Upsurge of strikes and popular anger in France at mass sackings, tax hikes

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Workers led protest marches and occupied factories in various parts of France yesterday, amid rising popular anger with the right-wing Socialist Party (PS) government of President François Hollande.

The demonstrators were protesting against a wave of mass layoffs at industrial and service enterprises, as well as the PS government's tax increases and austerity measures. There is widespread anger against a major PS income tax hike hitting working class income brackets, and the "eco-tax" on truckers that threatens the livelihoods of struggling food processing plants and self-employed truckers in Brittany.

Mass protests that began in Brittany, demanding the suppression of the eco-tax and Hollande's resignation, are spreading throughout France.

Over 1,200 workers of retailer La Redoute occupied the central square in Lille to protest 700 planned job cuts and demand employment guarantees for all workers from La Redoute's major shareholder, the Kering Group.

Early yesterday morning, hundreds of workers at Goodyear's Amiens-Nord plant occupied and blockaded the factory, which is threatened with closure and the loss of up to 1,173 jobs.

Six thousand midwives and midwives in training from around France attended a protest march in Paris, marching on and surrounding the health ministry. Working midwives have been on a nationwide strike for three weeks, demanding official recognition as first-line providers of follow-up gynecological care, a status that would lead to increased pay and professional recognition.

They carried banners reading "Wonderful profession, awful conditions" and "Yes to storks, no to pigeons"—denouncing last year's pro-free market "pigeon" campaign on social media, which called for lower corporate taxes and other concessions to business interests.

Journalists at the public France Télévisions (France 2, France 3, France 4, France 5 and RFO) also went on a one-day nationwide strike against plans for 361 job cuts announced last month and staged a rally in central Paris.

The hemorrhaging of jobs continues. French appliance maker Fagorbrandt, which employs 1,870 workers, declared bankruptcy yesterday.

Explosive anger is building in the working class and sections of the middle class against Hollande's austerity policies. Polls released yesterday found that Hollande is the most unpopular president in French history—beating a record previously held by right-wing President Jacques Chirac—with an approval rating of only 25 percent and a disapproval rating of 72 percent. He is down to only 56 percent support even among people who voted for him in the first round of last year's elections, leading to fears that public opinion will turn violently against him.

"The major risk for him, in the coming months, is to become unpopular even within this hard core," said CSA pollster Yves-Marie Cann, adding that "an alarm signal has gone off."

The bankruptcy of capitalism and the discrediting of the French bourgeois "left" are creating conditions for an upsurge of the class struggle with revolutionary implications. Amid growing fears that the PS' policies will impose in France the nightmarish social retrogression that the European Union (EU) has forced upon Greece, polls found that two-thirds of the population are ready to join mass protests against taxes and for jobs.

Sentiment in favor of strikes and protests against Hollande is strongest in the working class. Polls found

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that 76 percent of blue-collar workers, 71 percent of white-collar workers and 47 percent of managers and professionals supported strike action against Hollande's policies.

In April, another poll found that 70 percent of the French population believes there is likely to be a "social explosion" in the coming months, including 81 percent of blue-collar workers.

Political spokesmen of the ruling elite now speak openly of their fear of upheavals. Right-wing deputy Philippe Gosselin told *Le Nouvel Observateur*, "This anger is frightening. I am not saying the country is on the verge of social chaos, but the French people cannot take it anymore … I often hear people say, 'It makes you want to break everything, like they did in Brittany.'"

Such concerns are shared inside the government as well. Admitting that he felt "very unclear" about how to speak to voters, François-Michel Lambert of the Green Party, a partner in the PS-led ruling coalition, said: "People are fed up with making sacrifices and getting nothing in return."

Rising social anger in the working class brings it into collision with reactionary forces in the petty-bourgeois "left," like the New Anti-capitalist Party and the Left Front, and in the union bureaucracy. These forces backed the PS and Hollande's election last year.

Significantly, the union bureaucracies and the Left Front are explicitly hostile to the anti-eco-tax protests in Brittany. (See "Breton food processing workers, businesses protest French eco-tax")

As the upsurge of working class anger shows, the failure of these organizations to mobilize opposition to Hollande did not reflect the lack of broader popular opposition to the Socialist Party president. These long-time allies of the PS did not want to mobilize popular opposition to a figure whose policies they support.

Responding to calls from the banks and the EU for intensified austerity measures and ignoring rising popular opposition, the PS government is signaling that it will press ahead with more attacks on the working class. Speaking to business daily *Les Echos* on Wednesday, Junior Budget Minister Bernard Cazeneuve (Socialist Party) pledged that he would "go further with cuts," cutting a further €3 billion from public budgets in order to keep budget deficits to 4.1 percent of GDP.

Cazeneuve bluntly outlined a policy of unending austerity in defiance of popular opposition: "We must make more spending cuts, until the end of the legislative session. We have already made 15 billion in cuts for 2014, which is unprecedented, as the European Commission recognized on Tuesday. In 2015 we will have to be even more ambitious, and also in 2016 and 2017."

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