

Amid strikes, French President Hollande pledges to impose labor law

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Speaking yesterday from the G7 summit in Japan, French President François Hollande pledged to maintain the Socialist Party's (PS) unpopular labor law in the face of mass protests and an escalating wave of strikes against the law.

Yesterday, new blockades emerged at La Rochelle, where dock workers blocked the port and were preparing to extend the blockade last night for another 24 hours.

With multi-day or indefinite strike action called starting next week in Paris mass transit, the French national railways, and civil aviation, the stage is set for a vast escalation of the class struggle. A recent poll found 62 percent of the French population supported strike action against the law, which lengthens working hours, undermines job security, and allows trade unions to negotiate contracts violating the Labor Code. Hollande signaled he would make no concessions to the law, however.

"I will hold out because I think that this is a good reform," Hollande declared. He added, "As a head of state that wanted to carry out this reform, because I indeed wanted it ... I want us to be able to go all the way. If it is adopted, since this is what is planned for the month of July, everyone will take into account what this law is and the effects it can have starting as early as September."

Hollande also obliquely defended the PS' violent crackdown on strikers blockading oil facilities and fuel depots to protest the labor law. He said, "We have taken the necessary measures and we will continue to take them, always respecting public liberties but also the first among all liberties, which is freedom of movement."

Hollande's remarks left no doubt that he intended to trample mass popular opposition in order to impose the

law, and that he would violate constitutionally protected rights to strike and demonstrate in order to do so. He also made clear that he did not accept as legitimate, criticisms of the labor law from several trade unions, led by the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT).

Without explicitly referring to the CGT, he said: "We cannot accept that a trade union federation, which has its history, would decide what is the law or what the law cannot be."

Hollande's comments reflect the basic position of the French ruling class, which intends to impose austerity and social retrogression while crushing opposition with police violence. Nonetheless, Hollande also faces increasing calls and warnings from inside the ruling class itself, both in France and internationally, that he has provoked a confrontation with the working class that is fraught with immense danger.

In one comment, "Hollande at the end of his rope," the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* wrote, "The president knows that his country remains marked by the heritage of the French revolution. The heart of the political system goes back to 1789 ... The president's legitimacy is far too weak already to enter into conflict with a radical minority of CGT strikers. This all shows how reforms at the end of a presidential term are as good as impossible, above all in France."

Leading PS officials have also contradicted themselves over the law: Economy Minister Michel Sapin suggested the PS could rewrite sections of the law earlier this week, though Prime Minister Manuel Valls subsequently directly contradicted him.

Under these conditions, Hollande plans to work closely with the trade union bureaucracy, and particularly those sections of the bureaucracy who are critical of the law, to try to prevent an eruption of

workers' struggles and of a general strike that could bring down his government. He is well aware that the CGT and the entire union bureaucracy supported him in the 2012 presidential elections.

Speaking from Japan, he stressed that he would continue to rely on close political collaboration with the unions if they agreed to his terms. "Dialog is always possible, but it is never founded on ultimatums," he said.

The reaction from the union bureaucracies was immediately positive. Undeterred by Hollande's statements that he would make no concessions on the labor law, but only impose it on the population, they posted a statement yesterday stressing that they intended to continue to negotiate a deal with him.

"The organizations reaffirm the terms of their joint letter sent on May 20 to President Hollande, in which they asked for a meeting. While he claims to make social dialog the basic method of his government, the organizations are still waiting for a reply to their letter," the CGT wrote in a statement signed by a collection of trade and student unions and posted on its web site.

The CGT's favorable response to Hollande's overtures is a warning to workers seeking to oppose the labor law. While the CGT has found itself compelled to call strikes amid escalating popular anger with the PS' labor law, it does not have any principled objection to Hollande's reactionary measure.

Its calls for "generalizing" strike action are not intended to lead to a general strike in which the working class mobilizes in political struggle to bring down the PS government and defeat its anti-worker agenda.

Instead, the CGT aims to keep the working class as much as possible under the political influence of the union bureaucracy, and trap the workers in symbolic protest actions coordinated between the union bureaucracies and the PS itself. Such actions do nothing to defend workers' social or democratic rights. Indeed, over the past seven years, such symbolic one-day strikes in Greece went hand in hand with the impoverishment of broad sections of the population.

The bourgeoisie has long experience handling and manipulating the unions, which have totally lost their base in the working class in France, and depend on corporations and the state for 95 percent of their yearly budget. Ruling circles are very clear that the union

bureaucracies are part of the political establishment and allies of the bourgeoisie in their dealings with the working class, and have an immense financial and political stake in the existing social system.

The response of the CGT to Hollande's overtures underscore that the only way forward for workers in struggle against the PS' labor law, and austerity measures across Europe, is to create organs of struggle independent of the trade unions.



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