

Workers, students march against French labor law reform

Alex Lantier
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On Wednesday, between 250,000 to 450,000 workers and youth marched in protests across France against the Socialist Party's (PS) labor law reform called by trade and student unions. Marchers held signs denouncing not only the proposed labor reform, which would lengthen the work week and scrap basic workplace protections, but also the European Union's persecution of refugees and the state of emergency imposed by the PS after the November 13 terror attacks in Paris.

Workers at the SNCF national railways and the RATP Paris transport authority went on strike on the same day.

The PS government is meeting with the unions today in an attempt to make minor modifications to the law in order to win their support for ramming it through in the face of mass opposition.

In Paris, tens of thousands of people participated in several protest marches across different areas of the city. "It's our future that is under attack. We have not even begun working, and they are telling us that it will be possible to fire us easily," said high school students Alexandre and Mathilde.

"Working conditions today are already complicated, it is not easy to talk to your employer. With this law, the problems are just getting worse. Then people will be told to work more hours, until they burn out, instead of hiring more people. It's not logical! When Valls says this is going to create jobs, he is lying," said Flavie, who has not been able to find work in her field, tourism management.

The PS government and the police cracked down violently on the demonstration in Lyon, attended by 20,000 people, using police powers granted by the state of emergency to attack protesters and impose extraordinary prison sentences. Several high schools in Lyon were blockaded that day, and clashes broke out

when police suddenly tried to block the path of the demonstrations. At least two protesters were hospitalized after riot police shot rubber bullets and split open a protester's skull with a police club.

The charges brought against three protesters detained during the clashes make clear that the PS, while it does not yet dare invoke the state of emergency to ban demonstrations, is moving to illegalize public protest. "Democracy is expressed in the ballot box and not in the street," declared state prosecutor Jean Ailhaud as he brought down charges not only for "aggravated violence against an official representing public authority," but also for "rebellion."

These charges, which imply that people exercising a constitutionally protected right to protest and defending themselves against police attack are organizing an armed insurrection, are absurd provocations. Faced with broad popular opposition to its reactionary program, the PS is declaring that it has decided that all expressions of opposition threaten the survival of the state and must be crushed.

This is a serious warning as to the character of the state of emergency and the policy of deprivation of nationality for those deemed to be enemies of the state. While presented as targeting Islamist terrorist groups, which in fact serve as tools of the PS' policy of regime change in Syria, the state of emergency is in fact squarely aimed at workers and youth protesting the PS' unpopular agenda of austerity and war at home.

As of yesterday, one high school student was under investigation and on probation, an unemployed man was condemned to six months in prison and a €1000 fine for a rugby tackle against a policeman after the attack, and a student faces a €800 fine and a six-month suspended sentence. Police are expected to appeal in an attempt to obtain stiffer sentences.

As they move into opposition to the reactionary social policies of the PS, workers and youth face a broad political challenge. Any real struggle against the PS requires also mobilizing opposition to the agenda of imperialist war, anti-immigrant chauvinism and attacks on democratic rights that the PS shares with its counterparts across Europe and internationally.

The natural ally of the workers and youth in France, as the ICFI has explained in its statement “Socialism and the Fight against War,” is the international working class, developing a global struggle for socialism against austerity and imperialist war.

This struggle cannot be carried out under the political straitjacket imposed by the PS' political allies, like the Left Front and the New Anti-capitalist Party, and the trade and student unions. The fraud that these organizations are “socialist” or in any way represent an opposition to capitalism has been thoroughly exposed.

Ever since the PS came to power with the election of François Hollande in 2012, they have suppressed rising opposition in the working class to France's most unpopular government since World War II. Their support for the NATO powers' war in Syria is the clearest indication of their alignment on the PS' reactionary policies.

To develop, the movement must be conducted in total political independence of the PS' allies, and taken out of the hands of the various union bureaucracies. The open opposition of PS-aligned unions like the French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT) to stepped-up strike action to halt the labor reform, like the student unions' refusal to endorse blockades of high schools and universities, testify to the role of this entire social layer.

If Hollande is now declaring that there are “corrections to be made” in the labor law reform, and Prime Minister Manuel Valls is calling for “an ambitious and dynamic compromise,” it is because they hope to use the unions to pass a barely amended version of their law. They know that the unions will seek to organize the minimum number of protests necessary to ride out the social anger now building among workers and young people, while reaching a deal acceptable also to the PS and to its big-business backers in the Medef business federation.

The mobilization of the broad discontent and opposition in the working class to the PS can take place

only on the basis of opposition to the PS' political and trade union periphery.

Above all, what is required is the construction of a new party that offers a political perspective and a socialist alternative to the reactionary pro-capitalist policies of the PS and its allies. The WSWs encourages its readers in France to read and discuss its material with their friends, contact the WSWs and join its struggle to build a political alternative for the working class in France and internationally.



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