The El Khomri law in France and the Schröder-Blair Paper

Peter Schwarz
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Strikes and mass demonstrations against the El Khomri labour reform law in France have been met with sympathy among workers and young people across Europe.

For decades, so called “structural reforms,” including cuts to social spending and workers’ wages, were portrayed as unavoidable. The French government of François Hollande and Manuel Valls thought it could destroy rights and achievements fought for by generations of workers with the use of force. It was mistaken. When it imposed the hated law by decree, it did not intimidate workers, but only provoked their anger. Since then, strikes and protests have spread and paralyzed the whole country.

The situation in France marks a major development in the international class struggle. A similar mood prevails in many other European countries, in the US and in large parts of the world. It is expressed in the resurgence of the class struggle, including a spike in strikes and protests worldwide.

There is a danger that the movement in France – like other such struggles—will be isolated and strangled, and that the far-right National Front will profit from the resulting disillusionment. To allay this danger, it is necessary to probe the roots of this situation and determine who is responsible for the present attacks.

The French workers are fighting against a government that calls itself “left” and “socialist.” This is neither an accident, nor a misunderstanding. For the last 15 years, it has above all been the social democrats—supported by the unions, the communist parties and their successors as well as numerous pseudo-left groups—who have carried out structural reforms against the workers.

It is worthwhile in this context to look back at the paper published jointly by two social democratic heads of government, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, in 1999. Almost all of the social attacks that have taken place since then in Germany, Great Britain, Southern and Eastern Europe, Greece and now in France were outlined there.

In the paper, entitled “The Way Forward for Europe's Social Democrats,” Blair and Schröder call for the transformation of the “social safety net from entitlement to a springboard for personal responsibility.”

As we wrote at the time on the WSWS, the paper is “a list of social atrocities, which have become the standard repertoire of European economic, financial and social policy, is meticulously and approvingly catalogued. The authors take care to invoke every cliché: cuts in state expenditure; criteria of efficiency, competitiveness and performance for public services; adjustment of the social insurance system; encouragement of business; reductions in taxes on employers and property; flexibility ... and more flexibility.”

The chapter “An active labour market policy for the left” demanded, as the WSWS summarized, that “all social and political means are to be employed to encourage individual responsibility. The system of taxation and social payments are to be revamped to 'ensure that it works in the interests of the people'. Low-paid 'probationary jobs' should be subsidized by the government and all those receiving social payments should be evaluated according to their ability to earn their own living. In short, the paper advocates massive state pressure to force the acceptance of low-wage jobs that, in turn, serve to drive down wages as a whole.”

The Schröder-Blair paper appeared at a time when the social democrats ruled almost everywhere in Europe. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 1990s

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were characterized by an orgy of self-enrichment by the ruling elite and enormous attacks on the working class. At the end of the decade, workers throughout Europe supported the election of social democrats in the hope that they would adopt a more socially humane approach.

The opposite took place. The Schröder-Blair paper served as a blueprint for the Hartz laws in Germany, and the austerity course in Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece. In all of these countries, as a rule, the social democrats followed a much stricter austerity course than conservative governments.

The author and namesake of the Hartz laws, Peter Hartz, a German Social Democratic Party and IG Metall union member, travelled to Paris two years ago to advise the French president on social cuts. The El Khomri law is the immediate result of this collaboration.

In the meantime, social democrats across the globe have plunged into free fall. In France, workers are rebelling against the Socialist Party and in Greece against Syriza, which has further intensified the austerity policies. This rebellion needs a conscious political strategy.

It is not just the corrupt social democratic apparatus, the unions and the pseudo-left groups that move in their circles that are bankrupt, but the national program on which they are based. The globalization of production has destroyed the basis of all national social and labour market policies. Today, the social democrats and the unions see it as their responsibility to impose constant attacks on the workers to defend their "own" corporations against international competition.

The El Khomri law, as well as every other attack on the working class, can only by defeated by an independent, international movement of the working class that bases itself on a revolutionary, socialist program. The offensive against the El Khomri law must become the starting point for the building of such a movement.

The unions and social democratic parties all over Europe stand behind Hollande and react with horror to the offensive of the French workers. European workers must stand behind their fellow workers in France, free themselves from the influence of social democracy and the unions and take up the fight for the United Socialist States of Europe.

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