

# France: A major trial of strength between the classes

The tenacious struggle that has developed between the classes in France has attracted the attention of workers everywhere. After the recent general strikes in Greece, Portugal and Spain, what happens in France will deeply affect the mood developing across Europe for a fight against government attacks. Analysis and report from CLARE DOYLE, CWI Secretariat, recently in Paris and Rouen, discussing with members of Gauche Révolutionnaire, CWI France.

**"P**ETROL SHORTAGE spreads, only the demos are filling up!" was the headline of France's satirical paper, *Le Canard Enchaîné*, the day after over three and a half million took to the streets again in 260 towns and cities across the country. This is one twentieth of the whole population of France!

70% of the population were supporting the industrial action. In some small towns, up to a third of the population has been on the streets. The numbers coming into the movement reflected the depth of feeling on the issue of raising the retirement age and much more.

The present situation is in some ways analogous to 1967, before the mass revolutionary general strike of 1968. Then everything stopped, the factories were occupied, the president, Charles de Gaulle, fled the country and discussions took place everywhere about how to construct a socialist society.

The struggle today is more intense than in 1967. 25% of young people are in favour of "a revolutionary transformation of society" but few, even of the strikers and demonstrators, see a socialist revolution as 'realistic'. This is in large part because there is no mass party campaigning on a socialist programme. Yet a rapid politicisation is going on among workers and young people.

Even though the movement is not yet strong enough to pose the question of power being taken by the working class and its social allies, the question of who runs society is more and more raised, as both sides have been prepared to conduct a prolonged battle.

Each side has reiterated their determination not to back down over pension reform. Tuesday 19 October saw another massive response on the sixth national day of strikes and demonstrations in six weeks. Two days later talks between the government and the union leaders broke down and new days of action were called for 28 October and 6 November.

## State violence

PRESIDENT NICOLAS Sarkozy and his interior minister have repeated the mantra that there is no going back and accuse a minority of holding the country to ransom. They used emergency powers to send helmeted riot police in body armour against pickets at an oil refinery near Paris, injuring three. Later that day, as expected, the Senate voted for the 'reforms'. Sarkozy is using further exceptional constitutional rights to



It is pressure from the working class that has forced the national trade union leaders to continue the action.

speed the pensions bill through its final approval in the national assembly.

Associated Press reports that the head of the national petroleum industry body says it is struggling to import fuel to make up for the shortfall, because strikers are also blockading key oil terminals. Workers in Belgium and the Netherlands are taking solidarity action, as they have done before, and the special reserves are blocked, the government is in trouble.

## Pressure from below

IT IS the overwhelming strength of feeling from below and the nationwide support for strikes and blockades that have forced the national trade union leaders to continue the action. It is this, too, which has forced the main opposition Socialist Party to move from suggesting their own 'reforms' to pension entitlements to promising to reverse Sarkozy's legislation, after defeating Sarkozy and his party, the UMP (Union for a Popular Movement), in the 2012 election.

But can the movement last without a leadership from amongst the strikers themselves, coordinating the struggle at all levels, and without a clear strategy for victory, on the pensions issue and on the question of who should run society?

A special supplement of the *Gauche Révolutionnaire* paper, *Egalité*, spelled out the approach that is needed - one of a fight to the finish, a real general strike and the linking up of the coordination committees on a local, regional and national level. The fullest of debate and discussion is vital in these bodies - of the concrete steps needed to develop the struggle and also the perspective for socialist change.

The lack of a strategy for victory proposed by the union leaders means that the struggle can be protracted and in some senses a 'proxy' battle as some call it. Places like Marseilles have seen bigger actions and demonstrations proportionally than elsewhere, but militant traditions have been revived in many areas and discussion of what it all means has been taking place.

The capacity of one or two sections

of workers in a modern society - in the docks and the refineries - to strangle a country's economy quite quickly is a double-edged sword. It can rattle the government with a relatively small number of workers being on strike. On the other hand, it can weaken the movement in terms of the lack of involvement of other sections.

But the movement has, up until now, remained strong. The problem of so many days of strike action eating into the wages of a minority has been partially overcome by beginning to organise strike support funds and workers taking it in turns to strike.

Even the scenes of youth 'riots' in Nanterre and Lyons have not yet undermined support for the revolt against Sarkozy. Far-right thugs have tried to attack the youth and also some picket lines, with little success. They could become a more significant threat if the movement declines. Compared with 1968 the heavy battalions of workers have started the struggle and the youth have come in later. Both have sensed their power increase. The combination of these forces has unnerved the government, with some ministers pushing for a harder line to be taken and others fearing this would only provoke a worse crisis.

In this volatile situation, one incident can cause an explosion and raise the stakes in the struggle of the Sarkozy regime for survival. Already, as the CWI has spelt out previously, there are elements of a pre-revolutionary situation in the France of today. They could develop. On the other hand, they could dissolve in a mood of disappointment. Either way, nothing will be the same after this new mass movement of the French working class, unprecedented in a number of ways.

Sarkozy knows that any concession will be seen as proof that 'militancy pays', and the rest of his programme and his own political future are at stake. After the riot police violently raided the Total Oil Refinery at Grandpuits near Paris, a CGT delegate there, with tears of anger in his eyes, said: "We're not at war! This is not a military airport! ...There should be a general strike now!" But the trade union leaders have maintained their intransigence against making such a

call, appealing instead for calm!

If they called for a real general strike, even of limited duration, this would enthuse workers to go further and put these reluctant generals in the driving seat of a vehicle careering towards dual power and suspending the government in mid-air! They have at no time even considered naming just one day for such action.

There are factors which can weaken the mobilisation temporarily such as the strikes' disruption of plans for the half-term holiday. Train drivers, some workers on the buses and underground and lorry-drivers are continuing with different forms of action.

There is also the gradual drying up of the petrol stations due to all-out action at oil depots. But a TV journalist commented: "20% are going on holiday, the rest are just staying philosophical!"

If the disruption continues with no prospect of victory, the mood can change, but after the latest mass demonstrations one poll showed that six out of every ten French people wanted the fight to continue.

## Different to 1968

THIS CURRENT persistent wave of strikes and demonstrations is taking place at a time of the biggest downturn in the world economy since the 1930s. This marks a major difference in the background to the events of May 1968. And this is one of the main factors behind its durability.

As an article in *Egalité* says: "After the retirement [cuts], there are the attacks on social security and on the labour contracts, the budget cuts of public services, ever-rising unemployment, and waves of redundancies... So a defeat on the retirement issue is unimaginable for the Sarkozy government as that would paralyse [its ability to] inflict all the foul blows to come."

On the basis of capitalism, in fact, the massive gap in the pensions fund cannot be filled. Huge sums have been paid to the banks and should be paid back. The ideas of taxing the rich and making the bankers pay up are popular.

Unfortunately, however, if a government did agree to levy taxes

on the rich and take action against the banks on a sufficient scale to fill the gaps in public spending, the rich would just shut up shop and take their ill-gotten capital elsewhere. It is their crisis and they want the workers and youth to pay.

Only public ownership of the major industries and banks, under workers' control and a plan drawn up and managed by elected representatives of the working class, will see enough resources for adequate pensions at 60 and guarantee jobs for all youth at a decent, minimum wage.

Most of the French left, such as the Communist Party and the Parti de Gauche, a split from the Socialist Party, has not put a clear programme forward. Even the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) launched over a year ago has failed to take advantage of the tidal wave of feeling against the system and of the massive popularity of its spokesperson Olivier Besancenot. He got 56% in a recent popularity poll, representing in workers' minds what a leader should be - an ordinary worker like them expressing ideas about changing the system. But even as the situation has intensified Besancenot has limited himself to calling for "more radical action".

Many of the NPA's members are very active in helping to picket oil depots and blockade important round-abouts at all times of the day and night. But there is no initiative from the top of the NPA to build a mass working class party that can channel the anger and dissatisfaction of France's workers and youth into a challenge against capitalism, just at a time when the whole system is on the ropes.

They confine themselves to an abstract call for a general strike with no programme for how to make it successful in terms of either the immediate demands on the pension reform or for bringing down the government. This is in spite of the efforts of the *Gauche Révolutionnaire* current and others to change the course of the party.

The situation in France remains extremely volatile. It could explode into a movement even more powerful than that of 1968. At present it is like a slow-burning fuse that could alternately splutter and pause over a protracted period of time. If it is temporarily defeated on the retirement issue, it can flare up again over the other attacks in store for the working class of France, as elsewhere in Europe. Either way, the urgent task is posed of building a mass workers' party with a leadership prepared to take the movement onto the road of socialist transformation.

**This is an extract from a longer article. See [www.socialistworld.net](http://www.socialistworld.net) for more on the struggles in France and international news and analysis.**

## the committee for a workers' international

THE COMMITTEE for a Workers' International (CWI) is the socialist international organisation to which the Socialist Party is affiliated. The CWI is organised in 40 countries and works to unite the working class and oppressed peoples against global capitalism and to fight for a socialist world.

For more details including CWI publications write to: CWI, PO Box 3688, London E11 1YE. email [cwi@worldsoc.co.uk](mailto:cwi@worldsoc.co.uk). [www.socialistworld.net](http://www.socialistworld.net)