

A new strategy is needed to fight French labor law

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France's Socialist Party (PS) government imposed its labor law without a parliamentary vote on Thursday, using anti-democratic powers granted by article 49-3 of the constitution. The imposition of a law that is opposed by three-quarters of the French population, in the face of two months of mass protests by workers and youth, marks a political turning point. It opens a new stage in the struggle against austerity in France and across Europe.

The mobilization against the law began in March, as PS-linked student and trade unions began to call protests. These groups supported the election of PS presidential candidate François Hollande in 2012, and they organized no opposition to his austerity measures after he took office. However, they sensed deep opposition in France to introducing the type of exploitative conditions created in Germany by the Hartz IV laws. The El Khomri law (named after French Minister of Labor) increases working time, eliminates job security and allows the unions to negotiate contracts violating the Labor Code.

The response revealed a broad radicalization of the population, particularly among high school and student youth. An entire generation of working class youth across Europe, which has grown up in the period of capitalist collapse since the 2008 Wall Street crash, is coming into increasingly direct conflict with the social and economic system. When the trade unions gingerly called out sections of workers in support of the youth protesters, over a million people took to the streets.

Increasingly weak and isolated, the PS reacted by launching desperate crackdowns on protesters by hordes of riot police, mobilized under the terms of the French state of emergency. These still failed to halt the demonstrations, however, and under increasing pressure from the banks and the EU to pass the

measure, the PS brought it to a vote.

Though all the parties in the French National Assembly support austerity, Prime Minister Manuel Valls could not assemble a majority of deputies that dared vote for the law. In the end, Valls resorted to article 49-3—which he used last year to impose Economy Minister Emmanuel Macron's deregulation law—to ram the law through, forcing the deputies to vote a censure motion to bring down the government if they wanted to block it.

The so-called “rebel” faction of the PS, which is close to pseudo-left groups like the Left Front and the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), and has made some impotent criticisms of PS austerity, would have had to support the censure motion for it to pass. Arguing that passing the censure motion would bring to power the right-wing The Republicans (LR) on an even more draconian austerity program, the “rebel” faction voted against it, triggering passage of the El Khomri law.

The passage of the reactionary law must be the occasion for workers and youth to draw fundamental political conclusions about how the onslaught of the banks across Europe can be stopped.

The working class internationally is passing through critical political experiences. Protests in France this week came as masses of workers in Greece struck for two days against pension cuts and EU-backed austerity measures imposed by Greece's Syriza (“Coalition of the Radical Left”) government, which has completely betrayed its previous promises to end EU austerity.

Like Greece and countries across Europe, France is in the grip of a deep crisis of bourgeois rule. The ruling class, facing an escalating economic crisis and pushing for increased military spending as the major European powers fall into an arms race, intends to make no concessions. Even as the PS follows the path to

electoral oblivion traced by Greece's social-democratic PASOK party, it rams through laws with contempt for rising popular outrage.

There is no way out from this crisis through the existing state institutions. The alternatives to the PS within the political establishment are LR, whose current front-running candidate, Alain Juppé, is now advancing a free-market agenda of lengthening working times and slashing corporate taxes, and the neo-fascist National Front (FN). Both of these parties, if elected, will intensify the attacks on workers and youth.

As for the institutions through which the class struggle has been channeled since the formation of the PS in the years after the 1968 general strike, they have proven totally bankrupt. The occupations of public squares by the #UpAllNight movement—staffed largely by forces close to the NPA and the Left Front, allies of Syriza who also called for a Hollande vote in 2012—are a dead end. By promoting economic nationalism, they cut across the unification of workers throughout Europe in a struggle against austerity.

The unions, led by the Stalinist General Confederation of Labour (CGT), oppose mobilizing the working class in a political struggle against the PS government. After the passage of the law yesterday, CGT President Philippe Martinez mocked calls among protesters for a general strike, declaring, “General strike, that doesn’t mean anything as such. Even in 1968, the CGT did not call for the general strike.”

In fact, if the working class has not intervened earlier to bring down the Hollande regime, it is above all due to the role of these organizations, which for nearly a half century since 1968 have been supporting the PS, a reactionary bourgeois party.

The mounting crisis facing France and Europe cannot be solved through an attempt to pressure the PS and its political satellites to the “left.” Nor will it even be solved through the explosive experience, as in 1936 or 1968 in France, of a general strike. The objective crisis of capitalism and the rising anger in the European and international working class are indeed preparing the eruption of general strikes and mass workers struggles.

As the French ruling class's authoritarian response to the anti-El Khomri law protests has made clear, such struggles would themselves only set the stage for a revolutionary confrontation with governments in France and across Europe. The most politically

conscious and advanced layers of workers and youth must prepare themselves not only for the mass struggles that will erupt, but for socialist revolution.

This raises the most burning question facing the working class in France and internationally: the crisis of revolutionary leadership and the necessity of building Trotskyist parties. The struggle against the El Khomri law has starkly exposed the fact that not one establishment party can or wants to speak for the explosive anger that is developing in the working class against the entire political set-up.

The fraud that socialism is represented by the PS and its Stalinist and pseudo-left political satellites like the NPA is ever more exposed by the day. The radicalization of the workers and the discrediting of what has for decades passed as the French “left” are creating the conditions for a true struggle for socialism—that is, a revolutionary struggle for social equality by the international working class. Under these conditions, the International Committee of the Fourth International is building sections across the continent to fight for the United Socialist States of Europe.



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