

Despite mounting opposition, French unions signal concessions on labor law

By Alex Lantier
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Despite increasingly militant opposition in the working class to the Socialist Party's (PS) regressive labor law, French trade unions are signaling that they will capitulate and accept key provisions of the law in response to the PS' intransigent stance.

Last week, Prime Minister Manuel Valls threatened to ban protests called by the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union in major French cities. This unprecedented step underscored that the state of emergency imposed after the November 13 terror attacks in Paris is above all aimed at suppressing opposition in the working class to the European Union's (EU) austerity agenda.

Valls repeated and amplified this threat yesterday in a bellicose interview in the *Journal du Dimanche*, smearing workers and union officials protesting the labor law as rioters. "Given the situation, the violence that is taking place, the appalling attack against the police couple [killed last week in Magnanville] and also the Euro football tournament, the organizers should themselves cancel these gatherings," Valls said. "It's only common sense."

He called on the CGT to "get out of this dead end," adding, "it's a fact: union officials can act with rioters. That's unacceptable. Protest organizers do not want to act responsibly, to clearly oppose the violence. If we find that these protests again pose a threat to the security forces and public property, then the government will do its duty."

With these remarks, Valls demonstrated his contempt not only for constitutionally-protected rights to strike and protest, but for the opinions of the broad mass of the population, which is bitterly hostile to the PS' labor law. Even official polls found that, after the PS rammed it through the National Assembly, using an emergency measure to impose it without a formal vote, between 60

and 64 percent of the population want the PS to withdraw the law.

Precisely as opposition to the PS is mounting, and after broad participation in last Tuesday's nationwide protests, however, the CGT is offering broad concessions to the PS government. This was the substance of talks on Friday between CGT General Secretary Philippe Martinez and PS Labor Minister Myriam El Khomri, who is tasked with overseeing the progress of the law through the chambers of parliament.

Previously, the CGT had criticized a key measure of the labor law, a provision allowing for unions and bosses to negotiate contracts at the level of individual firms that violate industry-level contracts and provisions of the national Labor Code. This would make official the role of the trade union bureaucracy as pro-business labor contractors, trampling labor legislation to impose speed-up and cuts to wages and benefits in line with employers' profit requirements.

As he left the talks with El Khomri on Friday, Martinez suggested that they had been essentially a stalemate. "There are points of disagreement between the CGT and the government on substantive points," he said, "and these disagreements were confirmed today."

El Khomri reported, however, that there had been substantial discussion of the CGT's attitude towards the law. While she and Martinez had "not found a consensus," El Khomri said, "we had a constructive exchange, that was carefully argued, on the primary importance we intend to give to firm-level contracts."

CGT position papers leaked, however, and it was soon widely reported that the CGT is abandoning calls for a withdrawal of the law. Instead, it is beginning to set conditions for agreeing to the most controversial section of the labor law, which allows unions and

bosses to sign contracts violating industry-level or national labor legislation.

“Individual industries will define, within legal limits, the possible margin of negotiation in enterprises. ... [Either] Firm-level agreements will be negotiated in limits set by the industry level contract and will have to be approved by trade unions representing a majority of workers. Or firms will want to obtain exceptions to the framework set by the industry-level contract, respecting legal limits. In this case, a request will be addressed by the industry-level commission, which will verify its legality and appropriateness,” the CGT paper proposed.

While the CGT is maintaining, at least for now, its calls for protests on June 23 and 28, it is maneuvering desperately to engineer a sellout. It is ever more obvious that the conflict between the contending position of the working class, on the one hand, and of the PS government and behind it the bulk of the French and European ruling class, on the other, is irreconcilable. This has undermined the positions of the CGT and pseudo-left political organizations close to it, such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s Left Front and the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA).

As part of its explicit repudiation of social revolution after the Stalinist bureaucracy’s dissolution of the USSR, the CGT has long openly declared that it carries out “social dialog” with the bosses to find “propositions” acceptable to them and to the government. It is now quite obvious, however, that the only things Valls and the PS intend to negotiate with the CGT are terms of surrender. As such, the CGT is now seeking to find some way of packaging a sellout.

The working class, on the other hand, is indicating by its struggle that it requires and is objectively ready for a different type of leadership: revolutionary parties that mobilize the broad opposition to the PS and to the EU’s entire austerity agenda among workers across Europe in a political struggle for socialism. After nearly a decade of escalating economic crisis and political discontent, conditions are ripe for the explosion of political mass strikes and revolutionary struggles across Europe.

The CGT, the Stalinist-dominated Left Front, and the NPA are united in their opposition to such a perspective. They are longstanding allies of the PS, supported it in the 2012 elections, calling for a vote for François Hollande as president, and organized no

meaningful opposition to his austerity measures for four years, until youth protests erupted against the labor law this spring. Broad layers of workers sense they are part of the status quo, despite their criticisms of the PS.

These organizations were aware of divisions inside the ruling class over the law, and likely hoped to exploit them to obtain minor concessions from the government that they could try to package to workers as a victory. Indeed, the CGT’s proposals to El Khomri on firm-level contracts echo objections by Martine Aubry, a PS heavyweight who wrote an editorial together with German Green parliamentarian Daniel Cohn-Bendit bitterly criticizing the Hollande government. One point in the editorial was an attack on the labor law.

The editorial called for limiting the attack on industry-level contracts contained in the labor law. It warned that imposing massive wage and benefit cuts in one firm after another in an industry could unleash an uncontrollable race to the bottom in workers’ living standards that would be financially destabilizing for business and politically explosive. “Workers will face constant wage blackmail,” they wrote, “and enterprises will suffer from distorted competition, whereas industry-level contracts unify business conditions in a same industry.”

The CGT’s proposal would somewhat address this objection, by giving unions at the industry level control over cuts made to workers’ wages and conditions at each individual firm—giving businesses a somewhat clearer picture of of price conditions across supply chains.

Such a proposal itself would offer nothing but the prospect of further social attacks on the workers. It is increasingly obvious, however, that the PS government does not intend to adopt the proposals of Aubry or of the CGT, and that the only way forward for workers in struggle against the PS labor law is to take the struggle out of the hands of the pseudo-left parties and the union bureaucracy.

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