

French union leaders seek to wind down opposition to pension cuts

By Alex Lantier and Kumaran Ira
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In the run-up to today's one-day national protest against the pension cuts of President Nicolas Sarkozy, union leaders signaled they did not support continuing opposition to the cuts. Even though many workers remain on strike and opposition to Sarkozy's pension law remains profound, the unions are urging the end of strike action against the cuts and moving to isolate workers who remain on strike against them.

As with last month's port and oil workers strike and high-school protest movement, the unions are moving to isolate strikers and discourage attendance at today's protests—even though they themselves have organized them.

Significant sections of workers are continuing strikes in protest of the law, which was passed in the teeth of mass popular hostility: over 70 percent of the population opposed the cuts.

Garbage workers in suburbs of Paris remain on strike. The incinerator in Saint-Ouen, near Paris, has been occupied since Wednesday—joining the garbage incineration facility at Ivry-sur-Seine, which has been on strike since October 21.

Since yesterday morning, workers have blockaded a logistics platform in PACA region, supplying fresh goods to Carrefour stores. They are protesting against poor working conditions and the elimination of benefits by their employers.

Strike is also planned next week at the Jobs Pole national employment center, whose management announced recently 1,800 jobs cuts by the end of 2011. The nationwide strike has been called to protest against deteriorating working conditions and rising workloads.

In Lyon, employees of the city council working in school canteens have been on strike for three weeks, protesting against bad working conditions and low wages. They are also calling for additional staff.

Universities in several cities, including Toulouse and

Lyon, remain blockaded.

Far from seeking to build on this opposition to appeal for broader working-class support, however, the unions are abandoning protests and opening negotiations with business leaders.

In a press statement released late Thursday, the unions pledged to “pursue joint work on jobs, wages, purchasing power, and working conditions.” At the same time, several unions—the French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT), the French Christian Workers Confederation (CFTC), and Workers Force (FO)—have already scheduled talks with the business federation Medef (Movement of French Enterprises). Such negotiations can only produce further social cuts.

Yesterday, union officials made statements aiming to wind down ongoing protests against the pensions law.

CFDT leader François Chérèque declared, “We are going to unfortunately move away bit by bit” from the subject of pensions.

He wrote off opposition to Sarkozy as hopeless: “If I say today, ‘We’re going to get the President of the Republic to back down,’ no one would believe me. They would say, ‘That one, he’s dreaming.’” Instead, Chérèque said his goal was to “open spaces of negotiation with business leaders.”

He suggested that the only way to oppose Sarkozy's pension cuts was by electing a government of the bourgeois “left.” Speaking of pensions, he said “we will continue to speak of them ... in 2012,” the year of the next presidential election.

National Union of Autonomous Trade Unions (UNSA) leader Jean Grosset warned against “methods of action that would not correspond to the situation,” and might lead the unions to “inflict a serious defeat upon themselves.”

General Confederation of Labor (CGT) rail official Didier Le Reste expressed “a bit of anger” at the unions’

decision, which he said could have been “firmer.”

However, CGT leader Bernard Thibault declared that the movement was going through a “period of doubt.” He said he supported “more decentralized, polymorphic protests.”

That is, Thibault intends for the CGT to organize no broad sympathy action for workers still on strike against Sarkozy’s cuts. This is in line with Thibault’s isolation of last month’s oil and port strike, despite repeated strike-breaking by riot police, against which the CGT and other unions took no action. In other words, strikers are again to be stabbed in the back.

The unions no more want large protests or a powerful political appeal to emerge from today’s protest marches than do Sarkozy and his aides. All are hoping for a low turnout, to declare popular opposition to the cuts to be “over.”

The defeatism of the unions is not a response to any rise in popular support for Sarkozy’s policies, which remain as unpopular as ever. Sarkozy’s approval ratings stand at 31 percent, according to *Le Parisien*’s polls, and polls have repeatedly shown support of 65 to 70 percent for strike action against the cuts.

The unions fear that a genuine struggle against Sarkozy would be successful and would create rising expectations among the masses, producing a political movement they could not control. They are therefore signaling their hostility to demonstrations they have themselves called. According to experts interviewed by the media, the union leaders expected this outcome: they never intended to defeat Sarkozy’s cuts in the first place.

Jean-Marie Pernot of the Institute for Economic and Social Research told *Le Monde* that the “trade unions are very mature ... The end of the mobilization is taking place without any disappointment, as everyone had anticipated that the government would not budge.” Nonetheless, Pernot claimed that such an outcome would not signify that the movement “has failed,” and would even constitute a “symbolic defeat for Nicolas Sarkozy.”

Such comments indicate the social gulf separating the working class from the unions and their supporters among the official political parties. It underlines the central reason for Sarkozy’s ability to push through his cuts despite massive strikes and popular opposition: the unions waged no serious struggle. These demonstrations aim not to bring down the Sarkozy government, but to inflict “symbolic” rebuffs and help the bourgeois “left” Socialist Party (PS) beat Sarkozy in 2012, after the cuts have passed.

This underscores the correctness of the *World Socialist Web Site*’s call for workers to form independent committees of action to take the struggle out of the hands of the unions, to prepare mass political strikes to bring down the Sarkozy government and fight for a workers’ government based on socialist policies.

In the absence of a real struggle, however, the unions are allowing the state to defeat the working class and implicitly supporting the PS’s 2012 campaign. This is a betrayal, as it is well understood in political circles that the PS is preparing massive austerity measures against the workers, in line with social cuts carried out by social-democratic governments in Greece and Spain.

University of Reims political science professor Rémi Lefebvre told *Le Monde*: “The PS has overall done quite well from these strikes. It has symbolically repaired its break with the unions and won back legitimacy in the social movement.” This is a somewhat euphemistic reference to the fact that, after the fall of the PS government of Lionel Jospin in 2002, the PS was so hated for its privatizations and other right-wing policies that its leaders could not attend strikes or protest marches.

While it maintains a few spokespeople to manage its relations with the unions, like Benoît Hamon, the bulk of the PS is preparing austerity measures for a future government.

Le Monde explained: “On one side, the left wing led by Benoît Hamon, wants to ‘stick’ to the social movement; on the other, social-democrats like François Hollande, Manuel Valls, or Gérard Collomb argue for ‘necessary realism.’ ... They know it will be very hard to follow Nicolas Sarkozy and they want to speak truthfully.”

In recent months, these officials have made repeated calls for cuts in pensions and other social spending. (See, “Socialist Party leaders call for austerity policies”)

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