

French unions attend government's anti-worker "social conference"

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The French Socialist Party government called its third "social conference" of employers and unions on July 7 to deepen its attacks on the working class and boost French companies' competitiveness.

The CGT (General Confederation of Labour) and FO (Workers Force) unions put up a phony threat to boycott the proceedings due to more government concessions to employers on working conditions just days before. The two unions backed down, however, attending day one to listen to more empty promises of President François Hollande on apprenticeships for youth and training for the 2 million long-term unemployed.

Hollande complained about the lack of apprenticeship places available in high schools, promising to boost the figure to 70,000 by 2017. However, employers continue to slash training programs. There has been a 14 percent drop in youth training since the beginning of the year.

With 5 million unemployed, Hollande's employment policy is an empty and reactionary hoax. He recognised that in exchange for his financial concessions to employers through the "responsibility pact", "Still too many [industrial] branches have not met to put the pact in place".

The Medef employers association and CGPME for medium-sized firms threatened a real boycott of the conference, if the government did not concede to its demands to slash retirement arrangements for workers in arduous industries, further concessions on the legal definition of part-time work, and tearing up labour code provisions on workers' rights to representation in firms with over 50 employees.

Prime Minister Manuel Valls duly agreed to these demands, and the Medef (Movement of French Enterprises) President Pierre Gattaz indicated that he

was satisfied with "an encouraging speech"

The CGT protested calling it "a provocation", while FO leader Jean-Claude Mailly called it "a bug in the social dialogue". Clearly the unions would have preferred to have "negotiated" these attacks.

The cynical show of anger of the two unions was dismissed by Valls and the PS officials. At the end of the two-day conference, he declared they would all participate in the September meeting to work out the details of a job-creation package in exchange for the €41 billion tax breaks granted to employers in the PS's so-called Responsibility Pact program of cuts.

Labour Minister François Rebsamen confirmed that the CGT and FO "have indicated they really want to pursue the social dialogue with us in September".

While Hollande, the unions and employers were praising "social dialogue" between the unions and the employers as the best means to impose austerity on the workers, his Socialist Party (PS) deputies in the National Assembly voted to enforce the same measures by passing the revised social security finance bill enacting the tax breaks for employers. This is linked to the €50 billion cuts in public spending over three years to meet targets set by the bankers and the European Union.

The bill was passed with 272 votes in favour, 234 against and 54 abstentions. Fifteen Green deputies abstained out of the total of eighteen. All Socialist Party (PS) deputies either voted in favour or abstained, thus helping to avoid any crisis of confidence in the government. The main bourgeois opposition party UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) voted against, sure that the PS did not need its vote to ram through the cuts. It supported the bill's essence: the reduction in employer contributions to the social security system.

This vote put an end to a cynical charade by a group

of 100 PS deputies who, after the nomination of Valls as prime minister this spring, claimed that they opposed the Responsibility Pact and the acceleration of the PS's austerity program. As was eminently predictable from the beginning of the affair, the PS deputies all support the evisceration of the basic social gains of the working class in the post-World War II period.

The "social conference" and the passage of PS austerity measures comprehensively expose the rotten, anti-working class character of the union bureaucracy and the pseudo-left parties that have promoted it and the PS government.

The Left Front of Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) has been wooing the 100 PS oppositionists, now reduced to 35 abstentionists, and presenting them as a "left" alternative in government. Now, the Left Front laughably describes the abstainers as "the suffering at the heart of the militant Socialists".

Mélenchon claimed, "These socialists have a historic role today... if they are independent, it is they who will recreate the possibility of a left dialogue and another government which has a left policy".

In fact, the recent developments have shown that the claims of Mélenchon and the PCF that the PS opposition would move to the left was so much hot air, designed to promote and give a "left" face to the PS, which is a party of the blackest social reaction.

The pseudo-left Left Front and its allies in the NPA have sought to portray the CGT, FO and SUD (Solidarity, Unity and Democracy) unions as militant opponents of the PS government, when in fact they have betrayed every struggle of workers, from the fight to preserve pensions in 2010 to the recent rail workers' opposition to privatisation.

Referring to the "social conference", the NPA complained that unions should not "lend themselves to this cynical masquerade". They do, however and throughout all their various plots against the working class to police the working class and preserve the PS government, they are supported by the NPA.



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