

An interview with LO's Arlette Laguiller: “We’re happy [the trade unions] are waking up”

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The developing political opposition in France centering on protests against the Socialist Party (PS) government’s labor law reform is increasingly becoming a movement against the PS itself and the organizations that for decades have claimed to form the “left.”

The trade unions, which for four years have done nothing to mobilize opposition to PS President François Hollande, fear protests and strikes could explode outside their control. The gulf between workers and youth, on the one hand, and the political establishment and the trade unions, on the other, grows ever wider.

While the French media claim it is a “far left” organization, *Lutte Ouvrière* (LO—Workers Struggle) has worked for decades to block the emergence of a political movement in the working class breaking with the Socialist Party and the union bureaucracies. The emergence of a movement against the PS terrifies LO, which is trying to cover up as much as possible its role as a defender of the PS and a key cog in the official political machinery.

Currently, this entire political mechanism is beginning to seize up amid rising popular opposition to the PS and broad indifference to the trade unions. This is shown in the following interview with Arlette Laguiller, the former LO presidential candidate in six elections between 1974 and 2007, conducted at a demonstration in Paris on March 31, 2016. It is a more or less open admission of political bankruptcy.

Asked about LO’s position on the labor reform, Laguiller said, “We are here to oppose it, of course; we have been in the street, basically, since March 9. We called for all the demonstrations. ... Hollande is doing what the bosses want, what [his predecessor, conservative President Nicolas] Sarkozy did not dare do because it would have provoked a stronger reaction. Hollande is taking orders from the bosses, the Medef business federation, and [Medef chief Pierre] Gattaz. He serves the bosses, like all governments we have ever known, ultimately.”

WSWS: In this context, is LO reconsidering or taking a different position on its political alliances with the PS, and rethinking its decisions to stress in the presidential elections

that it makes a clear difference between the PS and right-wing parties?

Arlette Laguiller: Look, we think it [the PS] has right-wing policies. So we don’t say PS is a bit less bad than the right. That is not true. ... Look at the rise of unemployment, it took no measures to outlaw sackings. Even when Hollande was claiming not to want sackings at PSA [French car manufacturer, formerly PSA Peugeot Citroën], he did nothing to prevent them. So we have our own candidate, Nathalie Arthaud, in the presidential elections to defend the interests of the workers.

WSWS: What do you think of the fact that the trade unions have organized no opposition to Hollande for four years?

Arlette Laguiller: Well, we’re happy they’re waking up a bit now with the labor reform, because until now it’s true a lot of hard blows were inflicted without there being really a reaction.

WSWS: How do you explain this? After all, LO has relied a great deal on the CGT [General Confederation of Labor] union.

Arlette Laguiller: No, we do not rely on the CGT or on other trade union federations. Our members in the CGT, they are at ground level and they try to make sure things move in their workplaces, but our members doing trade union work in companies do not take sides for any trade union. It is normal when you are a revolutionary communist to at least do trade union work.

WSWS: What do you make of the fact that the union federations are 95 percent funded by the state and the corporations, given that you work so intimately with these organizations?

Arlette Laguiller: Look, I don’t think the problem is the financing. Of course, it would be healthier if the parties, if the trade unions, if everybody were financed by contributions by their members, of course that’s true, too. But here we are ...

WSWS: How do you explain the social gulf between the working class and the unions?

Arlette Laguiller: I think a lot of struggles were betrayed. A lot of workers are angry over struggles they waged where finally the trade unions pushed them back to work without obtaining a victory. So there is all that anger, and then it’s true

that we are in a period where things are not easy, the trade union struggle in the companies, because the bosses are maneuvering, they even set up unions that take their orders when they can, and so on.

WSWS: In [the presidential elections of] 2002, you received 3 million votes collectively with the [Pabloite] Revolutionary Communist League and another party [the Lambertiste Workers Party]. How do you explain that you could not easily build a broader movement in the working class?

Arlette Laguiller: Look, in 2002, I got 5.7 percent of the vote, [LCR candidate Olivier] Besancenot 4.3 percent. We got almost 10 percent. It turned out it was an electoral gesture of a certain number of voters, but it did not necessarily mean total support for our ideas, of the one or the other organization. We did not manage to grow so much afterwards, those were our scores in the elections ... a vote is not the same thing as building organizations.

Asked about French foreign policy, Laguiller suddenly ended the interview, declaring: "Look, frankly, doing an interview in these conditions is not fantastic. I answered your questions on the labor law reform."

Laguiller did not explain her reluctance to reply to questions about French capitalism's role on the world stage and whatever relations, political and financial, that LO might have with its foreign policy. But her reply makes clear that LO is not a Marxist organization, seeking to mobilize the working class in struggle against imperialism, but a nationalist organization that largely keeps a complicit silence on the wars and international crimes of the French ruling elite.

It is ever harder to deny the close involvement of LO in French bourgeois politics, including with forces seeking to impose the reactionary labor law "reform." Laguiller did not seek to deny that LO works in trade unions bought and controlled by big business, or that LO has close relations with the Socialist Party. Its electoral alliances with the PS, notably in the 2008 municipal elections, are well known. Laguiller simply tried to evade the question of the political importance of such ties by lamely asserting that Nathalie Arthaud is LO's presidential candidate.

Arthaud's role itself underscores, however, the close ties that exist between LO and the PS. In 2012, when she was also LO presidential candidate, she indicated clearly that she was willing to have her supporters vote in the run-off for PS candidate Hollande, whom she claimed was less the "president of the rich" than his opponent, Sarkozy.

In May 2012, Arthaud wrote: "Obviously no conscious worker can vote for Nicolas Sarkozy, the president of the rich, this man that throughout his five-year term, was the loyal servant of the capitalist firms and bankers. Some of my voters, confronted with the poisoned choice between an open enemy of workers and a false friend, will abstain or cast a spoiled ballot. Others, to get rid of Sarkozy, will vote for Hollande."

As for Laguiller's comments on the betrayals of workers' struggles by the unions, they are dishonest, insofar as she seems to critique betrayals which were in fact carried out by LO.

The struggle at the PSA factory at Aulnay-sous-Bois was driven into the wall by none other than leading LO member Jean-Pierre Mercier, the CGT delegate and spokesman at Aulnay who also ran Arthaud's presidential campaign. Mercier helped the CGT isolate the struggle against the closure of Aulnay, blocking the mobilization of broader layers of workers to save the plant, and allowing the PS and PSA to shut it down.

Laguiller says she finds it "normal," that is, without any significant impact on the interests defended by LO, for LO members to serve as officials of trade unions financed by the financial aristocracy. This attitude faithfully reflects the outlook of numerous union executives and other petty-bourgeois operatives in the pseudo left.

In her comments on the 2002 presidential elections and the clear vote against the PS government of Lionel Jospin, which led to his elimination and a run-off between a conservative (Jacques Chirac) and neo-fascist (Jean-Marie Le Pen), Laguiller makes clear LO's fundamentally pessimistic and hostile attitude toward the building of a revolutionary socialist movement.

Her indifference to the fact that 10 percent of the electorate voted for candidates they were told were "Trotskyist" is in itself a condemnation of LO. Saying, as Laguiller does, that it was impossible to do anything under conditions of mass protests against a neo-fascist candidate's presence in the presidential run-off, amid mass protests internationally against the impending illegal US invasion of Iraq, amounts to writing off the political situation as hopeless. In fact, if LO voters do not identify with its ideas, it is because the large majority of them are far to the left of LO.

Nothing frightens this organization more than a movement in the working class directed against capitalism, the drive to imperialist war and police-state forms of rule, that would collide with the PS government, the unions, and their pseudo-left allies. The coming developments of this movement will inevitably show the LO stands on the other side of the barricades from the workers.

The authors also recommend:

An interview with Lutte Ouvrière leader Arlette Laguiller, and comment by Peter Schwarz
[10 May 2002]



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