

# Massive strikes in France

Wednesday 28 November 2007, by [BESANCENOT Olivier](#), [HAYES Ingrid](#) (Date first published: 24 November 2007).

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## Strong resistance to Sarkozy's agenda

**Ingrid Hayes**

***Sarkozy's election in May 2007 was a serious political defeat. But the recently elected president, hand in hand with the bosses' union, had yet to inflict a major social defeat to the working class.***

It was uncertain whether the team in power would try to go as fast as possible in inflicting that defeat, or if it would choose to buy time only concentrating on some specific categories hoping they would not be supported by the population (railway workers, students ...). With the economic crisis imported from the United States, the uncertainty was over: it would have to be everything at the same time, especially as the government had started off by giving billions of euros to the richest among the rich and had nothing much left to deal with the situation.

Apart from the ruling classes, literally everyone is under attack. A few examples: on the pensions issue, workers are supposed to work longer to get less in the end, sick people will have to pay a "franchise" (fixed rate fee) to be allowed access to social security, immigrants are submitted to more restrictive laws, the possibility of DNA testing of immigrants to prove family relationships was voted in Parliament, illegal immigrants' children are threatened, the right to study is put in jeopardy both by the loss of thousands of teacher jobs and the autonomization of universities, preparing the competition between them...

But the government is facing two major problems. First it is quite risky to carry out all the attacks at the same time. Second, Sarkozy was elected not only because of the absolute lack of alternative on the side of the Socialist Party but also on a fairytale: he would increase buying power. And buying power is not increasing.

The Ligue communiste révolutionnaire had said from the beginning that there would be some resistance to Sarkozy's attempt to deepen neo-liberal policies in France, and it had called for resistance when virtually everybody sank into depression, or got ready for the next presidential elections, or, as a good number of Socialist Party leaders, decided to join the government. The consensus was that nothing could be done because the president had the legitimacy of the vote. This consensus has been proved wrong. The resistance has now been active for a number of weeks, fishermen, junior doctors, judges and more recently (and more classically) railway workers, students, employees in the state public sectors, which is very broad and includes health services workers and teachers.

The major conflict has been between the government and the railway workers. They form one of the last categories of workers who do not have to have 40 years of contributions to qualify for a full pension, they are still on a special regime (which is self-financing !) of 37.5 years.

This was the number of years every worker was supposed to work until the 1993 reform of the private sector and the defeat of 2003 concerning the state sector. These last special regimes are also the last deadlock left to break so as to force everybody to work 41, 42 or even more years. Therefore it is a priority reform for Sarkozy. The movement started on the 18<sup>th</sup> of October with a massive 24 hour strike among railworkers (75% of the workers were on strike, it hadn't happened since 1953!). Then the strike started again on the 13<sup>th</sup> of November and lasted for ten days, although the leaderships of all the main unions (sometimes even publicly) disapproved, and didn't even try to oppose the massive campaign waged against the strikers by the government and the media. The strike has now been suspended, but the railway workers are not defeated, they have already forced the government to make some significant changes, and the strike may start again in December depending on the results of the negotiations in process.

The students are still blocking a good half of the universities around the country. This movement came as a surprise as the government had negotiated a deal during the summer with the main students union and the presidents of universities. But the deal didn't convince the students. They reject a reform meant to privatize university education by introducing private funding, disengagement of national government, submission of education to the immediate needs of the bosses. The movement is strong and radical, and seems to be spreading to secondary schools.

We must now build a convergence of all these movements. The perspective is that of a large movement, taking on all specific demands but also unifying on the key questions, wages, pensions and jobs. The strike on the 20<sup>th</sup> of November was a first step. The situation requires to go further. And more and more people see the need for it. Prices are rising, rent, food, petrol, health expenses, while Sarkozy has given himself a 172% rise of his wages! The pensions are under threat while the members of Parliament voted themselves a special regime of 22.5 years to qualify for a full pension! As we say in France, "tous et toutes ensemble!"

*\* Ingrid Hayes is a member of the National Leadership of the LCR (French section of the Fourth International), with particular responsibility for work in the global justice movement.*

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***The strikes and demonstrations against Nicolas Sarkozy's attempted neoliberal reforms have been massive. We publish here an initial report by the LCR. More detailed material will be published soon.***

### **The 20 November public sector demonstrations in facts and figures**

700 000 demonstrators in 148 demonstrations across France of which: 70 000 in Paris, 8 500 in Orleans, 5 000 in Brest, 3 000 in Quimper, 8 000 in Tours, 10 000 in Toulon and Saint-Etienne, 15 000 in Grenoble, 15 000 in Lyon, 60 000 in Marseilles, 30 000 in Nantes and Bordeaux, 35 000 in Toulouse, 25 000 in Rennes, 4 000 in Strasbourg, 19 000 in Lille, 20 000 in Caen, 18 000 in Rouen, 15 000 in Le Havre, 30 000 in Nantes, 5 000 in Saint-Nazaire, 15 000 in Grenoble, 1 500 in Réunion, 10 000 in Pau...

### **Strikes at Yoplait.**

The employees of the three production sites of Yoplait France, in Le Mans (Sarthe), Monéteau (Yonne) and Vienne (Isère), struck massively, following the call of the CGT, to demand the reopening of the 2007 wage negotiations 2007 and a rise in their purchasing power.

### **UNEF [the main student union] estimates at 40 000 the number of students and high-school pupils who demonstrated.**

Approximately 40 000 university and high-school students demonstrated, on the one hand, in support of the public sector workers, while on the other demanding the abrogation of the Pécresse law on the universities, according to , which said it was "satisfied" with such a mobilization. The universities, in particular in Lille, Nantes, Rennes and Lyon, were particularly mobilized, notes the union.

### **Booed, Francois Cherèque takes to his heels and leaves the demonstration**

The calls for the end of the transport strike launched on several occasions by the leader of the CFDT, Francois Cherèque, were not forgotten by the demonstrators. The general secretary was booed by a group of about twenty militants, some wearing CGT stickers saying "Cherèque is with the bosses!", "Sarkozy-Cherèque, on the same side!" "Cherèque, stop stabbing us in the back!", they shouted, while Mr. Cherèque ran away from the demonstration, protected by his escort.

### **Strike strongly supported in the national education system, according to the trade unions.**

Nearly six out of ten teachers in colleges and the high schools in strike on the day of the mobilization of the public sector. "We have an overall rate of 58 per cent of strikers in the colleges and high schools. The mobilization is particularly strong in the colleges, with rates of 60 per cent and peaks of 80 per cent", declared a spokesperson of the SNES [the main secondary school teachers' union]. These figures were assembled by the trade union from a sample of 200 "test-establishments". The FSU [the main federation of teachers' union] indicates that an average of 65 per cent of primary school teachers and 58 per cent of teachers in colleges and high schools were on strike.

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### **Besancenot: "There is something of the smell of 1995"**

PARIS, Nov. 20, 2007 (AFP) - Olivier Besancenot, spokesperson of the LCR, estimated that the strikes and the demonstrations of public sector and rail workers on Tuesday have "something of the odour of 1995" and should not stop "as long as the government does not give anything". "The mobilization this Tuesday is even stronger than on October 18" at the time of the last big day of mobilization, Mr. Besancenot, who demonstrated in Paris with his post office worker colleagues, told AFP. In addition, he stressed, "the railway workers are standing firm, in spite of the attempts at diversion and division by the government".

"There is something of the odour of 1995, there is something which is mounting", said the Trotskyist leader, in an allusion to the retreat of the government faced with the mobilization of the railway workers in December 1995. "As long as the government does not give anything, I do not see why it would stop", added Mr. Besancenot. "There are people who are outraged by the policy of the government, there are people who are resisting and who do not want to submit", according to him. "On Wednesday morning, there will be general assemblies at the post office to see how we can

continue the movement”, affirmed the young postal worker.

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**Two thousand people attended the LCR rally** in the Mutualite hall in central Paris on 23 November.

*\* Olivier Besancenot was candidate for the Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire (LCR - French section of the Fourth International) at the French presidential elections in 2002 and 2007.*

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\* From International Viewpoint Online magazine : IV n° 394 - November 2007.