

# France: Low turnout for pension rights protest

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Less than half the expected number of demonstrators participated in protests in France on June 17 in defence of pension rights and against the deregulation of workers time. The poor mobilisation for the day of action—less than half the stated aim of a million demonstrators—is an indictment of the trade unions and their apologists on the “far left.”

A movement that had seen several one-day strikes of up to 2 million workers and nationwide demonstrations totalling millions against the Nicolas Sarkozy government’s policies of severe social regression has been deliberately wound down.

The two biggest trade union confederations, the CGT (General Confederation of Labour, close to the Communist Party) and the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour, close to the Socialist Party) organised the June 17 protests in a fraudulent attempt to cover for the betrayal perpetrated by their signing of the “common position” with the employers on April 9. This document proposed the “experimental” possibility of deregulated working hours in individual firms, which allowed employers to depart from national and industry-wide legal constraints. The signatories hoped this would pass unnoticed into law.

However, this opened the door to the draft law on union representation and working hours, published May 27, which openly and permanently dismantles essential parts of the labour code safeguarding working conditions with the trade-off that trade union privileges are enhanced. The undisguised nature of this attack on workers obliged the unions, in order to retain some credibility, to call the June 17 actions. After the May 22 mobilization they had expected to close down this year’s long series of dispersed protests against President Sarkozy’s programme of social regression until after the summer break.

The constant mantra of the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR) of Olivier Besancenot and *Lutte Ouvrière* of Arlette Laguiller—that the unions can be obliged by mass pressure to act in the interests of the working class—has been exposed as an utter fraud. Arlette Laguiller’s editorial in this week’s edition of *Lutte Ouvrière* clearly expressed the bankrupt line of both organisations when she wrote: “The anger which will finally burst forth will force the hand of the trade union leaders and will then be able to fully mobilise against the government and the employers.”

Exactly the opposite has taken place. The unions have done all in their power to demobilise the growing discontent against the government’s regressive policies.

Perhaps the most blatant act of sabotage of the day of action itself was the decision of the CGT not to call the rail and Paris transport workers out on strike June 17, despite the fact that they are at the centre of the fight for the defence of pension rights and struck for some 15 days last October and November in defence of their special pension schemes. The CGT had only issued a strike notice for the day to provide legal cover for individual workers who might wish to act: in order to “allow rail workers to take part in the demonstrations.”

Whereas strikes and demonstrations against Sarkozy’s social

programme since he was elected in May last year have involved millions, this day of action, according to inflated CGT estimates, put 500,000 onto the streets throughout France. The real tally could be half to a third of this. WSWs reporting teams observed much reduced numbers in Paris and Amiens.

According to official figures, only 7 percent struck at the post office, 11 percent at France Télécom, 7 percent on the railways, and 2.6 percent in the public education service. Participation was much higher on the May 22 mobilisation on pensions, when one in four workers on the SNCF national railways went on strike, one in two trains were cancelled and strike support was much higher in other sectors as well. On May 15, when the same union bodies had limited protests to government workers and the issue of job cuts in education and the civil service, between a third and a half of all teachers as well as over a million government and local government workers struck.

The low participation on June 17 was a consequence of a deliberate tactic on the part of the unions of separating the issues of jobs and pensions in order to keep control of the movement and prevent it from politically challenging the government. The low turnout represents a massive disavowal of the trade unions by the French working class, whose hostility to the Sarkozy government’s social policies has grown to a point where the president’s approval rating has sunk from the high 60s to 33 percent.

Demonstrators interviewed by the WSWs unanimously condemned the dispersal of the movement by the trade unions and expressed an urgent need for united action of the working class and youth against the government’s policies. Many were not aware that the CGT and the CFDT had signed the “common position” with the employers’ organisations. They were keen to read the account in the statement distributed by WSWs supporters on the protests. (See “France: Break with the trade union collaborators of Sarkozy! Build an independent socialist movement of the working class!”)

*Le Monde* on June 17 interviewed Dominique Labbé, a teacher-researcher at the Grenoble Institute of Political Studies. Asked whether the CGT and the CFDT had been discredited in the eyes of the rank and file by signing the agreement, he replied: “Yes, but I think there is disappointment with the attitude these trade unions have had since 2003 and the pension reform. The CFDT said one day that it was in agreement with the extension of the contribution period [for entitlement to a full pension], then the next day said the opposite. The position is indecipherable. As for the CGT, it gave way quite easily on the reform of the special pension schemes last autumn. These two organisations are paying the price today...it’s certainly demobilised the workers a lot; they can’t mobilise people who think they haven’t been supported.”

The poor response to the unions’ June 17 call was benevolently characterised by most of the media as a “semi-setback” and by the Socialist Party (PS) as a “significant” mobilisation. Though the PS eventually declared support for the protest, leading members were

reportedly “conspicuous by their absence” on the Paris demonstration.

The reduced mobilisation was immediately seized upon by the camp of President Sarkozy as a signal that the way was clear to proceed quickly with the legislation dismantling the 35-hour week.

The right-wing *Figaro* crowed: “Above all it’s a sign that Nicolas Sarkozy has won a major psychological victory: showing that France is no longer the unreformable country which people have been describing to us for 30 years.... He worked the dialogue ploy as long as he could, never forgetting the key issue: the absolute necessity of getting out of the status quo with the 35 hours.”

*Figaro* wonders: “Has the *ménage à trois* between the Elysée, the CFDT and the CGT broken up?” after it had “given birth to several reforms.” The paper points out that, according to a UMP member (governing Union for a Popular Movement), the risk had to be taken in order for Minister of Labour Xavier Bertrand to “toughen up his image, and to get close to the electoral base of the UMP.”

The former UMP minister of labour, Gérard Larcher, hoped that soon it would be business as usual with the habitually compliant CFDT: “Everything’s been going so well these last 18 months! It’s up to the government to show that the relationship of trust which ties [CFDT-leader] François Chérèque to it is not over-stretched.”

*La Tribune* commented: “The trade unions bark and the caravan passes by.... The trade unions’ new failure yesterday will enable the executive to advance.”

*Ouest-France* affirmed that “Nicolas Sarkozy had, quite remarkably, got the social dialogue going when he got to the Elysée. Back in motion, social democracy had even facilitated and achieved unexpected advances.” In the recent manoeuvres with the CGT and the CFDT “the government was, in the short term, playing a winning game. It had weakened and partially broken up the trade union front. The way is now wide open to circumvent at will the 35 hours.”

The CGT and CFDT leaders both blamed the public sector workers for the poor turnout. *Figaro* reports that CGT-leader Bernard Thibault, “in order to explain the smaller mobilisation than he hoped (he had put out the figure of a million demonstrators), and to justify the fact that the numbers of his troops had been inferior to those of the CFDT, recalled that the government workers had already demonstrated last week.”

A CFDT leader on the demonstration likewise opined, “It’s because the public sector feels that the 35 hours do not concern them.” Gerard Aschiéri of the FSU education union federation implied that this sector had stayed away because they had struck the previous week.

CGT leaders sought self-justification by implying that the leaders of the Force Ouvrière (FO) union were just as much scoundrels as themselves. *Figaro* June 17 reports: “Other CGT officials, furious with FO, denounced ‘the calculations of a shopkeeper’, i.e., of FO’s general secretary Jean-Claude Mailly. ‘If we were to count up the agreements allowing non-compliance on the question of overtime, signed by FO at the plant level, you would need more than 10 fingers.’”

After the June 17 protests, the CGT and CFDT both called off any action by the working class until after the summer holiday period. CFDT-leader François Chérèque said: “We want to get back to dialogue.” Thibault promised a “tumultuous return to work” after the holidays and gave October 7 as the next mobilisation. This allows the government to take the law through its parliamentary procedures unhampered by any mass actions: the bill will be debated in the National Assembly June 24, put to the vote June 26 and, using the emergency procedure, go through the Senate in mid-July.

Thibault observed in *Nouvel Observateur* June 17 that the government “is acting quickly to outmanoeuvre us” and threatened toothlessly, having demobilised the troops, that “if he uses emergency procedures we will take action notably with the deputies.”

WSWS reporters spoke to workers on the Paris demonstration.

Xavier, who works in Val-de-Marne, sees working conditions getting worse. “That’s why I’m on the street,” he said. “I don’t think we can win if the different sections of the working class and youth react separately. We must have a united strike. I’m neither in the CFDT nor the CGT. I’m demonstrating against that draft law, not with those unions. But, for the moment, it’s they who give me the possibility of demonstrating. It’s a shame that there is no unity between the unions, the private and public sector workers and the students.

“In 2003, the government showed that if they want to legislate they’ll do it whatever.... There are fewer and fewer people in the street and in the unions. That’s the fault of the unions perhaps. Perhaps we’re falling asleep. We’ll have to do something about that. Our democracy is getting less and less democratic. The unions are not trying to bring down the government.

“The left is not acting to bring down the government either; it’s taking a soft line to get people behind it. The attacks we’re suffering in France are international. In general the world is in a bad way, but the more things are bad the more some people are doing fine. Sarkozy’s policies are international, we need an international struggle.”

Xavier put some hope in Olivier Besancenot of the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire: “Besancenot does not mince his words. He says things you don’t hear on the main media. He speaks of struggles and the democratic rights that are being destroyed and things you might hear in conversations at home or at work. But I wonder where that guy might end up once he got into power.”

Martin Blanc, 18, is a pupil at Saint Sernin high school in Toulouse. He said, “The trade unions seem to have lost hope in bringing about a fundamental change. But with all the people who are taking action you can see it’s possible. We must get back to socialist values and stop following the unions. If we don’t fight it’s going to be catastrophic.”

Yannick, 39, works in Vitry-sur-Seine. After being told about the “common position,” he said, “At present, you don’t know where you stand on a lot of things. My parents and grandparents fought to have advances. With today’s government you can see that we’re losing everything. We’re going back to the Middle Ages. We must be all together: the same place, the same day and everything shut down for the government really to respond. Why are the trade unions collaborating? They are the ones to answer that. In Europe we’re stymied. China’s developing; there is the US. Everyone should get together, rail workers, fishermen, teachers. For me winning means getting our advances back, our purchasing power.”

François Lefèvre, 35, was on a small demonstration of just over 1,000 in Amiens. He has worked for eight years at EDF, the state electricity utility that is being privatised, and cited this as his principal reason for demonstrating. He said: “There is no clear policy as far as energy suppliers go. There are private companies like Suez. We are no longer a public service. All that counts is productivity, the shareholders, and figures. The social side is left out.

“True, it’s hard to tell the difference between the unions and the bosses with this ‘common position.’ The union does not pass on all that’s being done. The union members are not informed. Agreements are signed without issues being resolved. To win means to tax profits; lay hold of all those billions in profits and redistribute them for pensions, etc. I don’t think Sarkozy will back down. We’ve already seen it.

“As long as the working class is caught by its debts, it won’t go onto the streets. We can’t win at a national level. There must be a world where there is fair trade, get back to social values. The working class has to mobilise on the same scale as the World Trade Organisation.”

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