

French unions plan ongoing anti-crisis struggle

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On March 19, more than 3 million people joined in the second day of strikes and mass demonstrations called by France's eight main union federations so far this year.

The general strikes have been called against the government of President Nicolas Sarkozy's response to the global economic crisis — which has been to attempt to make working people pay.

The protests reflected a significant growth in size to the previous day of action on January 29, which mobilised 2.5 million people.

With the government showing no interest in changing course, the debate over what the direction the campaign should take is deepening.

Unions are demanding policies that seek to make capital, rather than workers, pay for the crisis. The central demands include: increases in the minimum wage and payments to the unemployed and pensioners; increases in public housing; bans on redundancies at profitable companies; the reversal of the tax cuts given to the rich; and preventing the "restructuring" of the public sector.

The growth in size of the protests and strikes reflects growing public support. Recent opinion polls indicate that 78% believe the strikes are justified, up from 69% in January.

Growing anger is being fuelled by the rapid growth of unemployment as companies shed jobs to improve their bottom lines. More than 100,000 private sector jobs were shed in the last three months of 2008. A further 350,000 are expected to be destroyed in the first half of this year.

The French oil company Total announced in early March that it would shed more than 500 jobs despite posting record profits in 2008.

The government is also persevering with attacks on the public sector, claiming a lack of funds. However, it has had little trouble finding billions to bail out corporate interests.

In response, public sector workers have organised broader industrial action. University staff have been conducting a seven-week strike.

Adding to the militancy of the workers have been the massive general strikes in the French colonies of Guadeloupe, Reunion and Martinique.

The demands of workers in Guadeloupe and Martinique were largely met, following general strikes that lasted 44 and 38 days respectively.

However, the government has remained unmoved. While acknowledging that the strikes reflected "how worried workers are by the economic crisis", Sarkozy ruled out any increase in government spending to meet the demands on March 20 .

Sarkozy's refusal to budge is increasing tensions over the movement's direction.

The leaders of the eight union federations were scheduled to meet on March 30 to discuss the campaign's next steps.

On March 20, Jean-Claude Mailly, head of the Force Ouvriere federation, said it was "determined to keep up the pressure" and was considering calling new protests on May 1.

In a March 19 statement, the radical union federation Union Syndicale Solidaires argued: "In order to deal with the social crisis and the need for alternative policies", the unions should build the movement in order to launch an ongoing general strike.

This call was supported in a statement the same day released by the leader of the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA), Olivier Besancenot. Recent polls have indicated the revolutionary socialist Besancenot is the country's most popular politician.

Besancenot argued that French Prime Minister Francois Fillon "gave the finger to 3 million demonstrators, by staying the course on the policy of finding tens of billions only for those responsible for the crisis while telling the strikers and protesters that the coffers are empty when it comes to jobs or wages.

"Such a success and such a government provocation deserve better than the announcement of a new meeting of trade unions on 30 March.

"Twenty-four hours of strikes and demos are not enough to make the government and employers bend. Only by a prolonged general strike can we make them meet our demands: prohibit layoffs, increase wages, and lower prices."

P.S.

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