

French unions try to strangle workers' opposition to Macron

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Faced with growing working class anger at French President Emmanuel Macron's decrees attacking the Labour Code, facilitating mass sackings and unilateral cuts to wages and basic benefits, the union bureaucracy is trying to strangle opposition to Macron. It is organising rolling strikes in different industries, aiming to dissipate working class militancy and block the unification of strikes into a revolutionary mobilisation against austerity across France and Europe.

The unions are terrified of losing control and facing an eruption of workers' struggles, and are closely coordinating their actions with the government. The different union federations are announcing multiple one-day protest strikes on various separate dates. Yesterday, truck drivers of the French Democratic Labour Confederation (CFDT) and the French Christian Workers Union (CFTC) organised blockades in Paris and in the provinces. The General Confederation of Labour (CGT) and Workers Force (FO) are calling a strike that will affect fuel depots for September 25.

A second national day of action is scheduled for September 21. Public television and Paris public transport unions have announced strikes for that day, and nine trade union organisations are calling for retirees to protest in Paris on September 28.

After having refused to participate in the September 12 protest organised by the CGT and Solidaires unions, attended by around 400,000 people, the CFDT is organising on October 3 a meeting at the Paris Event Centre. On October 10, the public sector workforce unions will call a one-day protest strike.

The unions have not, for now, announced strikes in the refineries. However, leading politicians are reportedly discussing the danger of such a movement, which rapidly led to a breakdown of fuel supplies to gas stations across France in 2010 and 2016.

In a sign of explosive conflicts inside the state machine itself, one quarter of France's specialised riot police—9 of 36 brigades at the national level—are striking against budget cuts targeting them.

Local trade union bureaucrats are reporting escalating discontent among workers and, as in the case of the CFDT-Metallurgy federation, pressing the union leaderships to call symbolic protests in order to avoid being totally discredited with the workers.

"The choice was made not to call a national protest," the CFDT-Metallurgy federation wrote to CFDT leader Laurent Berger in a letter seen by AFP. "This decision led to anger among many members who, since they belong to the largest trade union in the private sector, were expecting a far stronger response from the CFDT. ... What the members are demanding, and what we are passing on by expressing our positions as members of the bureau of our federation, is a national call for protests from the CFDT."

The incestuous links between the state, which imposes austerity and the state of emergency, and the union tops, who pretend to oppose these policies in order to channel workers' anger into harmless protests, are in the open. The satirical weekly *Canard enchaîné* revealed that two secret meetings took place on August 28 between Macron, FO leader Jean-Claude Mailly, Laurent Berger, and Muriel Pénicaud, the labour minister. According to the *Canard*, the government was checking whether Mailly and Berger "could keep control of their trade union base."

Such meetings occur constantly, notably during a September 14 debate between the leaders of business lobby groups and the heads of the trade union federations at the Senate, which was attended by Pénicaud and Prime Minister Edouard Philippe. At this debate, which *Le Monde* called "convivial" or even "a

debate between old friends,” Edouard Philippe stressed to CGT chief Philippe Martinez that he understood “the legitimacy of the criticisms” made by the CGT.

Pénicaud claimed to be “very enthusiastic” about financing the training of union officials, one of the main avenues through which Macron’s decrees channel more corporate money into the unions’ coffers. The unions, which have been in a deep financial crisis since the 1980s due to the collapse of their working class base and thus of their dues base, depend currently on state and business funding for 95 percent of their budget, according to an official parliamentary report.

The government includes in its ministerial staffs several people closely tied to the union bureaucracies. Pénicaud recruited Stéphane Lardy, the ex-number two of FO leader Jean-Claude Mailly who last year began work at the general inspectorate for social affairs, as an advisor on training and apprenticeship issues. Marc Ferracci, an economics professor and wedding witness to Emmanuel Macron serves as the liaison with the CGT. Pierre Ferracci, Marc’s father, runs the Secafi firm, which provides advice and financial planning for the CGT.

Such links underscore the political bankruptcy of the strategy of sending workers’ demands to the trade union leaderships. Pressuring the state to negotiate with the trade union leaders signifies leaving all elements of the decision in the hands of various members of the same, anti-working class ruling elite. As Macron prepares to make the state of emergency permanent by writing it into common law, and to spend billions of euros on increased defence spending, workers are facing not a trade union but a political struggle.

Workers will be forced to create new organs of struggle to replace the trade unions, and above all a new revolutionary party, the *Parti de l’égalité socialiste*, to give these struggles political leadership.

The opposition to Macron is part of a broad radicalisation of workers and youth against austerity and the dangers of dictatorship and war across Europe. Sixty-eight percent of the French population opposes Macron’s labor decrees, and 55 percent supports strike action against these policies, while Macron’s approval rating has collapsed to 30 percent. This is part of a broader radicalisation of the masses across Europe that saw a majority of youth, in a poll earlier this year, declare that they would be willing to join a mass

movement to overthrow the existing order.

This opposition cannot develop in the narrow and essentially false context of negotiations between union leaders and the Macron-Philippe government, all of which are seeking above all to boost the profitability of French firms on the world market. The task is to unify working class opposition that is rising across Europe independently of the trade union bureaucracies, in revolutionary struggles carried out on a socialist programme.

On this basis, no confidence can be given to the manoeuvres of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who told Europe1 yesterday that he hopes to use the union protests and his media profile as the “leading” opponent to Macron to become Macron’s prime minister. He explained this via a reference to the French rail workers’ strike of November-December 1995 against then-Prime Minister Alain Juppé’s pension cuts.

Europe1 wrote that Mélenchon “has one example in mind: the 1995 protests against Juppé’s reforms. A powerful social movement ultimately led to the abandoning of Juppé’s cuts then, a year later, to early legislative elections [which brought the Plural Left and Mélenchon personally into the government.] ‘Chirac had understood that the relationship of forces that had existed after his election in 1995 no longer did,’ Mélenchon said. ‘I’m sure that we will govern this country! We are in a war of movements.’”

This strategy of entering into a Macron government is a trap for the workers. A Macron-Mélenchon regime would impose anti-worker policies just as the Plural Left government of 1990s France or, more recently, the Greek government led by Mélenchon’s ally, the Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza). This government, after having pretended to oppose austerity, capitulated to the EU once in power and imposed deep attacks against the workers. Such a perspective, which Mélenchon is developing through his alliance with the trade unions, is a reactionary dead end for the working class.



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