French workers, youth defy state of emergency to protest austerity policies

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1 April 2016

Masses of workers and youth, 1.2 million according to union sources and 390,000 according to police, protested Thursday across France against the labour law reform of Labour Minister Myriam El Khomri. Defying the anti-democratic state of emergency imposed by President François Hollande and a large deployment of heavily armed riot police, high school and university students and growing layers of workers are demonstrating against the Socialist Party's (PS) austerity policies.

According to trade and student unions, there were over 200 protest marches, demonstrations, and rallies across France. They estimated that marches in Paris, Marseille, and Toulouse gathered over 100,000 people, and tens of thousands of people in Nantes, Bordeaux, and Montpellier.

According to the Education Ministry, 176 high schools were blockaded across France yesterday morning, out of the country's 2,500 public high schools. High school student unions said their figures showed 250 high schools were blockaded. About 20 Paris high schools were closed pre-emptively by the authorities, a move that education ministry trade unionist Philippe Tournier said was "unprecedented."

Dockers and port workers mobilised in Le Havre and Rouen, blocking dozens of bridges and entrances into cities, industrial zones, and ports. They were also in struggle in Marseille, alongside workers at the railways, Air France, and steelmaker Arcelor-Mittal.

Transport and mass transit were also affected by strike action. Only half of regional trains were running, and TGV high-speed train traffic was cut 25 to 50 percent in various regions of France. Orly airport in Paris was hit by strikes, and 20 percent of flights at Orly and a third of flights in Marseille were cancelled preventively.

The PS government, which had hoped that youth demonstrations against its policies would soon die down, is increasingly terrified by the rising protests. From the prime minister's residence, after a cabinet meeting, government spokesman Stéphane Le Foll called on "everyone to calm down. … we cannot give some people the opportunity to break things or to commit acts of violence. So I am calling upon everyone to be calm, by definition, and also in order to respect the rules of the Republic. We cannot accept any violence."

In fact, the PS set up an enormous security deployment, worthy of a police state, in an attempt to intimidate opposition among workers and youth to its reactionary policies. Protest marches took place under the hostile surveillance of large contingents of heavily-armed CRS riot police and mobile gendarmes.

In Paris, many contingents of hundreds of riot police armed with heavy shields, truncheons, and tear gas grenades rapidly surrounded protest marches, particularly those of the youth. Before protests began, many plainclothes policemen could be seen gathering in huddles with riot police and gendarmes, before leaving to try to blend into the crowds.

One student told the WSWS that at his university, agents of the General Intelligence (RG) agency were attending student sit-ins, distributing their contact information, and calling on students to denounce any suspicious behaviour by their colleagues to French domestic intelligence.

Several protest marches ended in clashes with police, including in Paris, Nantes, and Rennes. In the Paris area, police arrested a dozen people for throwing projectiles. In Nantes, they used water cannon to attack protesters.

In Rennes, where 8,000 people were protesting

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according to initial trade union estimates, the security forces fired large quantities of tear gas. Seven policemen were reported wounded, and there were approximately 50 arrests.

After four years during which workers' opposition to Hollande's austerity agenda has been suppressed by the union bureaucracies and the PS' political allies, like the Left Front and the New Anti-capitalist Party, class tensions in France are assuming explosive proportions. Seventy-one percent of the population opposes the labour law reform, which would lengthen the workweek and allow the trade unions to work with the bosses to ignore provisions of the Labour Code that protect workers' rights.

Masses of people attending the protests are rejecting official attempts to terrorize the movement by citing the state of emergency or the risk of terrorist atrocities, like those in Paris or Brussels, carried out by Islamist networks promoted by the NATO powers in their war for regime change in Syria.

The ruling elite has, however, no intention of seeking a compromise that would respect workers' demands. Insisting on boosting French capitalism's competitiveness and driven by the deeply unstable global economic and military situation, business circles, the PS, and the unions are determined to ram through their cuts at all cost and liquidate historic social rights won by the workers.

The only way forward for workers and youth in struggle against the El Khomri law is to take the struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucracies, break with the political satellites of the PS, and to mobilise ever broader sections of the working class in struggle. This means breaking free of the purely national context, and carrying out a struggle appealing to workers internationally against the war drive, attacks on democratic rights like Hollande's state of emergency, and the austerity policies of the European Union.

Workers and youth need their own organs of struggle, free of any influence of the old parties and of the unions, which have long records of betraying and selling out social struggles. The union bureaucracy is favourable to the law, most nakedly the PS-linked French Democratic Labour Confederation (CFDT). The Stalinist General Confederation of Labour (CGT) and its allies are for their part trying to stabilise the PS government and cover for it, by calling for adjustments to the El Khomri law, to then impose it more easily.

Fearing that they will totally lose control of mass opposition if they do not call for more protests, the union bureaucracies have called new days of action for April 5 and 9.

Yesterday, CFDT number two Véronique Descacq made the grotesque claim that any retraction of the El Khomri law by the PS would be "a defeat for the workers." On RTL, she said, "Today we managed to get our proposals heard and we will keep talking to the parliamentarians. Some CFDT officials are in the streets, but we all have the same standpoint. We have to make our influence felt, so the text is changed and gets better."

For its part, the CGT issued a joint statement with other unions before the protest, declaring that, "After the March 31 day of action, the government must respond. If it does not, the signatory organisations will invite workers and youth to debate whether to continue their actions and mobilisations in coming days, including by strikes and demonstrations."

By pushing for a halt to the protests with an invitation to debate whether or not to completely capitulate to the PS, the CGT aimed to hide that it is pursuing essentially the same policies as the PS itself.

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