchot report exposed, the latter contribute almost all of the unions’ financial resources.

The CGT has found itself unable to find a leader who with a “militant” profile. The choice of someone like Lepaon to lead the union reflects the objective development of the CGT as a pro-austerity organization.



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