

Tens of thousands in France, Italy protest austerity measures

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On Saturday, tens of thousands of people took to the streets in France and in Italy, protesting the social-democratic governments' austerity measures and pro-market labour reforms.

The protest in Rome, attended by tens of thousands of people, ended in violence as police attacked protesters. The police used tear gas and baton-charged demonstrators. There were dozens of lighter injuries among police and protesters, and at least six arrests, police said.

In France, the protest was called by the unions and their pseudo-left supporters, the New Anti-capitalist Party and the Left Front, a coalition of the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) and the Left Party of Jean-Luc Mélenchon. In the rally, Alexis Tsipras, the chairman of the Greek Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA), marched alongside Pierre Laurent of the PCF, Mélenchon and NPA spokesman Olivier Besancenot. Tsipras is the European Left (EL) candidate for the Presidency for the European Commission in the European elections.

Turnout at the Paris protest was around 25,000 people, according to police estimates, though the PCF claimed 100,000 participated. Several other protests were also called in other French cities, including a protest of 1,600 in Marseille.

In Paris, protesters carried banners criticizing austerity measures being carried out by the Socialist Party (PS) government of President François Hollande. Banners read, "Enough, Hollande," "If you're left-wing, you tax the financial sector," "If you're left-wing, you help the workers," or "If you're left-wing, Europe means people first."

The relatively low turnout for the rally in Paris, despite deep opposition to the social agenda of the EU and of France's PS government, reflects deepening

popular disillusionment and anger with the reactionary politics of the European pseudo-left. The rally drew largely on the membership and periphery of the pseudo-left parties and had the air of a family festival.

The Left Front and the NPA play a similar role to their counterpart, Syriza, which helped the "troika"—the European Commission, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European Central Bank—impose devastating austerity measures on the Greek working class. While making tactical criticisms of EU policy, Syriza did everything to block social opposition and tacitly backed the crushing of strikes against austerity. This allowed the "troika" to cut wages by 30 percent or more and destroy hundreds of thousands of jobs.

As for the PS, after a humiliating defeat in the March municipal election that saw a significant victory for the neo-fascist National Front (FN), it is shifting further to the right, vowing to intensify austerity and making law-and-order appeals to the FN. The government is planning to slash €50 billion in yearly public spending under Hollande's so-called "Responsibility Pact."

The sharp turn to the right reflects the disintegration of bourgeois "left" politics in France and Europe as a whole. Workers' deep social opposition to these reactionary policies finds no expression in the reactionary politics of the protest organisers, the NPA and Left Front, however, which are key allies of the PS and supporters of the EU.

Their empty opposition to Hollande is a political fraud. The NPA and the Left Front supported Hollande against right-wing incumbent Nicolas Sarkozy during the 2012 presidential elections, working to promote illusions in the PS. While acknowledging that Hollande would carry out austerity policies, they claimed that the PS could be pressured to adopt left-wing policies. These claims have proven completely bankrupt.

After the rally, the Left Front and the NPA cynically claimed that they would not allow the PS to carry out austerity measures. Besancenot said, “The message is clear, Manuel Valls is starting out with a first protest, and it’s important because this means a new political scenario is opening.”

Mélenchon said, “This is a message sent to the government... There is a left in this country, and it is unacceptable for it to be usurped to carry out a right-wing economic policy.”

Such remarks are a backhanded acknowledgement of the widespread sentiment in the population that there is no political left in France, and that the PS and its allies, including the Left Front and the NPA, are indifferent or hostile to workers’ interests.

The verbal opposition of Mélenchon and Besancenot to the PS offers nothing to workers seeking to fight EU-dictated austerity measures, however. They are mere political shadows of the PS itself. Their aim in calling this protest is to subordinate the working class to the reactionary agenda of the EU and the PS government, blocking a politically independent movement of the working class against the capitalist ruling elite.

The protest in Rome was called against rising housing costs, unemployment and labour market reforms amid a slowdown of the Italian economy. Protesters denounced the social-democratic Democratic Party (PD) government of Matteo Renzi, who is planning to reform labour rules to make it easier for companies to hire and fire employees.

Renzi was brought to power after his predecessor Enrico Letta failed to carry out economic reforms demanded by the European Union. Renzi has pledged that his government will enact economic reforms quickly, slashing public spending.



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