

French, European Strikes Reveal Mass Discontent... and Its Limits

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The September 29 European strikes and demonstrations featured mass mobilizations across several countries, as well as a large march outside the European Commission in Brussels. Up to 100,000 workers from 30 countries took to the streets of Brussels to denounce the politics of government budget cuts on the backs of the workers, as well as plans to introduce labor market “flexibility,” i.e. making it easier to fire workers. Taking its direction from the German state, the European Commission has been helping to implement these measures in various ways, including the threat of fines for member states of the European Union that fail to cut their budget deficits enough to satisfy the present demands of international capital. In response to September 29, European Commission President José Manuel Barroso indicated that the protests would have no effect on Commission policies.

GENERAL STRIKE IN SPAIN

Strikes and other mass actions also took place other European countries on September 29.

In Greece, which experienced a near-insurrection earlier this year against draconian austerity measures enacted after a near collapse of state finances, mass strikes shut down public transport on September 29.

In Ireland, mass actions also took place, with a cement truck — bearing the sign “toxic bank” — blocking the gates of the Irish parliament to protest the fact that the Irish people are being forced to repay \$97 billion in bad loans taken on by the Anglo-Irish bank. The bank had been in the hands of private capital until the crisis, when the state took it over along with its massive debts.

In Portugal, tens of thousands mobilized against austerity measures by the social democratic government, with unions announcing a general strike for November 24.

In Slovenia, state workers launched a strike to protest plans for a two-year wage freeze.

Even in relatively conservative Lithuania, some 400 workers defied legal prohibitions to rally against harsh austerity measures.

But it was in Spain that the September 29 mobilization reached its greatest dimensions, with millions of workers taking part in the country's first general strike since 2002. The strike was centered in the industrial sector, with factories, construction, and energy among the areas hardest hit, while state workers participated at a somewhat smaller level.

Large numbers of workers took to the streets of Madrid, where their picket lines blocked delivery trucks to vegetable markets, with police arresting some strikers. Workers also marched through the streets of downtown Madrid, attempting to shut down shops and banks. In Barcelona, demonstrators from far leftist groups clashed with the police, as a police car burned and several dozen demonstrators were arrested.

Overall, the strike in Spain revealed a deep chasm between the working class and the social democratic government of Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, which its votes have up to now maintained in power. With Spain under fire by international capital, which warns that its public debt level could lead to a Greece-style collapse, Zapatero has deeply angered workers by caving in. He has been slashing pensions and social benefits. He has also been planning to make it easier for workers to be fired, this at a time when the official unemployment rate still stands at 20%.

On the one hand, the September 29 general strike in Spain illustrated the mobilizing power of the large trade unions, which have roots in the left and the struggle against fascism. On the other hand, it revealed the bureaucratic character of these same labor unions, which had postponed the strike from June to September, and which also made an agreement in advance with the government to make sure the strike did not disrupt public services too much.

THE SEPTEMBER 7 STRIKE IN FRANCE

It is in France, however, that this fall's European strikes have had the greatest impact. French workers have succeeded in developing a massive and persistent anti-austerity movement in the face of one of the most reactionary governments in Europe, that of Nicolas Sarkozy.

The serial strikes and demonstrations, beginning with a one-day general strike on September 7, have constituted one of the largest outpourings on the part of French labor in recent decades. Coming on the heels of the much more militant Greek mass actions earlier in the year, the French events show that mass discontent on the part of labor is not limited to a few countries on the brink of financial bankruptcy, but extends to the larger and supposedly more successful capitalist economies as well.

As in Greece and elsewhere, the immediate focal point of the French strikes has been a government plan to drastically reduce retirement benefits by forcing workers to work longer, by raising the age for a minimum pension from 60 to 62, and for a full pension from 65 to 67. In brutal fashion, the new law proposed by Sarkozy made no exceptions for occupations involving hard physical labor, where many workers will now be forced to toil nearly 50 years to receive a

full pension. Last spring, two large strikes had already signaled labor's intention to oppose these measures.

The September 7 French strikes involved between 1 and 3 million people, according to the authoritative newspaper *Le Monde*. Much of the national commuter and long distance rail system shut down, as did the ports of Marseille and Le Havre, the country's largest. Most hospitals, schools, and childcare centers were also closed by the strike, while production was severely curtailed at major oil refineries and electric power plants. Paris subway workers kept the trains running so people could get to the mass demonstration, which drew hundreds of thousands onto the streets. Proportionally even greater numbers turned out in smaller cities: about 70,000 in Bordeaux, about 100,000 in Marseille, and about 25,000 in Lille.

Moreover, according to a respected public opinion poll taken on the eve of the September 7 strike, some 78% of the French public regarded it as "justified." Bitter irony was expressed against Labor Minister Eric Woerth, the point man for the new pension reductions, as he is currently under police investigation for his role in a major corruption scandal involving clandestine funding of the conservative parties by Liliane Bettencourt, heir to the L'Oréal cosmetics fortune. Meanwhile, Sarkozy's approval rate has dropped to 31% according to the same public opinion polls.

PERSISTENCE OF THE FRENCH STRIKES

In mid-September, Sarkozy pushed his retrogressive retirement law through the National Assembly without any changes or negotiations with labor, although it still had to go through the Senate, with debate scheduled for October.

With their base undeterred and the French public dismayed by Sarkozy's refusal to negotiate a single concession, the unions launched a second one-day general strike on September 23. Again, between 1 and 3 million workers participated. Although the government claimed that participation had decreased slightly, the unions claimed the opposite, and it was generally recognized that the turnout was basically the same as on September 7. Slogans sometimes took on a mocking character, as in a sign that read, "Work less and live better," satirizing Sarkozy's campaign slogan, "Work more, earn more." The humorous slogan about working less, which was put forth by anarcho-syndicalists, also had a serious side, the centuries-old fight by labor to cut the duration of work in response to the vast development of the productive forces by capital.

On September 23, new sectors of the population took a greater part in the one-day strike, as seen in the large turnout in smaller towns and cities. High school and university students also participated in greater numbers. Student and youth activists pointed out that one effect for them of raising the retirement age would be fewer jobs for youth, as older workers would then stay on the job, this at a time when France's youth unemployment rate stands officially at 24%.

By this time, dissension was breaking out inside the labor movement, with more militant unionists demanding an "unlimited" general strike if Sarkozy kept up his refusal to negotiate. More

conservative labor leaders wanted to ease the pressure by holding a demonstration on a Saturday rather than another strike during the workweek. France's most powerful union, the General Confederation of Labor (CGT), a leftist union with roots in the Communist Party, went along with the more conservative unions, over the objections of many of its members. This resulted in the mass demonstrations of Saturday, October 2, which again brought out between 1 and 3 million people, this time in street rallies rather than work stoppages. And again, Sarkozy government tried to claim – against all evidence – that the movement was dissipating.

In the aftermath of October 2, some sectors of labor, most prominently the CGT branches representing transit and subway workers in the Paris region, announced that they would stage rolling strikes beginning on October 12, during the time that the Senate would be debating the retirement law. By October 10, however, the Senate had rushed to pass – albeit narrowly – the 3 main planks of Sarkozy's pension cuts: raising the minimum retirement age from 60 to 62, raising the age for a full pension from 65 to 67, and raising the minimum number years of work required for a full pension from 40.5 to 41.5. It still had to be put together as a whole and sent back to the National Assembly for a final vote there, probably in November.

October 12 proved to be the largest mobilization yet, as even the government grudgingly admitted. Between 1.2 and 3.5 million people took part in the strikes and demonstrations. In Paris alone, up to 300,000 demonstrated in the streets, among them a large contingent of students. This led the government to attack the movement for “sending 15-year-olds into the streets.” The National Union of French Students retorted that Sarkozy's pension cuts would eliminate a million jobs for the youth. At the Paris demonstration, some workers called for an “insurrectional strike” that would force the government to negotiate by shutting off oil supplies. Also in Paris, the new women's group “Dare to Be Feminist!” – an organization formed last year in response to funding cuts to family planning programs — assumed a prominent place in the demonstration. Feminists have been pointing out that working women will suffer the most from the changes in the retirement law, given how most women leave the labor force for a significant part of their adult lives and thus do not accumulate enough years in the system to receive a full pension, even under the present system.

By this time, dockworkers had shut down the Port of Marseille, the country's largest, over a separate set of issues surrounding a plan to restructure and reduce the workforce. In that city, around 150,000 had participated in a demonstration during the October 12 strike. By October 12-13, 11 of the 12 oil refineries on French soil were inoperative, due to lack of supplies and to the strikes against Sarkozy's pension cuts. Fairly substantial strikes still gripped other sectors by October 13 as well, among them public transport and schools. Another large set of demonstrations was scheduled for Saturday, October 16.

OBSTACLES FACING LABOR AND THE LEFT

The September-October strikes in France are comparable to those of 1995, after which the government shelved an earlier set of austerity measures. This year's strikes had a different tone, however, than those in 1995. With a hard-right government in power, there was from the beginning far less of a sense that Sarkozy could be made to retreat in the face of mass protests. As mentioned above, Sarkozy pushed the new retirement law through the National Assembly shortly after the September 7 strike, in clear defiance not only of labor, but also of public opinion. And he got most of it through the Senate by October 10. A few last-minute changes that eased the pension criteria for parents of the disabled and mothers of three or more children were so small that they only accentuated the utter intransigence of the government in the face of massive popular protests.

How has the government gotten away with this in the face of both organized labor and public opinion, as manifested in several days of massive strikes and street protests? Part of the answer lies in the way in which Sarkozy has attempted to maintain support by whipping up hatred against immigrants and ethno-religious minorities. These were the same tactics that brought him to power in 2007, when he campaigned on the slogan of using a heavy-duty cleansing machine to clean up the "scum" in France's minority communities. The youth of these communities in the suburbs of Paris and other large cities had been staging protests against police killings that involved the torching of hundreds of automobiles. In his 2007 campaign and since, Sarkozy has tapped into the support base of the anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic National Front, a neo-fascist movement that has sometimes scored 20% or higher in national elections, with the rest of the electorate often pretty evenly divided between the traditional right — out of which Sarkozy emerged — and leftist parties. These not very subtle appeals to the neo-fascist vote have increased the electoral base of the rightist parties that back Sarkozy.

Sarkozy took three specific racist actions this summer in an attempt to stave off mounting popular anger over the economy and his austerity measures. First, the government rounded up hundreds of Roma, deporting them summarily to Romania. So blatant was the racism of this action that France is now under investigation by the European Union. Second, Sarkozy pushed through parliament a law banning the wearing of the full-face veil in public, not merely in public buildings or schools, but even on the streets. On this one, the pusillanimous parliamentary leftists — Socialists and Communists — abstained, when they didn't back this bit of demagoguery outright. This new law was quickly upheld by the Constitutional Court, which at nearly the same time decided against allowing gay and lesbian couples to adopt children. Third, Sarkozy has proposed a law mandating that French citizens of immigrant origin involved in violent altercations with the police would be stripped of their citizenship and deported to their birthplace, even if they came to France as a small child. He got this one through the National Assembly on October 12, the very day of the mass strikes. All of these measures played to popular fear and hatred of the "other."

But despite this racist demagoguery, Sarkozy has continued to lose public support over the summer and into the fall, while the strikes and demonstrations against the pension plan have

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enjoyed massive and growing popular support. Therefore, the answer to Sarkozy's success in pushing through his anti-labor measures must involve something else as well.

Some have noted that as French unions have declined in strength in recent decades, the tactic of mass mobilization on the streets has increasingly replaced the mass strike that used to shut down economic activity more completely. This is certainly an objective fact that shows the weakened power of labor, in a period when the relative number of production workers in France has declined, as industrial production has shifted to low-wage societies like China and India.

But there is a subjective factor to be considered here as well. What has also declined drastically in recent decades is the belief – once widespread among large sections of the French working classes and the intellectuals — that a radical uprooting of capitalism is not only theoretically possible, but also achievable. In the present atmosphere, influenced by the collapse of a misguided (but for many years widespread) belief that the totalitarian state-capitalist systems of the USSR or China represented positive alternatives, the notion that there is no alternative to the rule of capital has become hegemonic. Until that vicious ideological circle is broken, labor and the left will remain stuck.

(We should not idealize those earlier days, however, when the Communist Party-run CGT cloaked its concessions to capital and the state in Marxist, even revolutionary language. This was seen in 1968, when the CGT maneuvered to derail a massive anti-systemic student-worker uprising in favor of a large pay raise for workers and new elections. While some independent leftist currents grew in response to the betrayal of 1968, the Maoists grew even more, until their popularity among students and intellectuals crashed during the mid-1970s, to be replaced by anti-Marxist theories like the New Philosophy and the post-structuralism of Michel Foucault.)

Thus, while French workers have demonstrated *en masse* against Sarkozy, and the public has supported them, there is also a sense of weary inevitability surrounding the policies of this reactionary politician, who functions, in large part, as the personification of capital in this particular society at this particular moment. The same is true, albeit with local variations, in the other European countries that have experienced serious labor unrest in recent months.

Source: <http://www.usmarxisthumanists.org/articles/kevin-anderson-french-european-strikes-reveal-mass-discontent-and-its-limits/>