

The working class in France mobilizes against austerity

Alex Lantier
4 April 2016

French youth and workers have carried out mass demonstrations to protest Labour Minister Myriam El Khomri's reactionary labour law reform. They have done so in defiance of the state of emergency imposed by the Socialist Party (PS) government after the November 13 Paris terror attacks. These initial mobilizations mark a new stage in the international class struggle, with implications well beyond the borders of France.

The attempt to promote hysteria over terrorism to suppress popular opposition is failing in the face of a growing radicalization of workers and youth. The working class has not been intimidated by the state of emergency and is entering into struggle against the social counterrevolution being carried out by the PS government and the European Union as a whole.

University students are organizing on-going protests and meetings, hundreds of high schools are being blockaded by students, and growing sections of workers are taking strike action. Last Thursday, port workers, Air France employees and transit workers struck across France, while workers walked out at steel and auto plants in various cities.

As it enters into struggle, the working class finds itself compelled from the outset to define its aims and interests in opposition to all the forces that for decades have represented official "left" politics. There is deep anger against the PS government of President François Hollande, elected in 2012 with the support of the Left Front and the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), as it seeks to destroy social rights won in historic struggles of the working class in the 20th century.

The El Khomri Law would lengthen the workday by up to two hours, increase the precariousness of employment for young workers, and allow the unions, in violation of France's Labour Code, to work out contracts with employers at the level of individual firms.

The fact that this regressive and unpopular proposal

would violate existing law testifies to its illegitimate character. That it is being pushed by a supposedly "socialist" party, which depends for the implementation of its attacks on unions whose budgets are 95 percent funded by the state and big business, underlines the fraudulent and anti-working class character of the entire framework of what passes for "left" politics in France.

An explosive political dynamic is developing. Despite the relentless promotion of fear and national chauvinism in connection with the terror attacks, a deeply rooted mood of social militancy is developing among workers and youth. This has taken the PS government by surprise and frightened pseudo-left organizations such as the Left Front and the NPA, which are deeply integrated into the PS.

Something of 1968 is in the air. In the May-June general strike of that year, tens of millions of workers erupted into struggle against the seemingly impregnable government of Charles de Gaulle and in opposition to the Stalinist French Communist Party. What is emerging today is a similar explosion of the class struggle against a discredited PS government and its political allies. The broad popular opposition to PS austerity revealed by the protests has already deeply shaken the Hollande government, France's most unpopular administration since World War II.

On Thursday, as over a million people across France marched against the El Khomri Law, Hollande withdrew a proposed amendment enshrining in the Constitution the state of emergency as well as a policy of depriving terrorists of French nationality. Though the Senate and the National Assembly had both passed versions of the amendment, Hollande did not attempt to reconcile the differences between the two measures.

The reversal provoked consternation in sections of the media close to the PS, which fear that it marks the end of any hope of the PS avoiding a wipeout in next year's

presidential election. *Le Monde* called it a “major political disaster,” warning that “after this calamitous episode, Mr Hollande leaves behind him a field of ruins.”

Libération wrote: “François Hollande wanted to build national unity above the parties... He succeeded only in earning the opprobrium of his own camp and creating the spectacle of a petty political game, which citizens, even the most favourably disposed, did not understand and in many cases totally rejected.”

The entire reactionary strategy pursued by the administration of Prime Minister Manuel Valls since it emerged from the governmental crisis of the autumn of 2014 is threatened with disintegration.

At its heart, this strategy relied on using the terror attacks carried out in Europe by Islamist forces mobilized by French imperialism and its allies for their war in Syria to present Hollande as a “war president” and promote the neo-fascist National Front (FN). The PS responded to each attack by seeking to create a right-wing, nationalist atmosphere and incite Islamophobia to divide the workers and suppress social opposition to its austerity agenda.

After the January 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* shootings, Hollande invited FN leader Marine Le Pen to the Elysée Presidential Palace. After the November 13 attacks, he promoted two policies linked to the far right: the state of emergency first implemented in 1955 to wage the Algerian war, and deprivation of nationality, forever associated with its use to launch the deportation of Jews from Occupied France during the Holocaust.

This politically criminal strategy encountered no meaningful opposition from pseudo-left forces such as the Left Front and the NPA, both of which have supported the Syrian war. Left Front deputies voted for the state of emergency in the National Assembly.

As the passage of versions of the constitutional amendment by both houses of parliament makes clear, there is no opposition in ruling circles to the rehabilitation of the bloodiest crimes of French imperialism in the 20th century. This is a serious warning to the working class.

In the face of rising social opposition, however, the PS did not feel the current political climate allowed it to proceed with negotiating a compromise version of its reactionary amendment.

These events signify that workers entering into battle against the El Khomri Law are facing a historic struggle. The attempt to rehabilitate the legacy of the French far right and the attack on workers’ social rights in the El Khomri Law are rooted not in the personal cynicism and corruption of the PS and its political and trade union

accomplices, but in an objective global crisis of capitalism.

Amid an escalating spiral of economic collapse and war, every imperialist power is driven into ruthless competition for profits and strategic advantage. French capitalism, deindustrialized by decades of reactionary governments of all stripes and crumbling under a worn-out infrastructure and a mountain of debt, sees no way out other than wars of plunder from Mali to Syria, and a policy of plunder against workers within France itself. To create a suitable political climate for the economic policies they are driven to carry out, all of the bourgeois parties, including the PS and its satellites, fall in line with the rehabilitation of fascism and militarism.

The only way forward in the struggle against the El Khomri Law is the path of intransigent political struggle by the working class against capitalism, and, in particular, the so-called “left” parties of the bourgeoisie. No confidence can be given to proposals by the student unions and trade unions to negotiate with Prime Minister Valls over token changes to the El Khomri Law. These are simply attempts to impose this reactionary bill with the aid of the pseudo-left parties and their union allies.

Above all, the struggle must be liberated from the national straitjacket these forces seek to impose upon it. In the fight against the reactionary policies of Hollande, the main allies of the French workers and youth are the workers of all other countries, mobilized in a united struggle for socialism in opposition to austerity, war and attacks on democratic rights.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact