

Sarkozy announces vast attacks on French workers' rights and conditions

By Antoine Lerougetel
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In two major policy speeches September 18 and 19, French President Nicolas Sarkozy laid out a programme of the most far-reaching attacks on social and democratic rights and the working and living conditions of the working class made by any president of France since the Second World War. If implemented they will destroy gains made in decades of struggles by workers and drive them back to pre-war conditions.

In his September 18 speech outlining his "social contract," Sarkozy proposed these measures:

- * The abolishing of the "special regime" pension schemes enjoyed by 1.6 million workers employed for the most part in the Paris urban public transport and the railway, gas and electricity industries. Their pensions will be brought into line with those of the rest of the public sector's 5 million workers, which were severely reduced in 2003. Retirement at age 50 and 55 for some workers in the "special regimes" will be brought up to 60 and a minimum of 40 annuities will be required to have the full pension. The calculation of pension payments will be based on the salary of workers over the previous 25 years rather than the last six months of employment, leading to significant reductions.

- * "Long career" workers, who started work at age 16 or under, will have to have worked 42 years in order to have the right to retire before 60 on a full pension, a saving of some €2 billion a year for the treasury, affecting 430,000 workers. At present 40 annuities are required. All other public sector workers will have to have worked for 41 years to acquire full pension rights, as opposed to 37.5 in 2003.

- * The ANPE (national employment agency) and the UNEDIC (the fund jointly managed by employers and unions, which distributes unemployment benefits) are to be merged with the aim of placing a strict control on access to these payments. The merged organisation will impose sanctions for non-compliance with regulations: the worker who refuses two job or retraining offers will have his benefits stopped. This undermines the principle of the free negotiation of the worker with his employer for the sale of his labour power, a principle that establishes the difference between free and slave labour.

- * Tax disincentives and legislation will be designed to stop early retirement and to maintain people at work until 65.

- * The SMIC (minimum wage) will no longer be linked to the rise in the cost of living, but to "the economic fundamentals," that is the requirements of big business, and be fixed by a commission.

- * A 'reform' of the labour code will remove "the accumulation of protections which surround the work contract ... this excess of rights" (Sarkozy).

- * Individual out-of-pocket health charges will be raised by up to €50 per person per year.

One day later in a second speech, Sarkozy outlined an attack on public sector workers' job security and the break-up of their rights and status earned by qualifications and seniority. "I would like to get away from a purely mechanical, legal, egalitarian, anonymous approach" and work towards "the individualisation of remuneration," he said, and reported

that "18 audit teams made up of 200 state auditors were at work to propose reforms for the whole of the trillion euros of state expenditure," and announced the following measures:

- * The non-replacement of one out of every two retirees in the public sector and the massive recourse to overtime.

- * The break-up of professional corps by opening up so-called job mobility: "Resources must constantly be redeployed as the need arises." Public sector workers will get cash incentives to go into the private sector and there will be the possibility for people to be recruited to the public service on private sector-type contracts without the rights and guarantees now enjoyed by public sector workers. The entire system of remuneration is to be overhauled on these principles, stressing payment by results and individual merit rather than established rights for all.

- * Reductions in the quality and quantity of the education service in line with economic priorities: "The tempo of the staff reductions in the National Education Service will be determined by the progress made in the overhaul of the curricula and school hours, which are required by the balancing of our efforts to make savings." An approach popularly known as 'the pedagogy of the accountant.'

Previous French governments have proposed the same or similar attacks on pensions, the public service and education as Sarkozy (even though not all simultaneously), but they were regularly forced to compromise and partially retreat in face of massive opposition.

In 1995 an attempt to do away with the "special regime" pension schemes by then Gaullist Prime Minister Alain Juppé brought the country to a standstill. Juppé was finally forced to resign. In 2003 and 2006 mass movements of workers and youth impeded further austerity measures of French governments.

As a result, France has fallen far behind its European rivals in the rat-race of global competition, notably behind Britain and Germany, where social democratic governments have thoroughly done away with the remnants of the postwar welfare state. Consequently, France's negative trade gap has been steadily widening—from €2.4 billion in 2003 to €5.3 billion in 2004, €21.2 in 2005, €28 billion last year and a projected more than €30 billion this year. Public expenditure has grown from 37 percent of the GNP in 1974 to 53 percent in 2007, over €1 trillion.

As far as the ruling elite of France and Europe are concerned, the full-scale destruction of France's welfare state can no longer be postponed.

In a September 24 radio interview Prime Minister François Fillon said that the accumulated debt made French public finances "no longer sustainable." On a visit to Corsica he declared that France is "in a state of bankruptcy, financially speaking" and needs drastic measures, cutting social expenditure to address the problem.

Spiegel Online October 24 commented that Sarkozy "plans to complete in only six months a similar reform process to the one which took Germany years."

One of Sarkozy's favourite ploys is to use the lower level of rights of

others as an argument for workers to accept reduced rights for themselves and, indeed, to incite the less fortunate against the “privileged ones.”

In his “social contract” speech he declares of the “special regime” pensions: “It’s a question of equity. We will not undertake a reform of pensions without including them. If an engineering worker or a teacher sees their annuities go from 37.5 to 40 and tomorrow to 41 years, how can you explain to them that a worker in a big public enterprise should stay at 37.5 or even less?”

Here Sarkozy admits that the abolition of the “special regimes” is an essential preliminary for a new round of attacks on all pensions. He even suggests cynically that savings on the “special regimes” can be used to finance a boost for low pensions.

On the question of access to medicines he takes a similar tack, this time pitting one nationality against another: “It’s not right that 90 percent of visits to the doctor result in a prescription for medicines, when this proportion is only 40 percent in Holland.” He justifies the imposition of health charges by saying that the money will go to the treatment of Alzheimer and cancer patients.

The sick are being made to pay for the sick and the pensioners for pensioners, while the obscene accumulation of wealth by the financial elites is increased by tax breaks of some €10-15 billion.

In order to avoid the fate of his predecessors, Sarkozy is intent on using the services of the trade unions to impose his attacks on the working class. He knows that these organisations—nationalistic in their outlook and fully devoted to the global success of French companies—will stop at nothing to make sure French capitalism remains competitive.

In the past, the unions have regularly betrayed the big strike movements by making sure that they did not threaten French capitalism and the stability of the government. However, Sarkozy wants them to go one step further. The present state of French capitalism requires that they act as direct partners in the drive to dismantle the welfare state and labour rights.

The extent of the corporatist partnership that has developed between the trade unions and the most intransigently anti-working class French president since the Second World War is most strikingly revealed in Sarkozy’s September 18 speech. He made clear that he considers the trade unions as an indispensable instrument for the achievement of his aims. This is the significance of the expressions “social dialogue” and “social partners” recurring more than 20 times in the nine-page transcript.

Towards the end of his speech, the French president asserted: “I want to tell you that the social partners, and more generally the intermediary bodies, will be listened to, respected, more perhaps than they have ever been. My door is always open and will stay open. I use this opportunity to express the esteem in which I hold these great social players: I know them well, they are people of my generation, that is to say that they are experienced enough to know the faults in our present system and young enough to want things to change and to dare to envisage social innovation.”

His reliance on the trade unions emerges clearly in the proposals in relation to the right of bosses to sack workers and the weakening of statutory guarantees of job security—a key issue at the centre of the anti-CPE (*Contrat de première embauche*—First Job Contract) protests last year.

On the labour code and work contracts, Sarkozy stated, “I am pleased that the social partners have taken up this difficult issue. I am confident in their capacity to come up with innovative compromises. ... When an agreement is reached, the law will take it on board. *Where there is no agreement, the state will take the appropriate measures.* It will then take account, in discussion with the social partners, of the balance sheet of their dialogue.” The highlighted passage underlines Sarkozy’s contempt for the very trade union bureaucracy on which he relies.

On the reduction of unemployed workers’ rights to welfare payments, Sarkozy reported, “The social partners are dealing with the complete

re-examination of the system.”

In pursuit of their tasks as Sarkozy’s partners, the unions are applying their time-honoured tactic of wearing down the spontaneous opposition to these massive attacks on the rights and conditions of workers. The first action proposed is a national demonstration in Paris October on 13, initially planned as a protest by railway workers against job losses and in defence of their pension scheme. This call has been followed by the announcement of a day of action on October 18, a full month after Sarkozy’s long-expected proposals.

The September 25 conference held by the Stalinist-led CGT (General Confederation of Labour) trade union, reported by the Communist Party daily *L’Humanité*, is typical of the French unions’ efforts to stifle mass resistance. The article states that “one certainty emerged: the mobilisation of the workers is unavoidable.” But it goes on to reveal only foot-dragging. One delegate declared, “We must have time to put our suitcases down, to debate, to explain things.”

Jean-Christophe Duigou, the CGT official in charge of pensions, asserted that “the social temperature must be taken and the trade union response constructed.” Another speaker wanted to hold back the railwaymen’s action and wait for some undefined event: “The railway workers must not be left on their own ... at some time or another there will be an element which sparks things off.”

Since Sarkozy’s election in May, the trade union leaders have been in constant consultation with the president. These meetings, which must have had the character of a permanent war council against the feared mass resistance to his programme, will be extended to tripartite conferences in October (unions, employers, government representatives).

It is yet to be ascertained what there is in this for France’s small army of trade union bureaucrats and full-time officials. Even now, well over 50 percent of the unions’ finances are not covered by their dwindling membership’s dues but by different government subsidies.

“Left” groups such as the LCR (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire—Revolutionary Communist League) continue to glorify the trade unions and call on workers to rely on them to defend their interests.

The youth and the working class can only defend themselves from these attacks by building a party completely independent of the “left” and trade union bureaucracies and their petty bourgeois hangers on, based on socialist and internationalist perspectives.

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