

Industrial action mounts in France against Socialist Party's austerity drive

Pierre Mabut
9 April 2015

Industrial action is spreading in France in defense of jobs and working conditions and in opposition to the austerity policies of the Socialist Party (PS) government and the European Union (EU).

Air traffic controllers launched a series of 48-hour strikes yesterday over mounting attacks on working conditions and plans to raise the retirement age from 57 to 59 years in 2017. Nearly half of all short- and medium-haul flights were cancelled at French airports. The strikes are slated to continue through the month of April.

The government has reportedly refused point-blank to negotiate with the main controllers' union, the SNCTA (National Union of Air Traffic Controllers), on the demands the union has presented.

Over 400 workers at Radio France have been on strike for three weeks against government plans to lay off up to 380 workers, mainly technicians, in order to erase a €21.3 million deficit. The government intends to sell off or merge local radio stations, pool their program resources, and rationalize Radio France's two orchestras.

Journalists joined the strike last Friday. The seven government-run national and local radio stations are either off the air or running a skeleton service, with little or no news programming. The strike is already the longest in 10 years.

Radio France CEO Mathieu Gallet, a front man for the PS, has provoked workers with claims that the company will not survive beyond this summer if cuts are not implemented, while spending €100,000 to renovate his office. Radio France workers passed a motion demanding Gallet's immediate resignation, but the union bureaucracy is merely complaining that Gallet refuses to negotiate restructuring plans and job cuts with the unions.

Gallet has the government's full backing. Culture Minister Fleur Pellerin has said that the layoffs—referred to as “voluntary”—are “probably necessary”. She has called for a “programme of social modernization.”

The joint union committee controlling the strike is pleading for the appointment of a government mediator to break the deadlock, knowing full well that he or she will do the government's bidding.

Yesterday's strikes overlap with a one-day march called for today by the union bureaucracy as a safety valve for growing opposition to the PS government and EU austerity policies. Workers at public hospitals and public schools plan to strike today and organize protest marches in cities across France.

The strikes are an initial response by the working class to moves by the PS government and business lobbies to intensify austerity measures, despite an overwhelming rejection of the policies of the PS in recent local elections. Prime Minister Manuel Valls has made clear he will accelerate his attacks on workers in line with EU demands to reduce France's budget deficit to 3 percent of gross domestic product by 2017.

At the same time, Valls has found still more money for the employers. On Wednesday, he announced more tax breaks, totaling €2.5 billion over 5 years, for companies investing in new equipment.

The PS and the union bureaucracy are in intense discussions with employers' organizations on plans for historic attacks on workers' social rights as part of a reactionary “reform” of labour contracts. The corporate elite aims to scuttle all long-term labour contracts (CDI), allowing employers to hire and fire at will and impose drastic cuts to wages and benefits.

Mass layoffs are already mounting. On April 7, the Vivarte corporation, which runs the La Halle, Kookai,

and André clothing stores, announced 1,600 layoffs amid falling sales. At the end of March, trucking and transport company MoryGlobal filed for bankruptcy, with 2,150 jobs on the chopping block in the biggest corporate bankruptcy in France since appliance maker Moulinex collapsed in 2001.

In seeking to resist policies pursued in France and across Europe by reactionary governments of all political stripes, the working class faces a political struggle against the PS and the EU. The strikes can be successful only if they are linked to a revolutionary and socialist perspective, based on mobilizing broader layers of workers and fighting to unite the entire European working class in struggle against EU austerity.

This means workers have to take the struggle out of the hands of the corrupt union bureaucracies and pseudo-left parties that for decades have suppressed workers' struggles.

To understand the perspective animating the union bureaucracies, the Stalinist-led Left Front, and the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) in France, one need only consider their Greek co-thinkers, the Syriza party. Having come to power in January, Syriza has capitulated to EU austerity demands and is currently raiding the Greek health system, pension funds and social services to pay off Greece's creditors in the EU and the International Monetary Fund.

Shrugging off Syriza's attacks on the working class, the Left Front's Clémentine Autain hailed Syriza as a model for the PS. The answer to austerity, she claimed, was "a renewal of cultural policy" modeled on Syriza's temporary rescue of the Greek public broadcasting service. She added, "Greece has just reestablished its public television channel. France is running down its audiovisual service. Find the error."

Autain's comments are a warning to workers that the Left Front, the NPA and their allies have the same anti-worker agenda as Syriza and would pursue the same policies were they to come to power in France.

They are terrified of the explosive social discontent in the working class, which is deeply alienated from PS President François Hollande, whom the pseudo-left endorsed in the 2012 presidential election. While they call protests to let off steam, they are terrified that a broad mobilization of the working class could rapidly topple the PS government. Should protest strikes

escalate into a movement against the PS and the EU, they will rapidly seek to shut it down.

This is the lesson of last September's strike by Air France pilots against wage and benefit cuts bound up with the introduction of the low-cost airline Transavia. The pilots were in a powerful negotiating position, having halted Air France traffic, and the corporation was hemorrhaging hundreds of millions of euros.

Precisely because its position was so powerful, and it feared that a victory by the pilots would deal a decisive blow to the company and the PS government, the National Airline Pilots Union (SNPL) moved to shut down the strike and organize a defeat. Pseudo-left groups such as the NPA and Lutte Ouvrière (Workers Struggle) hailed the defeat as a victory, trying to spread as much confusion and demoralization as possible.

The working class can bring to bear its immense social power only in a struggle against the PS and the EU, mobilizing workers on an internationalist and socialist perspective.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact