

French government law increases worker exploitation

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On Tuesday, the French Socialist Party government obtained passage of an anti-worker parliamentary bill that attacks workplace rights, jobs and wages. The law passed with 250 deputies voting in favour and 26 voting against, including six Socialist Party (PS) deputies. The main bourgeois opposition UMP (Movement for a Popular Unity) abstained along with the Ecology Party, which is part of the government.

Falsely labelled the Security of Employment bill, it is better known as the flexibility of labour agreement based on an agreement between employers and unions on January 11. It is designed to make French industry more competitive on the world market by cutting labour costs, through greater exploitation and wage cuts. The French trade deficit reached €67.45 billion (US\$88.5 billion) in 2012.

The agreement negotiated by the French Democratic Labour Confederation (CFDT), French Christian Labour Confederation (CFTC) and CGC (representing middle managers and technicians) handed the employers the right to introduce short-time working with the consequent reduction in wages and/or increase of the working week, with no wage adjustment for a period of up to two years. Workers can be instructed to move to other operating posts within factories or moved to other geographical locations on pain of being fired.

At the heart of the new law is an outright attack on the labour code, rendering workers' rights and the obligations of employers contained in individual work contracts meaningless. President François Hollande has called it "a success for social dialogue". The "success" for trade union functionaries is measured by several seats on the supervisory board of directors in companies of over 5,000 employees.

The General Labour Confederation (CGT), and the

Force Ouvrière (Workers Force) unions mounted a day of national protests while the bill was being passed in the National Assembly. Few were called out on strike.

Rallies throughout the country attracted a small turnout, with barely a few thousand showing up in Paris. Workers are becoming indifferent and contemptuous of militant talk from the unions while they implement the government's austerity measures in practise.

A pathetic appeal by the CGT and FO, supported by the FSU public sector and Solidaire unions, was hoisted on a huge banner outside the National Assembly, which stated: "Ladies and gentlemen of parliament, do not vote for this unfair reform". Within the context of the French Republic rocked by tax fraud scandals, and anger in the working class over job losses, this mild rebuke is tantamount to ongoing support for the PS government and to preventing its fall.

The statement by Force Ouvrière leader Jean-Claude Mailly the previous day about a probable total boycott by workers of the protest sought to blame workers for not taking to the streets. He claimed workers did not understand the dangers the new law posed for them, stating: "I do not say that tomorrow there will be hundreds of thousands of workers in the streets because these [laws] are complicated subjects"—in other words, too technical for workers to grasp.

The real reason for workers' mistrust of the union bureaucracy is not hard to find. The previous protest by the CGT and FO against the "flexibility" law on March 5 attracted 200,000 throughout France, itself a low turnout. The next day, the FO national union bureaucracy agreed to a "competitive and flexibility" deal for all the Renault automobile plants. This involves a freeze on wages for 2013 and an increase of 6.5 percent in unpaid working time, plus 8,000 job

losses.

Over 300 hundred workers at the PSA Peugeot Citroën plant at Aulnay have been on strike for three months against their layoffs, but the unions led by the CGT have consciously isolated their struggle, aided by the Lutte Ouvrière leader at the plant, Jean-Pierre Mercier.

The CGT leader Thierry Lepaon, close to the Stalinist French Communist Party, termed the Security of Employment law as “securing layoffs and not employment”. However, Lepaon’s remedy is even worse. At the CGT 50th congress in Toulouse last month, he heaped praise on US President Barack Obama and the US trade unions for “saving” jobs at General Motors and having seats on the board of directors since 2009. He viewed this as a positive effect of “state intervention”, which “our comrades at the Florange steel works didn’t have.” Lepaon knows the results of Obama’s intervention in the auto industry, with dozens of plant closures and tens of thousands of layoffs linked to 50 percent wage cuts for new hires. Lepaon’s speech in Toulouse got an 85.1 percent approval from congress delegates, which confirms the anti-working class nature of the unions.

The “opposition” of the CGT and FO to the government’s law on “flexibility” is the window dressing that hides its support for French capitalism and its Socialist Party government. While workers are coming to realise this line-up of forces against its interests, the pseudo-left parties of the NPA (New Anti-capitalist Party) and Lutte Ouvrière, which supported the fraudulent protest of the CGT and FO, are the rotting pillars of the unions and government.



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