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The Crisis in France

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For months working people all over

Europe have been mobilizing — more or less successfully — to defend their livelihoods against austerity measures imposed by the central banks. On the pretext of a sudden and exaggerated panic over the debt, European capital is imposing a take-back of whatever social advances working people may previously have won in terms of salaries, job security, public services, health, retirement and unemployed benefits. These austerity measures are embodied in directives from the European Union and IMF, and the required cuts are being imposed by governments of both Right and Left. (Greece's Papandreou and Spain's Zapatero are both Socialists).

Popular resistance has been strong: Greece was in turmoil for most of the Spring, and September 29 was marked by a one-day general strike in Spain as well as a mass international demonstration at European Union headquarters in Brussels. Nowhere has this conflict been sharper than here in France, where an undefeated, un-Thatcherized working class conscious of its long revolutionary traditions has for months been defying the rigid right-wing government of Nicolas Sarkozy with a series of nationwide general strikes and massive demonstrations of historic dimensions.



Eerily Quiet Streets

However, as I write these lines, things are eerily quiet here in Montpellier, with stores closed, highways un-crowded and city streets near-empty. Alas, the reason for this vacuity has nothing (and everything) to do with the mass agitation and national strikes over pension cuts that have brought France to the brink of crisis over the past few weeks. Today is le Toussaint, an obscure Roman Catholic festival (think Tishibov) celebrated as a National Holiday by the officially secular French Republic with a three-day weekend and a

two-week school vacation. The French, 90% of whom never see the inside of a (tax supported) Catholic church, are nonetheless a pious people, and Vacances (vacation) is the name of the god they worship.

This disappointing dénouement to the tension that has been building here for months was alas all too predictable, and the Sarkozy government was openly counting on the vacances-effect when it deliberately brought the crisis to a boil by rushing the final version of the pension-reform law through the Senate last week, creating a fait-accompli. The angry, determined, consciously anti-capitalist social movement that has been coming to a boil for months has now dispersed, and it is difficult to imagine it resuming with the same intensity ten days hence. On the other hand, Olivier Besancenot of the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) is confident the movement will 'rebound' on Saturday Nov. 6, when the unions have programmed yet another one-day nationwide mobilization.

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Be that as it may, last Thursday's national strike/demonstration (Oct. 28), much less well-attended than the previous six, already had something autumnal and valedictory about it. It was of course the seventh in the series of spaced one-day general strikes orchestrated by the leaderships of the various French union federations (CGT, FO, CFDT, CFTC, Sud-Solidaires). This stop-and-go strategy of 'attrition' has mainly served to 'let off steam' — rather than building up the pressure against the arrogant, intransigent Right-wing government of the much-hated Sarkozy; it may well have run out of steam, as I feared it would in my first report. Nonetheless, the level of anti-capitalist consciousness, self-organization, inter-professional and inter-generational solidarity attained by this mass movement has reached historic levels with over three million in the streets. This experience will not be forgotten...

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What Kind of Society?

What I love about the French is that although more than two thirds have consistently voiced support for the demonstrators and strikers (despite real inconveniences like closed gas stations and cancelled commuter trains) only 43% actually agree with their goal — withdrawal of the 'reforms'. Remember when U.S. liberals used to condemn our anti-war and Civil Rights protests with bullshit about 'I agree with your goals, but object to your methods'? Here the public approves of the radical means, even when they don't really believe in the goal! What this not-so-silent French majority is saying to Sarkozy is simple: 'Don't play us for fools. We know you're a bunch of corrupt politicians and super-rich profiteers, and we refuse to work until we die to pay off your gambling debts while you dine with bankers at Fouquet's and go off on their yacht.'

This was precisely how the arrogant President-elect celebrated his 2005 election victory (snubbing his own Party's celebration), and Sarkozy's open contempt of democracy has not been forgotten. 'Take a good look at your Rolex: it's time for revolt!' is a popular slogan. The French — both Right and Left — are very conscious of their history, and this sense of history reinforces the very open class-consciousness — and class hostility — on both sides. Ancestral memories of civil wars between sans-culottes and aristos are part of French identity. Indeed, the word 'guillotine' has recently been bandied about (Sarkozy famously boasting it was out of style).

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Obviously, these strikes have been about much more than pension cuts — which in any case are generally perceived as the first of many such 'reforms' all designed to definitively tear up the post-WWII 'social contract' between labor and capital. 'Dignity' is the word on everyone's lips. 'If I can be tried as an adult at 13,' reads a sign held by a high school student 'I'm old enough to demonstrate at 16.'

La Grogne (generalized popular grumbling) has been in the air for months, as the pleasure-loving French see their lives getting worse under this neo-liberal offensive. The economic slogan of the Sarkozy administration is 'Work More, Earn More,' but work has become hell for thousands of employees through the introduction of Kafka-esque management techniques designed to isolate each individual worker and make her personally responsible for constantly receding, arbitrary 'goals.' This management-imposed sense of failure, combined with arbitrary re-assignments designed to de-skill and de-professionalize employees, has led to more and more frequent suicides in the Post Office and the Electric company, where my neighbor, a highly skilled line-man proud to work way up on high-tension transmission pylons, got transferred to a humiliating job behind a computer keyboard with a 70-minute daily commute from his home. In 'Suffering at Work,' a book and TV documentary, prominent psychiatrist Christophe Dejours revealed how French management uses psychological pressure to destabilize its employees and literally drives them crazy.

At stake ultimately for the French is the question of what kind of society they want to live in: a society based on social solidarity or one based on 'greed-is-good' individualism? The demonstrators' answer to Sarko's 'Work More, Earn More' is 'Work Less, Live Better.' Like Britain's Thatcher in the '80s, the French President is aggressively provoking class war from the top down in order to break the resistance of the working classes and impose the neo-liberal agenda once and for all. With two or three million in the streets and 70% against him in the polls, the French people are telling Sarko: Fous le camp, pauvre con! ('Fuck off, Little Prick!').

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The Class-Conscious French

Another thing I love about France is the clarity with which class interests get articulated in the political arena (as opposed to the U.S. where bankers and bus drivers are all 'middle class'). Since 1789 (and on through the revolutionary struggles of 1830, 1848, 1871, 1936 and 1968) France has been an ideal 'Marxist laboratory' for the study of class conflict. Today, France is basically still ruled by the legendary '200 Families' — a restrictive caste of landed aristocrats intermarried with industrialists and bankers who live in exclusive neighborhoods, graduate from elite schools, belong to exclusive clubs etc. It expands slowly by marriage, merger and cooptation and is almost impossible to penetrate from the outside.

This financial and industrial oligarchy, today represented by Sarkozy and the MEDEF (Chamber of Commerce) has been tightly organized since the 19th Century, when it used its influence on the state not just to discipline labor but to grant French industrialists profitable arms contracts at higher than world-market prices. In June 1936, this tight little oligarchy had the shit scared out of them when a wave of sit-in strikes broke out all over France upon the election of a Popular Front government led by Socialist Leon Blum. Blum immediately negotiated a compromise including the 40 hour week and France's first paid vacations, and from then on, it was 'Better Hitler than Blum' as far as the '200 Families' were concerned. This attitude (reinforced by traditional French Right-wing, anti-Semitic nationalism) goes a long way toward explaining France's 1940 military debacle and the willing (and profitable) collaboration of French industrialists with the Nazi occupiers while thousands of French workers were being deported to slave labor in Germany. Yet today, Sarkozy's party brazenly dares advertize itself as the 'Shameless Right.'

The oligarchy had a lot to answer for in 1944-45 when France was liberated. The Resistance took power under the Gaullist-Communist coalition, and collaborators were being tried and sometimes executed. Some big industries were nationalized, but there was no general expropriation of collaborators' property. The Communists, under orders from Moscow, supported de Gaulle in saving France for capitalism, but at a price. The elite was forced to agree to the 'social pact,' and the French Constitution that emerged from the Liberation defined France as a 'social republic' under which workers have economic rights and where salaries are defined as including both cash and a 'social salary' of defined benefits — including retirement.

These benefits are considered constitutional rights, and since the return to power of the Right in 1995, working people all over France have been fighting a rear-guard action to preserve them. The issue is clear to all: Sarkozy and the MEDEF are out to replace the social republic with the dictatorship of the market, that is to say of the banks. At last Thursday's demo here in Montpellier I saw a little boy

carrying a sign that read *La Bourse ou la Vie* ('Your Purse or Your Life') with a play on the word *Bourse* ('Purse') which also means 'The Stock Exchange.' (He told me his father helped him).

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Politics Rears its Ugly Head

Rather than gloating over his apparent victory, Sarkozy has for once remained low key. With a view toward the 2012 election, the paternalistic President is now hinting he might make a few unilateral changes in the pension law (which cruelly punishes women, who typically are out of the labor force for several years of child-bearing and might not be eligible to retire until 70.)

Meanwhile, with the angry French masses forced to wait until the 2012 election to dethrone their hated President, the Socialist Party seems to be emerging as the other 'winner' in this crisis. Sarkozy's potential Socialist presidential rivals, Ségolène Royale and Martine Aubry, have recently promised to abrogate the pension cuts if elected in 2012 – forgetting that they had previously accepted the cuts as inevitable (with minor modifications). The other Socialist presidential contender, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, has made no such promise. In 2007 on Sarkozy's recommendation he was named President of the IMF responsible for imposing these and similar austerity cuts on the European level.

Thus the official Left plays party politics, using the strikers and demonstrators as pawns on the electoral checkerboard. The millions of angry workers and youth in the streets were not thinking about 2012 when they told the 'Little Prick' to 'Fuck Off.' On Sept. 23, at the height of the movement in Paris, there was talk of coming back the next day, surrounding the National Assembly and bringing down the government. Didn't strikers topple Juppé's government in 1995 and Villepin's in 2006? Didn't their great-great-grandmothers march with their kitchen-knives to the Palace at Versailles in 1789 and drag the King and Queen back to Paris? However, the CGT vetoed this move on the grounds that it would be too 'political' (!) Militants were advised to lobby their representatives back in their constituencies (although they were all in Paris, the Assembly being in session). I guess there's 'politics' and politics.

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Whom Do Union Leaders Represent?

Thus, the union leaders have once again, as in 2003 and 2007, managed to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory by tactics designed to

disperse and dissipate, rather than unite the energies of three million militant working people and students backed by the huge majority of the population. How do they get away with these repeated sell-outs? If one were paranoid, one might even imagine the union leaders who imposed these defeatist tactics on the mass movement were actually 'in the pay of the government!'

Technically speaking they are. In France full-time officers and staff of the various union federations (Communist, Socialist, Christian etc.) are entitled to government-funded salaries as well as professional expenses and something like civil servant status. French 'pork-choppers' are paid on the basis, not of their actual dues-paying union memberships (which on the average are down to U.S. levels), but of the number of votes their union gets in work-place elections. Union reps may thus be seen as functionaries serving as transmission-belts between groups of employees and government or management.

In case of conflict, these union bureaucrats represent their federations on the intersyndical (inter-union committee) where, through various compromises between more or less militant unions, they come to agreement on both the objectives and the tactics of national (or for that matter local) actions. It is this highly bureaucratized intersyndical that has called this series of one-day national strikes cum mass demonstrations, whose official goal was not the actual withdrawal of Sarkozy's reforms (which is what the strikers want) but an official role for the union leaders in negotiating the cuts (accepted in as inevitable).

It costs the intersyndical nothing to call a symbolic one-day strike to pressure for inclusion. On the other hand, unlike unions in the U.S. and U.K., French unions don't have strike funds, so employees who participate in these symbolic one-day national work-stoppages lose a much-needed day's pay – which is why the mobilizations are more popular when called on a Saturday.

The problem for the union bureaucrats is to keep the pressure on while keeping it from getting out of hand. So strikes are limited to one day and widely spaced. Moreover, these mass mobilizations are organized in such a way as to maintain the division between public and private sector workers, between members of the various union federations, between different trades and professions, between different regions and between workers and students. They take the form of long parades led by blaring sound systems, with the demonstrators herded into successive separate ranks by category. Nobody gets to see the other groups or measure the strength of the whole demonstration, and when these marches reach their destination, they are dispersed before people can get together to discuss the day, exchange information – much less hold a rally or general assembly.

Another missing element in the unions' dis-unity strategy is any

visible move toward uniting European workers' resistance to these cuts, which are imposed by the European Union and Central Bank. While the European bankers and capitalists are united in making the workers pay the bill for the Crash, the Left and the unions — whether in Greece, Spain, France or Britain — confine their struggles within narrow national limits. Their Leftist leaders sing 'The Internationale' at rallies, but in practice the dis-unite the workers of Europe, who face a united European bankers' Internationale.

The great frustration in this situation is that, assuming I am not totally misreading the 'mood of the masses,' there is a real potential here in Europe for militant, international popular struggles, including cross-border actions and mass strikes that aren't just one-day symbolic affairs. (Even a one-day international general strike would scare the bejesus out of the ghoulish bankers attempting to suck the life substance out of European labor.) The stage is set for a showdown. On the one hand, 'shameless' Right does not deign to hide its objectives. On the other, the masses are angry and ready for a fight. It is the shameless Left, beginning with the Communist CGT, that disarms the masses, diverting the power of the militant millions into establishment channels like negotiations and elections, confining it within local and sectorial boundaries, and disregarding its most potent weapon: the open-ended mass strike.

How do they get away with this scam? Many rank-and-file militants are aware of the situation, but remain frustrated by a union apparatus that holds most of the cards when it comes to controlling the movement. However, they remain isolated because no organization unites them. Neither Besancenot's NPA, nor the Trotskyist Lutte ouvrière (LO) have taken any initiatives to expand and intensify the movement, for example by setting up rank-and-file coordinating committees or for calling general assemblies or mass meeting at the end of the official parades. On the contrary, rather than denouncing the defeatist tactics of the CGT and its shameful history of sell-outs, the 'anti-capitalist' far-Left organizations uncritically endorse the spaced, one-day symbolic strikes proposed by the unions, while abstractly calling for greater militancy.

Despite the sell-outs of 1995 and 2003 (never mind 1936 and 1968!) the CGT remains sacred cow, and no one on the Left dares criticize it much less unmask the Communists' historic role as what the U.S. Socialist Daniel DeLeon used to call 'labor lieutenants of the bourgeoisie.' This self-censorship — call it 'anti' anti-communism — is a form of political correctness left over from Cold War days, when the Communists were persecuted and still got 25% of the vote and when Sartre refrained from criticizing the gulag.

The cream of the jest is that the French CP, now down to 2% of the vote, long remained the most rigidly Stalinist CP in the West, ignoring Khrushchev's 1956 secret speech denouncing Stalin. The CPF

defended the Russian tanks crushing of the Hungarian workers' councils in 1956 and the invasion of reformist Czechoslovakia in 1968, remained aloof from the reformist Eurocommunist trends of the '80s, and never engaged in serious self-criticism. Yet the CGT remains a sacred cow, and even the 'Trotskyist' NPA and L.O continue to tail-end it 'from the Left,' concentrating their fire on the reformist Socialists (SP) while seeking alliances with the equally reformist CP.

Of course, the struggle is far from over, and the French (and European) workers remain full of surprises. One can only share Olivier Besancenot's hope that the mass movement will 'rebound' on Nov. 6 and develop into a full-fledged, open-ended, Europe-wide general strike. But if it does, it will not be thanks to any help from the official Left or its far-Left apologists.

Update on French Strikes by Richard Greeman

(Montpellier, France. Oct. 21, 2010) I ended my last week's report with the hope the 'the French people, who are always full of surprises, will find some way out of this impasse in which their "representatives" – the union leaders and the official Left parties – are apparently their worst enemies.' A week later, biggest 'surprise' is the entrance en masse of French youth, considered 'apolitical,' into the arena of the social struggle. All over France, high schools are being blocked by their students, while the presence of beautiful young faces is overwhelming in the huge nation-wide street demonstrations that keep intensifying. I'm not sure you're getting these exciting images on U.S. and British TV, but you can view some at <http://www.liberation.fr/societe/01012297576-les-jeunes-en-renfort>

A poll in yesterday's Paris daily Libération indicated four out of five French people think the government should give in and negotiate, while 69% support the demonstrators, who are demanding the withdrawal of the bill putting full retirement off to age 67. (Curiously, only 43% actually favor outright withdrawal. I assume most of the other consider themselves 'realists' and hope for a favorable compromise with the inevitable, considering the move toward 'austerity' all across Europe).

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"Youth+Labor=People Power?"

Actually, this massive mobilization of French youth should not come as a surprise. Last year there were weeks of strikes and protests among high school and university students against education cutbacks, and in November 2005 there was serious rioting among mostly French-Arab and French-African youth in the ghetto-like projects that surround Paris and other French cities (when Sarkozy, then Minister of Interior, made

a name for himself by call them Racaille ['Scum'] and threatening to scrub them with a high-pressure hose.) In 2006 the French youth revolt went more political, when the right-wing government passed the CPE (First Job Contract) bill, a labor 'reform' (presumably aimed at encouraging the hiring of youth) which deprived workers under 26 of their legal rights as workers. All over France, students blockaded schools, went down into the streets, attempted to block trains and eventually dragged the reluctant unions to support their demonstrations. In addition, the outpouring of us parents and grandparents in support of the kids was massive, and after six weeks of chaotic disruptions, the Villepin government was forced to throw in the towel and withdraw the bill.

A recurrence of 2006 is Sarkozy's worst nightmare, and he was recently quoted as saying in private: 'As long as the young people don't get involved, I can handle the movement against my pension reform.' The government's response to the youth involvement has been to try to drive a wedge between the generations by provoking violent incidents around the high schools and encouraging mysterious 'casseurs' to burn cars, presumably in the hope of alienating the adults with the specter of 'violence.' At the same time, Sarkozy's spokesmen paternalistically maintain that teenagers shouldn't be meddling with an adult issue they don't understand, especially since the reform is actually designed help young workers by lowering Social Security payments. On the Left, the head of the Force ouvrière union, equally paternalistic, was quoted rejecting the help of the youth as 'the weapon of the weak (presumably like 'women's' tears')! On the other hand, generational solidarity is strong in France, as witness a hand-made sign reading: "(Son, 26): Mom, what's work? (Mother, 57): You'll find out when your 67!"

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Elites versus Masses

The massive entrance of the youth into the arena has changed the balance of forces in today's stand-off between an intransigent Right-wing administration and most of the population. The second 'surprise' since last week has been the mobilization of the truckers (mostly independent) and the refinery workers, which has resulted in gasoline shortages at service stations all over France and deliberate slowdowns ('snail actions') by trucks on the highways. This is all the more remarkable in that the French truckers, who can retire at 55 under a special dispensation, are striking purely out of solidarity. More and more, the movement is in the hands of local committees and worker assemblies, who vote to continue and expand the symbolic one-day strikes called by the cautious national union leaderships. In Marseille and elsewhere, there are ongoing tugs of war between demonstrators, who block refineries and gas depots, and the police, who disperse them only to find them back the next day.

The deepest fears of both the official Left (union leaders and Socialist politicians) and the Right are that the movement will 'get out of hand.' Editorialists wring their hands about a tragic descent into chaos. In place of the traditional struggle between Left and Right within the institutions, today's struggles are between the established elites and the rank-and-file, what in the U.S. we prudishly call 'the working middle class.' The French, with typical Gallic irony have adopted as their identity a government Minister's contemptuous slur by calling themselves 'les Français d'en bas' ('the Frenchmen at the bottom of the heap').

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Different Interests, Different Tactics

As I see it, these struggles "between establishment Rightist and Leftist elites on the one hand and on the other between elites and ranks — are being carried out in parallel, but they have different goals, and thus need different tactics. The goal of the strikers and the masses in the streets is clear. They want Sarkozy withdraw the 'reforms.' Period. Their most effective tactic is equally simple: all-out unlimited mass strikes until the government yields — as it did in 1995 (when the union-initiated movement against an earlier pension 'reform' got out of hand) and in 2006 (when the CPE went down in flames).

On the other hand, the goal of the official Left (Socialists, Communists, and their affiliated unions) is to weaken Sarkozy, bring the government to the negotiating table and re-legitimize themselves as a viable alternative to the Right with a view toward the 2012 Presidential election. Their tactic: prolong the crisis by measured, periodic shows of force. Of course, this delaying tactic resulted in defeat for the workers in 2003, when the strikes predictably petered out during summer vacation and the government raised the minimum number of years you have to work to earn a pension from 37 to 42 (which particularly hurt women who have taken off years for childbearing). Nonetheless, after the success of yesterday's sixth successive national mobilization of up to 3.5 million in the streets, the union leaders are calling not one more but two more spaced symbolic one-day national strikes: one in a week and the other in two weeks!

Meanwhile, the whole country is going wild, and no one knows what will happen between now and two weeks from now. On the government side Sarkozy, ever more intransigent, is moving up the date of the final vote of his reform in the Senate, while among the youth and workers in transportation, petroleum, chemicals and other key industries the ongoing strikes and spontaneous, daily, local actions are intensifying all over France. One reformist union leader was quoted saying 'by marginalizing us, Sarkozy turned the power over to the streets.' So

why did Sarkozy put his Presidency on the line by uniting the fractious French unions against him, freezing them out of the action and refusing to negotiate?

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My Analysis

Short answer: 'France has the stupidest Right in the world,' well represented by this little man with the big inferiority complex. (Demonstrator's slogan: 'Carla, we're like you: we both get screwed by the head of state.')

Long answer: ever since 1995 when the Gaullists got back into power after Mitterrand's 14-year long 'Plural Left' (Socialist-Communist) administration, the Right has been looking for a showdown with organized labor in an attempt to duplicate the neo-liberal triumphs of the 1980's when Thatcher (after stocking up on coal for years) crushed the miners' union in a prolonged strike and Reagan fired all the Air Controllers. The Gaullists' first attempt at cutting benefits unilaterally under the Chirac administration was the ill-fated Juppé Plan of 1995, which provoked a runaway general strike and had to be rescinded. Villepin's 2006 attack on the labor rights of youth (CPE) had the same fate. In both cases, the Premier took the rap, and the President saved face. It took an egomaniac like President Sarkozy to take personal responsibility for the cuts and thus paint himself into a corner.

Today's Right forgets that the official Left is their best ally. During the May-June 1968 General Strike, the Communist Party (CP) its affiliated CGT union leaders saved capitalist France by blocking the striking students from making contact with the striking workers, negotiating a modest wage-hike with the government on behalf of the strikers, declared the strike officially 'ended' (ignoring a massive vote among the workers to continue it), and agreed to channel the movement into parliamentary elections which the Right won.

Indeed, going further back in French labor history, in 1936 during the general strike and factory occupations whose slogan was 'Everything is Possible,' the CP/CGT leader Maurice Thorez famously declared: 'You have to know how to end a strike.' The CP/CGT, allied with de Gaulle, saved French capitalism in 1944-45 at the time of the Liberation when the workers were still armed and French big business, having collaborated with the Nazi occupiers, should have been expropriated. The same Thorez told French workers to 'roll up their sleeves,' rebuild the country, and put off the revolution until after the recovery. Despite these betrayals and sellouts by the official Left, the French working class has not been seriously defeated by capitalism – at least not in the way that British and American labor has, and the French have learned the lessons that solidarity works, that resistance pays off and that mass strikes are their strongest weapon.

There is no predicting what may happen as this conflict moves toward a showdown – desired both by Sarkozy and by the vast majority of the rank and file French, who in polls favor an unlimited general strike to bring the crisis to a head (even if half of them accept the necessity of pension cuts). So stay tuned for future developments.

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Richard Greeman's First Report on French Strikes

(Montpellier, France, Oct. 15, 2010) People ask me what's it like living in France during these massive one-day strikes and popular mobilizations against the conservative Sarkozy government's pension 'reforms.' These cuts would push the minimum retirement age forward from age 60 to 62 and the minimum age for receiving full benefits from 65 to 67. For details:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/14/world/europe/14france.html?ref=todayspaper>

On the one hand, it is thrilling to see millions of citizens taking to the streets as well as hundreds of thousands of workers striking in defense of their hard-won social rights defying an increasingly reactionary government. Indeed, what is most heartening is that the 'troops' seem to be more radical than their official leaders, the union chiefs and Socialist Party politicians. Recent polls showed the French public not only supports the one-day strikes (which make life Hell for commuters and parents of schoolchildren); nearly half are in favor of an open-ended general strike to make the government yield – a strategy advocated by the far-Left parties like the NPA as well as by militant rank-and-file workers and local unions who are chomping at the bit.

Once again I am reminded about what I love about France: a still-living revolutionary tradition of popular mass mobilization and struggle that goes back to the sans-culottes of 1789, the revolutions of 1830, 1848, and 1871 (the Paris Commune), the sit-down strikes of 1936, and in my own lifetime, the nationwide student-worker uprising of May-June 1968. More recently, there was the 1995 nationwide strike of public employees that went 'wildcat,' paralyzed France for two months (during which Parisians cheerfully commuted by bike and even boat) and forced an earlier conservative government to withdraw its unpopular welfare 'reforms.' It's also a great pleasure to see a nasty right-wing s.o.b. like Sarkozy humiliated by millions of angry, jeering citizens blocking the trains and taking over the streets.

On the other hand, I also have a disheartening feeling of déjà vu. Why? Because the unions used the same dilatory tactics of spaced one-day work public sector stoppages in 2009, and the government simply bided its time until summer, when the French go on vacation, and rammed the cuts through parliament late one August night. And this wasn't the first time these tactics failed.

Indeed, ever since the runaway general strike of 1995, every time the French have massively demonstrated and gone on national strikes in opposition to government attacks on their labor and welfare rights (as in 2009, 2008 and 2003), the official leaders of the unions have imposed the delaying tactic of spaced one-day national work-stoppages and demonstrations — marches and counter-marches designed quite precisely to ‘demonstrate’ to the government their ability to call out their troops (and thus presumably to reign them in). These demonstrations are great for letting off steam, but inevitably they run out of steam. Time is always on the side of the government and the capitalists in the class struggle. The masses’ only strength is in numbers and resoluteness, and their most effective tactic, once they are mobilized, is to stay mobilized, spread the movement to all sectors of the economy, go for broke and paralyze the country until the bosses give in. As they did in 1936, 1968 and 1995, still in living memory.

The apparent purpose of the leadership’s military-style maneuvers is to make a show of force and induce the government to invite the union leaders to a round table — thus recognizing their legitimacy as the official representatives of labor. This plays out in the media through competition over how many demonstrators went into the streets in each successive demonstration. Social struggle reduced to sports statistics. The unions count 3.5 million people, the police count less than half. The union leaders go on TV and call it a success: the government says it is not impressed and won’t budge. Then the politicians get into the act. With presidential elections looming and Sarkozy’s popularity at an all-time low, the Socialists, who in power also imposed neo-liberal cuts, grandstand their support for the movement. They, too, have an interest in prolonging the struggle against Sarkozy as they hope of reaping the results of his unpopularity at the polls. Former Socialist presidential candidate Segolène Royale encourages the youth, specifically high schoolers, to join the demonstrations. The Right (which has been cutting back teachers like mad) cries ‘scandal.’ Another political horserace.

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The goal of the mass movement quite different. The strikers and demonstrators sincerely want to use their mass power to force the government to rescind the cuts, as the Chirac-Juppé government was forced to do in 1995, when rank-and-file assemblies ignored the unions’ cautious tactics and took matters into their own hands. Those 1995 strikes got out of hand and continued for two weeks until they achieved complete victory and the cuts were rescinded. Paradoxically, this victory was a stinging defeat not just for the government but also for the unions, who were de-legitimized as responsible ‘social partners’ unable to control of their troops.

This is worrisome for the brass at the CGT, CDFT and other federations, since only about 23% of French workers belong to unions,

which are supported not by dues but by government allocations. Since 1995, the unions have tightened their control over the movement to prevent another wildcat breakaway. And you can't cynically turn mass enthusiasm and anger on and off like a water tap without exhausting it, so such tactics inevitably spell defeat for working people whose dream of retiring keeps receding into the future while they remain on the treadmill.

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Similar masses struggles are happening all over Europe, where the same neo-liberal cutbacks are being imposed in the name of paying 'the debt' (created by bailing out the banks). Yet here again, the Left politicians and union leaders, far from seeking strength through international solidarity, remain staunchly isolated within their national boundaries, despite the obvious fact that the European Union has created a common economic zone! But the unions and left parties depend for their 'franchise' on the national state, which subsidizes them directly.

One hopes the French people, who are always full of surprises, will find some way out of this impasse in which their 'representatives' – the union leaders and the official left parties – are apparently their worst enemies.