

French government, trade unions rework reactionary labor reform

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Faced with growing opposition among youth and workers to the reform of the Labor Code, Prime Minister Manuel Valls presented trade union and business confederations a redrafted version of Labor Minister Myriam El Khomri's law, hoping to win their approval and support.

Valls insisted that he wanted to promote "social dialogue" between business and trade union groups. He said, "Much has been done on the issue of personal accounts, on workers' rights, the great principles. There were problems, I admit." He added, "there was a moment when we did not find the time, the right moment, to present it as we have done in the last few days. We needed to take fifteen extra days to listen and to hear."

Valls' presentation of a touched-up law is a cynical maneuver to lull to sleep workers and youth who are opposed to an entirely reactionary reform. The superficial modifications presented by Valls change nothing fundamental about the bill. The key element—it allows the trade union to negotiate contracts at the level of individual firms that violate the Labor Code—was never put in question at any step of the talks.

Fines for improper mass sackings, which the previous bill specified so as to allow companies to engage in improper sackings while calculating their costs in advance, are now to be fixed by an arbitrary government decree. They would be three to fifteen months' salary, depending on workers' seniority.

The government refused to change new criteria facilitating mass layoffs. The only modification is that judges will now be allowed to monitor the decisions of a transnational corporation in France, to ensure that it is not using accounting tricks to generate losses in its French operations. However, bitter experience teaches that workers cannot count on the courts to defend them.

Judges have many times ruled in favor of mass sackings and, under the state of emergency, for prison terms against workers struggling to defend their jobs.

Finally, programs to assist youths not in employment or training are more cynical smoke and mirrors to try to obtain the student union bureaucracies' support for the reform. Valls boasted that his "bill was welcomed by the second-largest student organisation," the Federation of General Student Associations (FAGE).

After visiting the prime minister at the Matignon palace, Laurent Berger, the national secretary of the French Democratic Labor Federation (CFDT), praised the reactionary reform as a "potential vehicle for progress for youth and workers."

The Stalinist General Confederation of Labour (CGT) and Workers Force (FO) unions, and the National Union of French Students (UNEF), have called for continued protests.

These bureaucracies' claims to oppose the reform are based on lies. Calls for protests by the CGT and UNEF are political maneuvers aiming to channel anger among workers and students behind the perspective of yet another renegotiation and slight modification of the reactionary bill with the Socialist Party (PS) government.

Since President François Hollande was elected in 2012, the CGT, the other union bureaucracies, and their political allies like the New Anti-capitalist Party have proven themselves to be the PS' best allies. They stifled opposition in the working class to France's most unpopular government since World War II, as it carried out mass sackings, austerity, and war measures.

Over the course of four years, the unions and their allies have not called a single significant national demonstration, as they had in past presidential terms, because they feared they would not be able to contain

workers' anger and might accidentally trigger an uncontrolled protest.

This same fear underlies the decision of Hollande and Valls to rework the labor reform, fearing that discredited unions and political parties could not control the broader movement of workers and students that could ensue.

During the March 9 demonstration in Lyon, students blockaded several high schools, and clashes broke out with police which, under the new state of emergency, blocked the demonstration's path. At least two protesters were hospitalized after police fired rubber bullets and smashed open a protester's skull with a police baton.

The central question facing workers and youth on these protests is the need to establish the political independence of the working class from the unions and pseudo-left organizations, and the urgency of building a political leadership for the working class.

As the WSWs indicated in its leaflet addressed to the March 9 demonstration, "All genuine opposition to the reactionary measures of the PS is welcome. It would however be a fatal error for this movement, which is still in its early stages, to limit itself to a national framework, to demanding revisions or even the withdrawal of the El Khomri law by the unions. Talks between these illegitimate bureaucracies and the PS, under the jackboot of the state of emergency and with the permanent threat of NATO military escalation against Russia in Syria and in Europe, will only produce new attacks on the workers. Above all, they will do nothing against the dangers of war and dictatorship that threaten workers in France and around the world."

It added, "The struggle against the El Khomri law must be developed into a political struggle against the NATO powers' war drive, and against the anti-democratic state of emergency decreed after the November 13 attacks. This struggle must be for socialism, based on the working class. The natural allies of the workers and youth in France in this struggle are the workers across Europe and the world."

The leaflet appealed to workers and youth to circulate the WSWs materials, discuss them with their friends, and contact the WSWs to discuss the struggle to build a political alternative for the working class.



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