

Amidst widespread strikes, limited turnout at French union demonstrations

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Despite high-profile strikes at French airports and public radio, and a limited one-day strike in the public sector, workers largely stayed away from protest marches called yesterday by French union confederations—the Stalinist CGT (General Confederation of Labour), FO (Workers' Force) FSU (United Trade Union Federation) and Solidaires (Solidarity).

Nearly 800 trade union locals in both the public and private sectors had called for workers to strike on Thursday, according to the CGT. About 24 percent of primary school teachers and more than 35 percent of high school teachers went on strike, based on trade union estimates.

From a first survey from 12 regions including Lyon, Lille, Créteil and Paris, the Ministry of Education claimed that only about 10 percent of teachers had joined the strike.

Air traffic controllers are carrying out a rolling strike throughout April against attacks on their working conditions and pensions whilst the government refuses to even negotiate with them. Radio France workers have been on strike for over three weeks because of cuts and redundancies due to the government having taken back a big part of the company budget.

There is deep anger in the working class over austerity policies of the Socialist Party (PS) government of President François Hollande and the European Union. The government's constant announcement of new austerity measures as unemployment surged has discredited its economic policy. In a poll last November it received a 3 percent approval rating—roughly six times less than the 17 percent approval rating in France of the Al Qaeda-linked Islamic State (IS) militia that US, French and allied forces are bombing in Iraq and Syria.

Nonetheless, this anger does not find expression through the traditional channels through which the union bureaucracy has sought to channel opposition in the working class over previous decades.

The number of demonstrations organized by the union bureaucracy yesterday, only 80, was down from the 200 demonstrations in 2010. Then, several million workers marched against pension cuts and austerity measures of the government of conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Yesterday's demonstration in downtown Paris gathered union officials bussed in from cities and regions across France. The CGT improbably claimed there were 120,000 people in the Paris march, while police claimed there were 32,000.

The main demonstrations outside of Paris were in Marseille (45,000 according to the CGT, 7,000 according to police), Bordeaux (CGT: 10,000; police: 4,700), Lyon (organizers: 7,000; police: 4,200), Toulouse (organizers: 8,000; police: 4,000), Nantes, Rouen and Rennes.

Even taking union over-estimates as good coin, the presence of 300,000 people that marched yesterday reflects a collapse of working class participation in such protests from five years ago.

On the one hand, this reflects the reactionary politics of the French union bureaucracy. In line with pseudo-left organizations such as the Left Front and the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), it openly called for a victory of the PS in the 2012 presidential elections, thus helping to elect Hollande.

Broad sections of union officialdom, terrorized by mass anger at the PS, are hysterically opposed even to toothless, symbolic protests against the government, such as yesterday's march.

The CFDT (the French Democratic Confederation of

Work) and number of smaller trade unions refused to join the strike and protest marches, openly denouncing them and supporting the PS. Two days before the strike, the General Secretary of the CFDT, Laurent Berger, absurdly stated in a radio interview that “there is no austerity in France”.

Above all, however, broad masses of workers in France and across Europe are deeply alienated from the union bureaucracy and the pseudo-left parties of the affluent middle class that gravitate around it.

Only a few weeks after coming to power in the January 25 elections in Greece, Syriza repudiated its programme of stopping the drive for austerity imposed by preceding governments. Having worked out an agreement with the EU in February, the Syriza government is continuing and deepening the austerity drive of the European banks and the IMF against the Greek workers.

Over the last decade, masses of workers in France have marched in dozens of one-day protests supported by Syriza’s French co-thinkers, that did nothing to halt an onslaught of social cuts and imperialist wars imposed by the French bourgeoisie.

Masses of people remember the endorsement given to Hollande three years ago by the pseudo-left parties and the unions. What is emerging is an explosive political situation with revolutionary implications, in which the mass anger in the working class can, of necessity, only find expression through mass action outside the normal channels of the political establishment.



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