

Strikes in France elicit support from German workers

By Verena Nees
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The strikes against the reactionary labour law of the Socialist Party government of President Hollande have triggered two very different reactions in Germany: on the one hand, support and sympathy among workers and youth; on the other, horror, anger, anti-communist attacks and anti-French tirades by the mainstream media.

For weeks, the major media outlets, television and radio stations have tried to avoid covering the events in France or have dismissed them merely as a youth revolt and a few skirmishes by the CGT (Stalinist General Confederation of Labour) union with the police.

However, when the strikes expanded against social attacks last week—with tens of thousands taking to the streets in France along with thousands in Belgium—the news blackout in Germany proved hard to maintain.

On May 26, *Spiegel-Online* expressed the concerns of the German political elite with this development. Under the headline, “France on the barricades,” the article bemoans the “chaotic situation” in the neighbouring country. The report cites the “fearful” question on the front page of daily *Le Parisien*: “Facing total paralysis?” and points to the result of an Ifop survey, according to which two thirds of French people expect “a social explosion” in the coming months.

At the same time, *Der Spiegel* and other newspapers tried to stir up sentiments among its readers against the French workers. Two weeks before the European football championship, the magazine claimed power was being shut off and fuel becoming scarce.

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), the ideological house organ of the German bourgeoisie, reacted particularly fiercely. Its Paris correspondent, Michaela Wiegel, angrily denounced the strikes. “It is only a radical minority that is making France hold its breath with street protests and bonfires,” she wrote

toxically on May 26. The CGT had set out on a “rampage against the labour law reforms.” But most French presidents would fail “when the barricades start to burn.”

Even President Hollande knows “how much his country is [still] influenced by the heritage of the French Revolution.” But Hollande was at an end, he was “too weak to pick a fight with the radical minority of the CGT strikers,” wrote Wiegel.

For the *FAZ*, the brutality of the CRS riot police against the workers’ roadblocks and pickets in recent days, causing several casualties, was not harsh enough. There is no doubt that the German ruling class is preparing to impose massive state repression should German workers fight for their rights as the French are presently doing.

Right-wing tabloid *Die Welt* published a vicious tirade against the French workers and youth. “A new 1968? No, just a revolt by the narrow-minded,” writes Sascha Lehnartz. The protests—the paper did not want to use the words “strike” and “workers”—were a sign of stagnation. In France, every government reform is blocked by “obdurate trade unionists,” a “crypto-communist organisation” and students that can be “easily whipped up.” The latter were thus ruining their futures, Lehnartz writes cynically.

The “citizens are again rehearsing an uprising,” he writes, and probably to reassure himself, “Whether it is...a mass movement, may be doubted.”

The opinion polls tell a different story: A large majority of the French population have solidarised themselves with the strikes and are demanding the withdrawal of the anti-working class El Khomri law, which is what really points to the precarious future for young people.

What haunts Lehnartz is the fact that the mood of

1968 is indeed in the air. However, there is a big difference from that time: Not only is the social divide much deeper now, but the old trade union apparatuses, including the CGT, and the social democratic and Stalinist parties, have far less influence on workers than in 1968, when they sold out the revolutionary movement. A new and powerful European movement of the working class is beginning to form that goes beyond these old corrupt organisations.

That is what Lehnartz, Wiegel and Co. fear, in Germany as well.

And rightly so, as the online responses to the WSWS reportage from France and the *Spiegel* report attest. “Respect for the Belgians and French!!” writes one person in a Facebook group where he posted a WSWS article. “At least they are defending themselves against the governments controlled by big business!!! Keep it up!!!” Another wishes that “This finally spills over here too.”

On Thursday morning, when *Der Spiegel* posted its report online at 8:25 a.m., the readers’ comments followed in a torrent. By the next morning, the article had received more than 500 comments, the vast majority expressing their solidarity with the French workers. “My respect for the French. While they take to the streets and really cause a stir, in Germany the Hartz4 [labour reforms] are discussed in forums and those responsible reelected,” reads the first comment.

A few minutes later: “Well, if only we had acted the same way before the agreement of our Agenda 2010 [reforms].” One reader cheers, “Vive la France” and “Keep it up dear neighbours. Fight against the liberalisation mania. The consequences of Agenda 2010 are clear. Millions dependent on benefits and temporary workers. The rich got richer, the poor get poorer.”

Another complained about the media: “The strike began on March 31. ... But no news from the German press. And now?? Ohhh, strike before the World Cup [sic]!! Is this information important?? Extended arm of the Communists!! Is that important?? The article [by *Der Spiegel*] is totally lacking substance.”

One soccer fan remarked: “Whether it’s France or Brazil...these countries, Europe and probably the world face quite different problems than these ridiculous and probably corrupt major events in the coming months. I am a passionate football fan, but I can live without this

European Championship, while so many other conflicts must be carried out.”

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