

The betrayal of the French rail workers strike and the role of the LCR

By by Socialist Equality Party (Germany)
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The first trial of strength between president Nicolas Sarkozy and the French working class has ended with a bitter defeat. There is no way round this fact. After a ten-day walkout, the strikers returned to work under conditions in which the government refused to withdraw its reform of their pensions, the so-called *régimes spéciaux*. The trade unions are just negotiating over the price of their surrender.

The French and international business press have struck a triumphant note. *Le Figaro* jubilantly declared that the reform of the *régimes spéciaux*, the “mother of all reforms”, has convinced public opinion, “that everything must change in this country”. Next on the agenda is “the reduction of the public sector, as well as reducing the budget deficit and the expenditures on social insurance”.

The strikers were not defeated in their struggle, but betrayed. The first responsibility is to recognise the fact and the extent of this betrayal. An unsparing analysis of its causes is the necessary condition to prepare for future struggles and prevent further defeats.

Those like Olivier Besancenot, the leader of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR, Revolutionary Communist League), who declare that “Nicolas Sarkozy did not succeed in breaking the social movement”, and that “it’s not a defeat, neither morally nor in content” are covering up the reactionary role of those responsible for the betrayal—the trade unions, the parties of the official left as well as Lutte Ouvrière (LO, Workers Struggle) and the LCR itself—which all consciously worked to isolate the strike and prepare its defeat.

The bourgeoisie knows very well what happened. Irrespective of the extent of future struggles it is relying on these same forces to betray again.

The betrayal of the rail workers has already had serious political consequences. Barely had the strikers returned to the work, when violent youth protests erupted in the suburbs. There is a direct link between these events. The strangling of the strike intensified the isolation of the most suppressed layers of society, whose future is inseparably bound up with the fate of the working class. In the absence of any progressive perspective, the frustration of young people assumed the form of violent acts of rage. The state reacts in turn by massively building up its security apparatus and attacking the democratic rights of all workers.

Everything now depends on drawing the necessary lessons and establishing a political alternative to those organizations responsible for the betrayal.

President Nicolas Sarkozy had carefully prepared for the dispute over the *regimes spéciaux* since the spring. He was anxious not to suffer the same fate as Alain Juppé, who as head of government in 1995 made an initial attack on pensions, but was then forced to retreat and eventually resign from office following massive popular resistance.

Even before taking office, Sarkozy had met with the leaders of the three most important trade union federations: Bernard Thibault (General Confederation of Labour—CGT), François Chérèque (French Democratic Labor Confederation—CFDT) and Jean Claude Mailly (Workers

Power—FO). He told them: “I want to tell you one thing immediately. I will carry out this reform (i.e. *régimes spéciaux*). The rest is a matter of negotiation.” (*le Monde* 26.11.) Since then he has cultivated his ties to the union leaders with a series of both public and private meetings, including dinner dates. Sarkozy is even on a first-name basis with the CGT leader in the energy sector, Frédéric Imbrecht.

Employment Minister Xavier Bertrand has also wooed the trade union leaders. He has regularly invited them in for drinks in an informal atmosphere in his ministry in the Rue de Grenelle. According to his own admission, he spent no less than 80 hours in discussions with union leaders. When Sarkozy and Bertrand finally announced the beginning of their offensive against the *regimes spéciaux*, they were already assured of the support of the trade unions.

On the eve of the strike, Bernard Thibault eliminated the last doubts by offering the Employment Minister negotiations on a branch-by-branch level. Thibault’s message was unmistakable: he had resigned himself to the essential points of the reform and was ready to negotiate about the details.

Thibault, however, was not able to bring about an immediate end to the strike. The grass-roots resistance was too great. He switched therefore to a strategy of attrition—the strike was allowed to continue without support from above until it finally ran out of steam. Despite the considerable costs to the French economy, Sarkozy supported this strategy. *Le Monde* quoted him saying: “One has to save the soldier Thibault”. It was necessary to “give him time to convince his members that they have nothing to win in a long conflict.”

Sarkozy knows that he will need the trade unions in future, as a comment in *Le Figaro* of November 22 makes clear: “The head of state is unwilling to harden his tone against the unions in difficulty with their rank and file. He knows he needs them in order to continue with his reforms: the labour code, the merger of the employment exchanges with the unemployment welfare offices, private sector pensions, vocational training. ‘The special regimes are just the aperitif for the other reforms, we will be needing responsible unions,’ argues David Martignon, an Elysée [presidential] spokesman.”

One day after the mass demonstrations of November 20, the time was ripe. The trade unions then sat down at the negotiating table. The following morning their representatives in the general assemblies enforced an end to the strike. Also participating in the negotiations was a representative of the trade union SUD (Solidarity, Unity, Democracy), which had previously presented itself as the most energetic opponent of negotiations.

For anyone who has followed the development of the trade unions during the last three decades, the behaviour of the CGT and SUD comes as no surprise. The shift by the trade unions into the camp of the class enemy is an international phenomenon, which results directly from the character and the perspective of these organizations. Under conditions where the trade unions are oriented to negotiating wages and working

conditions with the employers, they have a direct interest in the smooth functioning of the capitalist economy and take an organically hostile attitude to the class struggle, i.e., the political struggle against capitalism. Nationalist to the marrow, they are convinced that Sarkozy's "reforms" are necessary in order to defend France's standing in the world economy and world politics.

The history of the CGT is symptomatic in this regard. Already in 1953 and 1968, it used its influence to control and then strangle two general strikes of great revolutionary potential. On both occasions, it was remunerated for the sellout with substantial concessions to the workers. In the meantime, globalisation has obliterated any basis for social compromises, and the CGT has shifted completely into the camp of the conservative government. This is the only way to explain the unions' hours of hobnobbing with Sarkozy and Bertrand.

The trade unions were already heavily discredited at the beginning of the strike. Open distrust of the leadership prevailed at strike meetings. Most discussions revolved around the issue of how to prevent a sellout by the trade union apparatuses. Resolutions were passed which warned of any deal made without prior to consultation with the rank and file.

During the past 12 years, French workers have undergone a series of bitter experiences where the trade unions have intervened to demobilise social disputes and eventually organised a sellout.

The result of the conflict in 1995 was not the success it is often claimed to be. At the time, hundreds of thousands of workers struck for three and a half weeks in the defence of social security benefits, pensions, health insurance and jobs. Millions took part in demonstrations. The trade unions made sure that the mobilisations did not represent a threat to the right-wing government and eventually suffocated the movement by agreeing to a rotten compromise. The most disputed part of the Juppé plan was withdrawn, but all his other measures remained in place. Prime Minister Juppé was able to hold onto his post for a period of time, and President Jacques Chirac was given the necessary breathing space to prepare a regulated change of government.

In 2003 the government renewed its attack on pensions and was able to impose its measures in the face of substantial protests. The CFDT openly supported the government's proposals, while the CGT and FO followed a policy of uncoordinated strikes and explicitly emphasised that their aim was not to bring down the government. François Fillon, who was Employment Minister at the time, expressly thanked Bernard Thibault afterwards for his "responsible attitude".

In the spring of 2006, the trade unions only intervened in the mass movement against the First Job Contract (CPE) in order to assume control of the protests and throttle them.

The French Socialist and Communist parties are just as discredited as the trade unions. Both parties have never recovered from the defeat of SP leader Lionel Jospin, who, after five years in government, was beaten in the presidential election 2002 by the right-wing extremist Jean Marie Le Pen. Since then, both parties have moved even further to the right.

In the course of the presidential election this year, the Socialist Party tried to overtake Sarkozy from the right on many issues. Following its defeat at the polls prominent members of the party switched directly into Sarkozy's camp. In the course of the rail worker's strike the Socialist Party did not even put up pretence of defending the interests of the workers. The party supports the essential point of Sarkozy's reform, making workers covered by the special pensions work a minimum of 40 years, instead of the current 37.5, before receiving a full pension. The only criticism of Sarkozy from current SP leader, François Hollande, was over his "confrontational style", but Hollande had no problem with the content of his policies. He urgently called upon the strikers to return to the negotiating table as fast as possible.

The discrediting of the trade unions and the official left parties has enabled the parties of the radical left to acquire considerable influence.

Lutte Ouvrière and increasingly the LCR have become regular components of official French politics. In 2002, nearly ten percent of the electorate cast their votes for the presidential candidates of the two organisations—Arlette Laguiller and Olivier Besancenot. In this years presidential election, 1.5 million voters for Besancenot.

LO and LCR have used their authority to cover up the betrayal carried out by the trade unions and official left and nip in the bud any rebellion against these organizations. Had the LCR openly mobilized its forces against the trade unions and warned against the sell out, which was on the cards from the first day of the strike, it would have had a considerable effect on the course of the dispute. But they did the exact opposite and deliberately worked to head off any rebellion against the trade union bureaucracy.

One searches in vain in the statements of the LCR and LO for any criticism of the trade unions or any sort of initiative aimed at overcoming the paralyzing influence of these bureaucracies. The members of the party functioned as loyal trade unionists. SUD, in which the LCR has considerable influence, lent the sellout a stamp of legitimacy by its attendance at the negotiating table. Besancenot directed a number of appeals to the Socialist and Communist Parties to join with the LCR in support of the strike, although he was fully aware that these parties side with the government.

LO even went so far as to announce in the middle of the strike that for the first time in its history it intended to participate on joint lists with the Socialist Party in the forthcoming local elections. Under conditions in which strikers were confronted with the open hostility of the Socialist Party, LO sought to establish its solidarity with this organisation.

The utterly cynical and deliberate manner in which the LCR defends the bureaucracy was demonstrated in a public meeting held on October 22 in Paris. The meeting, featuring Olivier Besancenot as the main speaker, had been carefully prepared. Posters had been hung throughout Paris. In the event, around 2,000 assembled in the large hall of the Mutualité in the Latin Quarter.

One day previously, the trade unions had entered into negotiations with management and the government and on the morning of the 22nd most of the general assemblies of striking workers had voted to break off the strike. Nevertheless, Besancenot refrained from saying a single word about the betrayal of the trade unions and tried to portray the sellout as a success. He celebrated the strike as an expression of an unstoppable movement which will continue to grow and finally force Sarkozy to back down. The social movement was not at an end, it would continue and become permanent, he declared. Now the job was to "assemble the forces, to increase the pressure from the streets even more in order to rebuff the reforms":

This sort of hollow phrase mongering is the stock-in trade of every trade union bureaucrat. It is aimed at covering up one's own responsibility and clouding the waters when it comes to drawing political conclusions. The LCR is expert in this form of demagogy.

The LCR and LO are regularly described by the media as "extreme left" or "Trotskyist". In fact they are petty-bourgeois parties. Their Trotskyism is of an entirely fictional character. They have absolutely nothing in common with the theoretical and political heritage of the Trotskyist movement.

Forty years after the May-June events of 1968, these parties have emerged as a firm component of bourgeois political life with links to every corner of politics and the economy. Their worldview, their lifestyles and their social interests bind them inextricably with the bourgeoisie and its institutions. There are hundreds of former LCR members who have made successful careers in the sphere of official politics, business, culture and the universities without ever entirely severing contact with the party of their youth.

Anyone coming from Germany or America would be astonished at the

way in which Besancenot is treated by the French media. On November 19, he was interviewed in the middle of the rail workers strike at prime time for three quarters of an hour by the stations France Inter and i-Tele. His appearance was promoted by the newspaper *Le Monde* with a three column advertisement.

The French ruling elite is well aware of the vacuum that has opened up following the decline of the trade unions and the official left parties. This vacuum has to be filled urgently in order to forestall any revolutionary development. This is the job of the LO and LCR. There is nothing accidental in their behaviour. They are not centrist expressions of a movement to the left by workers and young people. They consciously contributed to the isolation and defeat of the strike, and their role had been factored in from the start.

LO never joined the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution created by Leon Trotsky. It always regarded the international organisation as an obstacle for its adaptation to the national environment of the trade unions.

The LCR is the French section of the Pabloite United Secretariat, which broke with the program of the Fourth International in 1953. It no longer regarded the working class as a revolutionary force and turned instead to the Stalinist and petty-bourgeois nationalist movements—such as the Algerian FLN, Fidel Castro, the Nicaraguan Sandinistas and their counterparts today, Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales. For many years, the LCR strove to establish an alliance with the French Communist Party. In so doing it was preparing to jump into the breach left behind by the decline of the Socialist Party.

In January, the LCR wants to create a new “anti-capitalist party”, which is explicitly reformist and has nothing to do with revolutionary politics. The new party will be a “militant” party, but “not an elitist avant-garde party”, Besancenot declared in the *Mutualité*. It would not be Trotskyist but rather draw from all traditions—libertarian, Trotskyist, Guevararist and Communist. The period, which began with the October Revolution of 1917, and ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union, was finally closed, he said. Now the job was to develop a “Socialism for the 21st century”. We live in a new period, which requires a new political program and new methods.

It is hardly possible to formulate a clearer rejection of the heritage of Trotskyism. Besancenot’s “anti-capitalist party” is strongly reminiscent of the German Left Party, the Italian *Rifondazione Comunista* and the Workers Party led by Lula in Brazil. All three were founded in response to a leftward development in the working class. All three betrayed the working class and assumed responsibility in bourgeois governments. And the local co-thinkers of the LCR participated in all three of them.

Olivier Besancenot is the living embodiment of everything that is foul and duplicitous in this new party. He was built up as the public face of the party by long time LCR leader Alain Krivine. His job is to give the organization a face lift and project the image of a young fresh worker earning his living by delivering the post. This is already a lie. This 33-year-old father has a university diploma as a historian and worked for two years as Krivine’s assistant in the European parliament. His part time postal job is entirely for propaganda purposes. As the husband of a woman who works as the well-paid literary director of a major publishing house, he is by no means forced to bring up his child on the meagre salary of a postman.

Besancenot is a typical media figure, who compensates for his ignorance and superficiality with a degree of eloquence. He has only contempt for the traditions of the Trotskyist movement. His role model for young people is the political opportunist and adventurer, Che Guevara, who caused many youth to turn their backs on the working class in favour of hopeless guerrilla warfare.

The working class is and remains the decisive revolutionary force in capitalist society. The strikes and protests in France are the herald of class

struggles throughout Europe. Increasing layers of the working class and youth no longer have any illusions in a peaceful improvement of their situation. This is clear from the courage and determination exhibited by the French rail workers who maintained their strike for a week in the face of solid political pressure and the sabotage of the trade unions.

The central problem remains, however, the question of political leadership. Further defeats are inevitable if the working class remains under the control of careerists and opportunists striving for their place in the political establishment.

The social and political situation is rapidly intensifying. The Iraq war, the global financial crisis and intensified international tensions are compelling the ruling class to introduce American conditions throughout Europe. Great power politics and militarism are incompatible with state-financed social programs; global competition cannot coexist with high levels of taxation and social security contributions. All obstacles to the unrestrained supremacy of the profit principle are to be swept aside. The most basic rights—jobs, education, insurance against sickness and old age, reasonable wages — are to be sacrificed on the altar of profit maximization and the enrichment of a tiny elite.

It is not possible to combat these attacks within the national framework. The working class must unite throughout Europe and the world. Across the globe it confronts the same problems and the same opponents.

In Germany, train drivers have taken strike action during the last six months for improved working conditions and wages. They confront a broad front of opposition comprising not only the government and management, but also the country’s major trade unions, the SPD and the Left Party, which are agitating against the demands of the train drivers and organizing open strike breaking.

A new political leadership must be developed on the basis of a genuine European and international perspective. The ruling class has long since organized itself along international lines. Behind Sarkozy stands the European Union and the European governments. The working class needs its own international organization. It cannot permit itself to be divided along national lines. It must pose the United Socialist States of Europe as its own alternative to the European Union of the banks and major corporations.

Increasing unemployment and social inequality can only be overcome by a socialist policy, which places human needs above the profit principle and converts the biggest and most important companies into the public hand.

The Socialist Equality Parties of Germany (PSG) and Britain (SEP) are sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), which was founded in 1953 to defend the traditions of Trotskyism from the opportunism of Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel. We call upon all workers and young people in France to turn to and take up the perspectives of the ICFI and build a section in France.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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