

After the March 10 demonstrations

France: Chirac government, Socialist Party close ranks on European constitutional referendum

By Richard Dufour
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Popular anger at the policy of social demolition carried out by the ultraconservative government of Jacques Chirac overflowed into the streets of France last week—for the third time since the beginning of the year, following two days of mass protest January 20 and February 5.

At the beginning of the week, tens of thousands of high school students marched in more than 150 cities against the lengthening of the work week. Then on March 10, nearly a million people demonstrated throughout the country—150,000 in Paris—against the assault by the government and employers on working conditions, wages, jobs and living standards.

The marches brought together teachers and high school students, public servants, researchers, workers from the public utility company Électricité et Gaz de France (EDF-GDF) and numerous delegations from the private sector, with banners from Lidl and Alcatel in Marseilles, EADS, Latécoère and Carrefour in Toulouse, Legrand in Limoges and RVI in Lyons, to name only a few.

Thousands of strikes were reported, notably at Coca-Cola, Exxon, L'Oréal, LU, Michelin, Nestlé, Renault, Rhodia, Rhône-Poulenc, Sanofi-Aventis, Total and Yoplait. Metalworkers were also strongly in evidence on the demonstrations.

Some 15 percent of postal workers, 24 percent at France Telecom and 22 percent at EDF-GDF, stopped work for the day, according to management reports. In the public service, 36 percent of workers were on strike, and in national education, 40 percent. Transportation was also strongly affected: the railways, the Paris suburban lines, the Paris Metro and bus system, and the ports and airports.

This day of widespread action demonstrates once again the willingness of French workers to fight the socioeconomic policy that benefits only the ruling elite. Unemployment has risen above 10 percent for the first time in five years, while the three biggest banks—Crédit agricole, BNP Paribas and Société générale—are making record profits of nearly 10 billion euros (\$13.3 billion). Such is the profound inequality tearing apart society in France, as everywhere else.

But the official leadership of the workers is doing everything in its power to prevent the necessary political conclusions from being drawn: namely, the necessity to reorganise society on a new basis, where the needs of the majority come before the accumulation of profit by a minority that owns everything.

The demands on March 10 were limited by the union leaderships to a mere slowing down of the brutal assault by the big enterprises on the social position of workers, without ever calling into question the pro-big-business policy of the whole government, and of the profit system itself.

For the general secretary of the CGT union confederation, Bernard Thibault, last week's actions "underline the level of discontent and also the urgent need for a concrete response to the demands over working time and buying power." According to the general secretary of the Force Ouvrière union, Jean-Claude Mailly, "the mobilisation shows that demands over wages, in particular, are broadly supported and are a priority with many, so the government must listen and the employers must say something." As for the public service unions, they let it be known that an additional wage increase of 0.7 percent—the equivalent of 550 million euros (\$736 million)—on top of the 1 percent granted for 2005, would make it possible to "get beyond a situation of conflict, renew the social dialogue and show the employees that they have been heard."

As always on these occasions, it fell to the self-styled "extreme left" to provide a political cover for this sabotage by calling on workers to limit themselves to pressuring their leaderships. "So that March 10 will not be a one-time event but a stage, the point of departure for bigger demonstrations," wrote Arlette Laguiller in the March 11 issue of *Lutte Ouvrière*, "the union leaderships must feel that the workers will no longer accept their shilly-shallying and stalling."

The media speculated about a possible retreat by the government—imperceptible, it must be said. According to a front-page article in the influential *Le Monde*, one day after the big demonstrations, the president's office gave instructions to add 1 percent to the tiny wages offer for the public servants already on the table.

Although the assistant minister for the budget, Jean-François Copé, subsequently reaffirmed that "the situation with public finances demands the greatest vigilance," it is not impossible that the government might depart from the hard line it took in 2003 in the face of a movement as broad as this one and opt for a slight tactical retreat.

The reasons justifying this approach were spelled out in an editorial in *Le Monde*. Its starting point is that "the government is fortunate that the unions protesting are responsible" and that they "completely mastered the social discontent by holding a day of multi-sector

actions, which they can control better than ‘spontaneous’ and ‘wildcat’ strikes.” With such support, the editorial concludes, “two and a half months away from an important referendum, on the European constitution, Mr. Chirac must not remain completely insensitive to the social demands.”

The fears expressed by this perspicacious mouthpiece of the French ruling class are far from exaggerated. If the social discontent manifested so massively March 10 met up with a conscious anti-capitalist opposition, that would indeed pose a grave danger to the ruling elite. It might indicate that French workers were beginning to realise that the defence of their immediate economic interests is incompatible with the whole political order in Europe, and that they must consequently build their own mass political party in opposition to all the parties of big business, including the official left of the Socialist Party (PS) and its junior partners, the French Communist Party (PCF) and the Greens.

The referendum campaign is also very instructive in this regard, beginning with the manner in which it was officially launched. Afraid of appearing to be forcing the constitutional treaty down the throats of a hostile population, Chirac rebuffed the advocates of a lightning campaign, setting the referendum for May 29, a campaign of 85 days. Nor did Chirac appear on television to solemnly notify the French people that he was asking for their vote, explain why and tell them that he expected a positive response from them.

As the campaign has unfolded so far, the majority of the effort for the “yes” vote is being made by the Socialist Party establishment, with its first secretary, François Hollande, leading the charge. His arguments amount to an open and shameless falsification of the European constitutional treaty, which will be put to a vote in the referendum. “All citizens will have the same social rights,” claims Hollande, without batting an eyelid. “For the first time, the constitution recognises the public service,” he repeats ad nauseam.

It is common knowledge, however, that the treaty has been drawn up expressly to minimise the social and environmental restraints on big European capital. Speaking, for example, of “the promotion of jobs and the improvement of the conditions of life and work,” the treaty adds that such a development will be the result above all of “the functioning of the internal market that will facilitate the harmonisation of the social systems.”

The leader of the Socialist Party makes no attempt even to distance himself from the campaign for a “yes” vote being led by the UMP (Union pour un mouvement populaire), the main party of the right wing, currently in power. “It was about time the UMP came out openly in favor of the European constitution!” Hollande exclaimed recently—providing a glimpse of the consensus among the French ruling elite around the plan for a “stronger” capitalist Europe, which it has been spearheading, together with its German partner.

This is a repeat of what happened during the second round of the presidential election in 2002, when the Socialist Party—with the blessing of the so-called “extreme left” parties such as the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR)—recommended a “republican” vote for the ultraconservative and racist Jacques Chirac, under the pretext of “barring the way” to Le Pen, the head of the neofascist National Front.

It is worth noting that Hollande’s positions earned him catcalls and a few snowballs during a demonstration of several thousand “to defend the public service” last Saturday in Guéret, in central France. The protest was organised by the Socialist Party federation in the area, sympathetic to a minority tendency within the party that advocates a

“no” vote in the referendum. All the leading lights of the left were there, including the national secretary of the Communist Party, Marie-George Buffet, and the spokesperson of the LCR, Olivier Besancenot.

The immediate reaction of the Socialist Party establishment was to launch a campaign of threats against “those who don’t respect the vote of the membership,” referring to an internal vote held December 1, where 60 percent of the members supported a “yes” vote for the European constitution. But the real aim of the campaign is to intimidate popular opposition to the treaty and to prevent it from taking a politically coherent and progressive form.

On this basic question, Hollande is joined by his critics within the official campaign for the “no” vote—be it the minority within the Socialist Party or the Communist Party. For while Hollande denies all connection between the European constitution and the neoliberal offensive of privatisations, the transfer of production facilities and massive cuts in social security, the advocates of the “no” vote remain silent on the profound connection between neo-liberalism and capitalism. In the final analysis, both work to prevent the emergence of a *progressive* opposition, that is, socialist and internationalist, to capitalist Europe.

The leader of the Communist Party declares, for example: “The referendum will be the opportunity to say that we want no more of the liberal [free-market] policies of the government.” But she carefully neglects to mention the fact that the assault on the public service didn’t begin with the European constitution; that the constitution only legalises and institutionalises a process that is already well advanced, driven by the profound economic transformation associated with the globalisation of production; and that this globalisation contains a powerful potential for social and human progress, on condition that it is freed from the anarchic control of the market and serves the common good.

The advocates of the “no” vote within the Socialist Party are also motivated by pragmatic electoral considerations; the fear that if they associate themselves openly with the right in power in the context of the campaign for a “yes” vote, their party will end up losing its last bit of political credibility in the eyes of the popular masses, two years before the next national elections.

This was openly expressed by the two most visible leaders in the Socialist Party minority. When launching his campaign, the deputy for Landes (southwest France), Henri Emmanuelli, explained: “If it wins, the ‘yes’ vote will not be 70 percent, it will be 50-something. Then the link will have to be reformed.” And the senator for Essonne (Paris region), Jean-Luc Mélenchon, warned: “The referendum campaign must not become a pretext for digging an unbridgeable gulf.”

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