

French unions downplay revelations they are financed by employers groups

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The French union bureaucracy has tried to cover up the issues raised by the statements of Denis Gautier-Sauvagnac, former head of the Engineering Employers Association (UIMM), regarding his financing of the unions, by issuing a blanket denial of his statements.

Confirming the statements of several leading UIMM officials, Gautier-Sauvagnac said he had financed the unions with tens of millions of euros over several years. He refused, however, to name the union executives who benefited from these funds. He declared that he did not wish to “betray their trust; it goes against my convictions and my values. I cannot go further, I am in a corner”.

Speaking of the UIMM funds, the general secretary of the engineering branch of the Stalinist CGT (General Confederation of Labour) union, Philippe Martinez, replied: “Who received it, when, and for what purposes, both among the politicians and the unions?” He added in reference to Gautier-Sauvagnac: “He has to go all the way, to really tell all; him and his friends including those who run the UIMM today, who hide behind their claims that ‘it’s not us, it was before us’”.

“The CGT has never received money from the UIMM”, claimed CGT national leader Thierry Lepaon.

The CGT and the other unions are relying on the fact that Gautier-Sauvagnac is not giving names in order to reduce the affair to its purely judicial dimension. They present the affair as if the only important question was to ask whether or not the employers’ organisations secretly paid out €16 million to union leaders between 2000 and 2006.

While such transactions would have a criminal character from the standpoint of the courts, the main question raised by Gautier-Sauvagnac’s revelations is that of the political criminality of the unions and their class nature. The affair has shined a broader light on

how the bourgeoisie finances the unions as organisations hostile to the class struggle and to the working class.

By financing the union confederations, the state and leaders of employers’ organisations aim to stifle the class struggle and mould public opinion in the interests of the bourgeoisie.

Lepaon’s claim that his union has received no money from the institutions of the ruling class is a lie. In fact, as the parliamentary report assembled by Nicolas Perruchot demonstrated last year, the unions are empty shells, dependent on corporate funding and state subsidies for over 90 percent of their revenues. These findings also apply to the CGT, which—like France’s other union bureaucracies—never denied the contents of the Perruchot report. (See: Perruchot report exposes French unions’ ties to the ruling class)

The comments by Gautier-Sauvagnac give a fairly clear picture of the methods through which the employers buy the reactionary services of the union bureaucracy. The first form of financing comes in the form of cheques “concerning the purchase of highly expensive advertising or hiring of expensive stands, or also the purchasing of union newspapers”, explained Gautier-Sauvagnac.

Not one union bureaucrat has contradicted this claim, because the subsidies that the employers’ organisations give to the unions really exist. The CFDT (French Democratic Labour Confederation) admitted that it had taken the UIMM’s money, though it claimed that it only took €20,000.

Finally, when the “legal” money does not suffice to maintain the functioning of the unions, the UIMM tops that up with secret cash payments.

In this way, the employers’ organisations support phony advertising and massively finance union

publications, which could not otherwise find a readership among workers. The employers' financial power is put at the disposal of the propaganda of the unions, supported by pseudo-left parties like the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), in order to manipulate public opinion in the interests of the ruling class.

Gautier-Sauvagnac's comments also give a clearer picture of the role the unions have played for decades in blocking struggles against various attacks on the working class. Since the 1980s, as the unions lost the bulk of their members due to working class anger over their support for austerity measures of Socialist Party (PS) President François Mitterrand, the unions have increasingly sought to limit strike activity. Deprived of a dues base, they have turned for financing to the state and the employers groups. (See: French unions secretly financed by millions of euros from business groups)

This transformation of the union bureaucracy into an instrument of the class enemy is at the origin of their hostility towards any significant strike movement against austerity, or against imperialist wars led by France or NATO.

During struggles against pension cuts in 2010, then-CGT Secretary Bernard Thibault declared that it was "abstract" to discuss calling a general strike, although public opinion supported such action. Refinery workers and workers at petrol depots striking against the cuts had brought the economy to a halt, threatening France with a petrol shortage.

The government at the time sent in CRS riot police to force workers back to work, thus allowing the ruling class to seize control of the refineries and end the strike. The CGT threw its weight behind the state, abandoning the strikers and isolating their struggle.

Under the present government of President François Hollande, the unions are playing a central role in the implementation of austerity measures, like the labour market "reform" and the most recent pension cut.

Through propaganda they carry on in work places with the aid of employers, these organisations are leading a struggle in the interests of the capitalist class, to block any development of a political consciousness in the working class. They are the mortal enemies of a proletarian revolution.

That also demonstrates the reactionary role of organisations like the NPA and the Left Front, which supported the election of President Hollande in the

second round, claiming it would be easier to "pressure" a PS government for progressive policies. These petty bourgeois parties subordinate the struggle of the working class to the union bureaucracies, pretending that the unions are workers' organisations, in order to strangle working class opposition and push through the policies demanded by the financial aristocracy.



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