

French unions complicit in Macron's May 11 return-to-work policy

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Last Saturday's interview by Philippe Martinez, the head of France's General Federation of Trade unions (CGT) with *France Inter* confirms that the French union apparatuses are backing the reckless return to work being organised by governments across Europe. French schools and businesses are due to reopen on May 11.

Tens of thousands of new cases of COVID-19 are still being discovered every day in Europe, including with at least several hundred every day in France. The European Union is meanwhile showering the banks with billions of euros, while hundreds of thousands of workers are being thrown into unemployment. The trade unions are working to prevent any resistance by workers as they engage in backroom discussions with Macron.

Already, interviewed in April by Sud Radio, Martinez had rejected out of hand calling on workers to refuse to return to work. "No, no, I think I've explained it well; we call for work as long as the conditions for protection are met." While these conditions of protection are not met, Martinez indicated again on *France Inter* that he would not organise opposition to the capitalist offensive to impose a return to work that endangers millions of lives.

Asked on *France Inter* whether the CGT was launching a national appeal to workers in nonessential industries to remain at home and prevent a new wave of COVID-19 infections, Martinez replied: "If the health of teachers and staff, of all the staff of the national education system is not assured, the health of children, well, we must not, we cannot, go to work... [Some] mayors are refusing to reopen the schools, which is a good thing, because there is something not quite right about the resumption of classes."

To put it bluntly, the CGT magnanimously permits

isolated workers to make their own decision, knowing that the ruling class will provide workers and small businesses with little or nothing after the May 11 reopening. The government intends to use the threat of debt and destitution to force them back to work. And while sitting on their hands in front of the workers, the union apparatuses are collaborating closely with Macron and corporate management to get them back to work.

This was alluded to even by the *France Inter* reporters themselves, who asked whether "the trade unionism of the next world will be in dialogue, co-management, rather than in opposition" to the government. Martinez initially dodged the question, stating that "I think that the problem must be posed differently"—since the CGT already participates in all the co-management meetings with the other trade union apparatuses, the employers and the government.

Then Martinez confirmed that he aspires to organise co-management, hoping that "the President of the Republic realises the essential role played by the trade unions. I am thinking about all the activists." He then referred to the demonstrations that have been taking place for years in hospitals. In a totally unrealistic way, he called for a Macron commitment "against bed closures, against hospital closures, for more employment in hospitals, for better recognition of qualifications."

The pandemic demonstrates the bankruptcy of all organisations that rely on unions to organise labour struggles. Financed in France by the state and the employers, either "legally" through co-management or illegally with bribes, they negotiated the destruction of France's Labour Law with Socialist Party President François Hollande, the privatisation of the national rail network, and Macron's plans to slash pensions. Now,

across Europe and America, the trade unions are planning a return to work that could result in hundreds of thousands or millions of deaths.

It is now an urgent task to prepare an international workers' rebellion against the trade union apparatuses and the bankers' efforts to impose a premature and deadly return to work. The policy of containment was initially imposed on governments in Europe through the mobilization of the European working class, especially in the European centre of the pandemic, Italy, where a wave of wildcat strikes erupted in March.

But the fight against premature deconfinement, including through strikes, cannot be organised under the control of the trade union apparatuses. Workers need their own organisations, action committees organised independently of the trade unions, to enable them to organise and to determine, free from employer and union pressure, whether the conditions for a return to work are met.

Since the confinement, the trade unions have been negotiating closely with employers against both the economic and health interests of workers.

The CGT and the French employer's association (Medef) signed a brief announcement, which stated, "The trade union confederations (CFDT, CGT, FO, CFE-CGC, CFTC) and the employers' organisations (MEDEF, CPME, U2P) ... met on March 19." Noting "the essential role of social dialogue and collective bargaining," these organizations added that "they agreed to keep in touch as necessary."

Since then, the unions, including the CGT, have been meeting with Prime Minister Édouard Philippe every two days by videoconference. "Social dialogue continues more than ever," Maud Stéphan, head of an association that brings together trade unionists and corporate management, said to *Le Monde*. The newspaper quoted the satisfied comments of management: "Everyone is playing the game, social dialogue is continuing almost as before" (Jérôme Fréris at Bouygues Telecom), "Nothing has changed except for an intensification of social dialogue" (Pierre Groisy at Thales, who welcomed the unanimous vote of the CFE-CGC, CFDT, CFTC and CGT for the agreement).

The workers, on the other hand, are paying for it with social attacks, and now also with threats to their lives. Medef head Geoffroy Roux de Bézieux is demanding an end to paid holidays and overtime pay. At Renault

and PSA, in order to maintain their full salary throughout the confinement, workers are being forced to accept reduction in holiday and overtime benefits, and the addition of a sixth working day, under agreements signed by the unions.

The workers cannot place any faith in these organizations, bought and paid for by the state and the ruling class, and meeting with the Macron government behind their backs.

The "yellow vest" movement that erupted in 2018, and the wildcat strikes in Italy and the U.S. since the outbreak of the pandemic, have shown that it is possible to build a powerful movement of the working-class framework of the trade unions. Workers can use their own means of communication, including on social media and phone networks, to organise themselves into independent action committees. Such committees will be able to lead a political struggle against deconfinement, and take power out of the hands of Macron, the European Union and capitalist elite, and into the hands of the working class in France and internationally.



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