

French government presents labour law to the National Assembly

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Tuesday, after two months of protests in France by millions of youth and workers against the labour reform of Labour Minister Myriam El Khomri, the Socialist Party (PS) launched a debate on the law in the National Assembly. The PS and business circles hope to impose the law virtually unchanged, with contempt for popular opposition.

This was also the occasion for the union bureaucracies to mobilise a small protest in wealthy areas of Paris near the Assembly. They sought to promote discredited illusions that by ‘pressuring’ the PS and the deputies in the Assembly, it would be possible to block the adoption of the law, or at least to force the retraction of its most reactionary provisions.

The Stalinist General Confederation of Labour (CGT), which since the PS’s arrival in power in 2012 has worked to block opposition to austerity in sections of the working class where it is still present, has pursued the demagogic turn carried out by its leader, Philippe Martinez, in response to the protests.

“We will go all the way!,” Martinez shouted. He insisted that “militancy is the same as on the first day,” and that we must “retract this bad law, in order to negotiate so there will be real social dialogue in the enterprises and not the law of the jungle.”

His colleague, Workers Force (FO) union leader Jean-Claude Mailly, indicated that FO is “still calling for retraction” of the law, but that in fact his confederation might defend it. He added that “if they change everything, we will see.”

In fact, the decision of the PS to present the labour law to the Assembly, an action it has repeatedly postponed during the demonstrations, marks a setback for the movement. The PS has no intention to modify the El Khomri law in the interests of the workers. It is seeking, instead, to impose a law rejected by 70 percent

of the population without immediately provoking a social explosion, and while trying as much as possible to escape political blame.

The PS and the business community are calculating that the work of political sabotage carried out by the PS’s trade union and political allies have created the conditions to do so. For months, the unions have blocked a wider mobilisation of workers against France’s most unpopular president since World War II, allowing police to beat youth protesters. They also claimed that “constituent processes” discussed during occupations of public squares by the #UpAllNight movement would modify the course of social life in France without an eruption of the class struggle.

There is enormous social opposition to the law, a fact that PS pollsters are well aware of. Nonetheless, they hope that illusions promoted by the unions and the PS’s pseudo-left allies, like Workers Struggle (LO) and the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA), together with the brutality of the repression will have politically stunned the masses and created conditions for them to pass the law, presenting the workers with a *fait accompli*.

This refutes all those forces, like the NPA or Jean-Luc Mélenchon of the Left Front, that called for a Hollande vote in 2012, sowing illusions that it would be easier to “pressure” a PS government to obtain social gains. In fact, Hollande attacked the workers even more ferociously than his right-wing predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy. When finally social anger began to overflow this year, and the student and trade unions felt compelled to organise protests, Hollande reacted by sending in the riot police.

The essential precondition for a defence of social rights is a political and strategic reorientation of the working class internationally. Improvements in social conditions, or simply the defence of existing social

rights, are impossible without revolutionary struggle on a socialist and internationalist programme, mobilising the vast opposition among the workers to the major European powers' program of austerity and war.

No confidence can be given to those organisations claiming that workers and youth can defend themselves by following the lead of the union bureaucracies, with manoeuvres supporting various factions of the PS in the National Assembly.

As El Khomri made clear yesterday in her remarks presenting the law to the Assembly, these forces can even hope to benefit financially and politically from the passing of the law. Besides lengthening working hours and making youth employment more precarious, the law's main provision is to give the unions extraordinary powers to negotiate firm-level contracts violating France's Labour Code. This would open the path to the undermining of working conditions across the country.

El Khomri boasted that her reform "continues and amplifies the philosophy of social dialogue, since our social democracy is bogging down in a culture of confrontation." She added that her law gives "the unions a role they never had in our Republic," and gives enterprises "new room for manoeuvre. ... We like the unions and we like businesses, because the country needs them."

Speaking to *Le Parisien*, El Khomri also stressed that the PS would not withdraw the law and, by mid-May, would force a vote—possibly, as with last year's deregulation law, imposing it without a vote using the provisions of the constitution's article 49-3, which forces opponents of the law to prepare a vote of censure against the government. She said, "The Parliament's time has come, and it will allow us to enrich the law. Should we surrender to the street and withdraw it? No."

Faced with anger among the workers, the PS and its allies will no doubt attempt to sow as many illusions as possible as to how the deputies will consider "enriching" the law. This is only a trap, however, as PS deputies are indicating that they intend to modify the text primarily in an effort to limit protests that it might cause, and thus to try to stifle opposition of workers to austerity.

In a long interview with *Le Parisien*, the designated negotiator who will oversee modifications to the El Khomri law, PS deputy Christophe Sirugue, firmly

defends the law, only criticising those provisions he considers most likely to provoke strikes and social protests in workplaces.

Sirugue attacked those who warned workers that the El Khomri would facilitate mass sackings, stating, "Having allowed people to say from the beginning that the law would facilitate sackings, that was the error, the original sin."

He criticised, however, provisions in the law allowing for referendums in workplaces on contracts voted by the trade unions, fearing "the risk of permanent conflict inside companies." He also warned of an uncontrolled spread of uncoordinated firm-level contracts, fearing that unions in each firm within an industry would compete among each other to drive down workers' wages and thus be the most competitive.

This process of "social dumping," as Sirugue called it, would intensify social conflict, particularly between workers on one side and business groups and the union bureaucracies on the other.



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