French unions seek to suppress opposition to Hollande's labour reforms

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25 February 2016

The trade unions are moving to divert growing opposition to the French government's new labour law behind toothless protests, while signaling to the ruling class their broad agreement with the bill.

The bill, prepared by the Socialist Party (PS) government of President François Hollande and Prime Minister Manuel Valls, would allow the trade unions to negotiate with the employers at the level of individual workplaces contracts that violate the national Labour Code. This would entail the destruction of broad sections of workers' democratic rights, undermine working conditions and living standards, and mark a sea change in class relations in France.

The General Confederation of Labour (CGT) hosted an inter-trade union meeting on the bill Tuesday evening, involving ten other unions. Present were seven other trade union federations, the National Union of French Students (UNEF), National High-School Students' Union (UNL) and Independent Democratic High School Student Union (FIDL).

In the communiqué issued after the meeting, the unions state that they will work "to make proposals on new provisions of the law and propose changes to existing provisions, notably on redundancies, organisation of work and the workday, health and safety, and apprenticeships." Their document focused its criticisms on two aspects of the planned law: limits imposed on fines for employers in the labour courts, and "measures which increase the unilateral power of the employers." The unions agreed to meet again on March 3.

The unions remained silent about the heart of the new law: their ability to negotiate with employers and then impose contracts at the enterprise level that violate the Labour Code. This shows that the unions do not reject the ransacking of workers' rights and will continue to negotiate various provisions of the bill with the government and the employers so as to pass it.

The current Labour Code has been built up over more than 100 years and contains many protections for workers. Also minimum conditions have been negotiated collectively on an industry-by-industry basis, so that any workplace or factory, according to which industry it is part of, must conform to these minimum conditions.

All that concerns the unions is that they conserve their role, privileges and influence with the employers and the state, while cynically posing as opposed to the reform. However, this pose is an obvious fraud: the trade unions did not even bother to organise strike action against the bill.

The daily *Libération* called the unions' statement "a timid communiqué," adding that now, "the government can relax."

Social anger and expressions of opposition are growing rapidly, however. An Internet petition against the labour reform has gone way beyond its organisers' hopes and collected 500,000 signatures in a matter of days. There are indications that youth in high schools and universities, who are currently on vacation, are preparing to mobilise when they come back in early March.

The unusual participation of university and high school student unions in talks with trade unions points to broader opposition among students and youth to the PS's policies. These organisations are closely tied to the PS and broadly support it, and UNEF officials praised the trade unions' cowardly communiqué as an "important step" in an interview with *Metronews*.

Nevertheless, the student unions' statements are a distorted reflection of the anger building among youth at the conditions they face as students and in their

working lives. UNEF president William Martinet declared, "For us, this bill is the straw that broke the camel's back. For 10 years, young people have faced ever more precarious conditions, on the job market due to the economic crisis and also during their studies. The tolerance level for these conditions has limits. They have been reached."

The CGT only reluctantly set a date of March 31 for a symbolic, one-day protest. Its officials told *Libération* that workers had attacked the CGT's inactivity faced with the law, saying that "There was some bellyaching." There have been calls on social media for a demonstration on March 9, "with or without the union leadership."

With France still under a state of emergency, against which the trade unions have organised no action, the trade unions are demonstrating that they support the diktat of the police and of the employers over the working class.

This attack on labour rights was launched just as the French State of Emergency was renewed for a further three months. Valls has said it will remain in place "until Daech [the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq] is defeated," signifying that the government intends to ban and make illegal strikes, demonstrations and meetings of any counter-offensive of the working class. The class content of the PS's permanent state of emergency is emerging before masses of people.

With 10,000 French troops patrolling the streets, Valls is insisting that he will ram through the bill in the face of all opposition, pledging to "to take the reform all the way."

The fight against the labour reform can proceed only in a political struggle against the PS government and the policies of war, police state rule, and austerity pursued not only by the PS in France but by all the imperialist governments. It must be a consciously anti-capitalist struggle oriented to mobilising the working class in France and across Europe.

For this, it must break with the trade and student unions, and their political allies including the PS and the New Anti-capitalist Party, who will seek to block a political struggle against the PS and the European Union. For years, they have suppressed rising opposition to the reactionary agenda of Hollande, who is now the most unpopular French president since World War II. It is only due to their complicity that the very weak Hollande administration has been able to continue imposing its reactionary agenda.

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