

CGT union tries to block general strike against French labor law

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Yesterday evening, General Confederation of Labor (CGT) leader Philippe Martinez appeared on the BFM-Politique show to discuss the escalating strike movement against the Socialist Party (PS) government's widely hated labor reform. He faced intense, often hostile questioning from moderator Apolline de Malherbe, several journalists and PS legislator Philippe Doucet about the CGT's decision to call strikes against the law.

Martinez has tried to cultivate a radical image since youth protests and strikes erupted against PS Labor Minister Myriam El Khomri's law two months ago, and particularly since the CGT began calling industrial action against the law in the last two weeks. He has called for "generalizing" strike action against the El Khomri law. Nevertheless, his interview confirmed that the CGT is in secret, back-channel talks with the PS and, despite the growing strike wave, is trying to cut a deal to secure passage of the law.

This presents the CGT bureaucracy with enormous difficulties: a vast strike wave is building, and the material possibility of a general strike in France and across Europe is emerging. President François Hollande, Prime Minister Manuel Valls and PS First Secretary Jean-Christophe Cambadélis have insisted, however, that the only deal they can accept involves cosmetic changes to the law. Martinez's statements are a warning that workers fighting the law must take the struggle out of the hands of the CGT and organize independently in order to avoid a sell-out.

Malherbe and her guest interviewers spent much of their time on right-wing attacks on Martinez aimed at discrediting any strikes or protests against the law. Doucet provocatively showed a picture of a local PS headquarters shot full of bullet holes by unidentified forces during a protest; he then attacked the CGT,

hysterically demanding that Martinez renounce violent attacks on the PS. Malherbe and a *Le Parisien* journalist attacked the CGT strikes at newspapers that refused to publish an editorial written by Martinez.

Nonetheless, the heart of Martinez's interview was a series of statements in which he issued veiled but unmistakable statements that the CGT supports the PS government and is looking for a deal.

"For the first time in two months, I received a call from the prime minister. It's rather better when he is not stuck in political posturing," Martinez said. Asked by the journalists to tell the public what he had discussed with Valls, however, Martinez bluntly refused.

"Secret conversation," he replied.

While Martinez refused to inform the population about his secret, back-channel talks with Valls, his comments show that he is preparing a rapid climb-down. He abandoned previous calls by union officials for a "withdrawal" of the law, calling instead for the law to be "rediscussed."

Martinez repeatedly insisted that the CGT would not enter into political conflict with the PS. He declared that he was not "going one on one against Valls." He stressed that the CGT is "playing its role ... We are in our proper role as a trade union."

This was an all but explicit statement of support for the PS. Asked whether he regretted the CGT's call for a vote for Hollande in the 2012 presidential elections, Martinez refused to say either yes or no, saying only that the CGT had not "paid enough attention" at the time. He recalled that in 2012, then-CGT General Secretary Bernard Thibault had called for a vote to remove Hollande's right-wing opponent, Nicolas Sarkozy, and then obliquely declared that in "another era," the CGT issued open endorsements of presidential candidates.

This was a veiled reference to the CGT's longstanding alliance, beginning after World War II and lasting until today, with the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF). A close ally of the counterrevolutionary Soviet bureaucracy until it dissolved the USSR in 1991, the PCF has had close ties to the PS ever since the PS' founding, shortly after the last great revolutionary experience of the working class in France, the 1968 general strike. It has been an official or unofficial coalition partner of every PS government since President François Mitterrand came to power in 1981.

This points to why the CGT has emerged as the de facto leadership of the strike. It was largely by default, because political parties that for decades have passed for the “left”—the PCF, the PCF's allies inside the Left Front led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, and the New Anti-capitalist Party—do not oppose or want to challenge the PS.

Instead, in line with similar parties across Europe in the post-Soviet period, such as *Rifondazione Comunista* in Italy or Syriza in Greece, they supported or joined pro-austerity and pro-war governments. Even today, as masses of workers in industries across France mobilize in struggle, from oil and gas to electricity, auto, trucking, port and mass transit, they are not challenging the PS or seeking to mobilize the working class in political struggle against Hollande.

It also sheds light on the content of the CGT's calls not for a general strike in France, but for a “generalization” of the strike. They oppose a general strike, that is, a struggle to mobilize and unify the entire working class in a common strike against the PS government and the capitalist class. Instead, as explosive anger develops among broad sections of workers, they aim to “generalize” strikes, spreading them in a disconnected fashion across various industries, to blow off steam but not to bring down the Hollande government.

Particularly given that the PS government is utterly determined to impose the law, this strategy signifies an attempt by the CGT to maintain political control of workers' struggles while preparing a filthy sell-out.

Martinez's preparations for this sell-out were covered up with political and historical lies. When challenged to explain why the CGT felt obliged to continue calling strikes, Martinez said that it had “never been seen in history” that the workers wanted to struggle but the

CGT refused and instead pushed to stop a strike movement.

In fact, the history of French Stalinism largely consists of struggles where, due to its hostility to the program of world socialist revolution represented by Leon Trotsky and Trotsky's supporters, it played the lead role to bring revolutionary struggles to a close and stabilize the French bourgeoisie. Most infamously, Communist Party leader Maurice Thorez, supported by the CGT leadership, declared that “one has to know how to end a strike,” as the PCF sold out the 1936 general strike.

CGT leader Georges Séguy was booed and thrown out of the Renault plant at Boulogne-Billancourt in 1968, when he was trying to force workers back to work amid the general strike.

The role of the CGT today will only be more hostile to the workers. Like the PCF and the other trade unions, the CGT has totally lost its mass base in the working class over the last 25 years since the dissolution of the USSR, emerging as a distinct petty-bourgeois constituency hostile to the working class. As it cynically mounts piecemeal actions against the PS' attempts to tear up basic social rights won by workers, the CGT is preparing even more reactionary sell-outs.

The working class is entering into struggle against the capitalist system and the ruling class. The critical task that workers face is to establish their political and organizational independence from the PS and all its satellites, such as the CGT.



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