

How the French state and big business finance the unions

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The French government has been rocked by the movement of the “yellow vests.” Now French President Emmanuel Macron and the pseudo-left parties linked to the unions are calling for the unions to seize control of this movement. They aim to create conditions for the union bureaucracies to strangle the movement and block the growth of the workers’ struggles. The unions are totally subservient to Macron.

Confirmation of this fact is provided by the recent report of AGFPA (Agence de Gestion du Fonds Paritaire National, Agency of Management of National Social Partnership Funds, AGFPA—an agency established in 2015 to ensure transparency in the sources of funding for unions and business associations). The 2017 AGFPA report shows that the unions in France receive massive funding from both the state and employers.

The yellow vest movement erupted onto the political arena independently of both the unions and the pseudo-left parties such as the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), Workers Struggle (LO), and Unsubmissive France (LFI). This signified a break between the workers and the organizations which have strangled their opposition to the austerity and war policies imposed by successive governments leading up to the current Macron government. The pseudo-lefts are now spreading the lying claims via the media that the unions lead the “workers’ movement.” They are only sowing confusion.

The unions are not the “workers’ movement” but hired agents of capital, which sabotage the struggles of the working class at every turn. The union leaders have repeatedly denounced the yellow vests. Cynically claiming to “represent” the working class, they have claimed that the yellow vest mobilization was one of the “people, separated from the working class.” The real reason for the hostility of the union officials is precisely the opposite: the yellow vest movement is a movement of the working class opposed to the domination of the state and the banks which exploit the workers but finance the unions.

The following table, from the 2017 AGFPA report, reveals how funds overseen by the AGFPA were distributed among unions and employers’ organizations:

The report emphasizes that in 2017 unions received €83,292,277 (US\$95,786,120) from both the government and employers’ contributions. The allocation of funds by AGFPA is made in accordance with three goals defined in its mission statement:

Mission 1: The formulation, administration, activation and evaluation of policies promoted within the framework of official institutions, where unions and employers are represented on an ostensibly equal basis.

Mission 2: The participation of unions and of professional employer associations in the conception, implementation and follow-up of public policies related to the authority of the government, through negotiation, consultation and collaboration.

Mission 3: The economic, social and trade-union training of those wage earners who are called upon to exercise official union functions, or of any union members in the workforce who find themselves in a situation of intervening on behalf of their fellow wage earners.

These figures expose the class nature of the unions. They are totally bought, bribed by the state and the employers, to the tune of tens of millions of euros—a down payment for their collaboration in imposing regressive social policies and attacks on past gains of the working class. The unions approved the Socialist Party’s (PS) Labour Law in 2016 and the Macron government’s rail privatization in 2018, all the while ensuring that resistance in the working class to these policies did not transform itself into a political movement against Macron.

The creation of the AGFPA occurred after the slush fund scandal of the powerful employers federation of the metallurgical industries (UIMM). During several decades, the UIMM had been misappropriating funds by secretly removing cash boxes, amounting to tens of millions of euros in cash, in order to finance the unions.

During the UIMM trial, Arnald Leenhardt, who headed this federation from 1985 to 1999, explained that the UIMM had paid these sums to the “five representative unions in the industry. The employers need strong unions. When there are

strikes and the imprisonment of employers by angry workers, you are very happy to have a union capable of containing these outbursts, and channelling them back into a favourable perspective for returning to work.”

This mechanism through which the state pours tens of millions of euros into the unions’ coffers is only one of many money conduits utilised by the bourgeoisie to buy the services of the petty-bourgeois layers that run the union bureaucracies.

According to the Perruchot report, accepted by the National Assembly in 2011 and published with the agreement of the Stalinist CGT (General Confederation of Labour) union in 2012, only a minute portion of the unions’ budget comes from workers’ dues. The rest comes from grants and monetary assistance provided by the state and the employers. To quote p. 165 of this report: “As can be seen, almost €4 billion (US\$4.5 billion) is probably allocated each year to the activity of the unions in France. The majority of these funds (90 percent) appears to come from the official status of the unions in companies and in the public service. Direct contributions from union members probably only make up 3 to 4 percent of the total, once other forms of government aid are deducted.”

The transformation of the unions from defensive organizations of the working class in the 1960s to instruments of the bourgeoisie financed by the state today is not the result of individual corruption specific to France. It is an international process, driven by the objective contradictions inherent to the unions themselves. The fundamental aim of all unions was to negotiate the wages of the working class with employers within the framework of the nation-state. The globalization of production has undermined this entire perspective and has therefore transformed the role that the unions can play today.

Faced with a globalized economy, where internationally organized companies force workers in different countries to compete with each other, the unions reacted by attacking the wages and conditions of “their” workers to boost the competitiveness of the national economy. They strangled and allowed the employers to crush one strike after another—the public service workers in Sri Lanka in 1980, US air traffic controllers in 1981, the British miners in 1985, to name some earlier examples—in order to defend the profit interests of the employers.

Since then, the International Committee of the Fourth International has emphasized, as the *Parti de l’égalité socialiste* wrote in its founding statement, that the emergence of globalization “made it impossible to pursue economic policy or bargain for wages and conditions on a national level. The ex-colonial bourgeoisies’ ‘national development’ strategies, the union bureaucracies’ nationally

based bargaining, and Stalinism’s autarkic orientation, had all been rendered obsolete. Instead, they all functioned evermore nakedly as labour contractors, competing to slash workers’ pay and conditions in order to offer the greatest profit to international finance capital.”

In France, the UIMM launched its current slush fund in 1972. At this time, the bourgeoisie was organizing its counteroffensive against the rise of militancy in the working class after the May 1968 general strike. Having betrayed the general strike, the unions started their metamorphosis from defence organizations of the working class into agencies of bourgeois reaction. Their integration into co-management bodies and indeed into ministries in François Mitterrand’s Socialist Party (PS) government coincided with the collapse of their membership.

The unions became empty shells that do not organize the class struggle at all, but collaborate in a “social dialogue” aimed at destroying the social rights of the workers. This graph shows how the unions have drastically slashed the level of strike activity in France since 1968:

As a result, workers abandoned the unions en masse. The graph below shows the collapse in the rate of union membership in France:

This highlights the necessity for the working class to create new organs of struggle to replace the moribund unions, and to turn to their international class brothers and sisters. The yellow vest movement has unmasked the mutual hostility that exists between the working class and the reactionary union bureaucracies. Throughout the struggles of the yellow vests in France, the teachers in the United States and tea plantation workers in Sri Lanka, the sections of the ICFI have called for the formation of rank-and-file committees of workers, independent of the trade unions.

There is an alternative to the national programme of “social dialogue” and class collaboration of the union bureaucracy and the employers. It is the formation of international networks of rank-and-file committees. The decisive role of the sections of the ICFI in this process will be to clarify for the working class its historic task: the only way for the working class to satisfy its pressing social needs is through the transfer of political power to new organizations built by the international working class. Thus, the working class can re-establish in struggle the continuity with its historic traditions of struggle for socialism against capitalism.



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