

France: Workers fight back against factory closures

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On October 12th, less than two weeks after a 50,000 strong demonstration in Paris against the European Union fiscal treaty, workers were on the streets of the capital again. They faced the CRS riot police using batons and vicious pepper spray, to protest against a rising tide of unemployment and factory closures.

The Confédération Générale du Travail, (CGT) - the more militant of the larger union federations in France ? had called for a day of action for jobs and ?to defend industry?. All over France, workers responded in large numbers and transformed it into a day of action against factory closures.

A militant response was just what was needed; on the morning of the 12th one thousand car workers attempted to storm the Salon de l'Automobile ? site of the Paris Motor Show. For several hours, they bravely faced up to the CRS robocops, using a viciously strong pepper gas. Philippe Poutou, presidential candidate of the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA) was the only political leader to take part in the melee. Unfortunately, few could hear his speech above the noise of the firecrackers.

In the front ranks were workers from Peugeot Aulnay, a factory near Paris that the management decided to close in July, threatening several thousand jobs. During his election campaign, Socialist Party President François Hollande and Arnaud, Minister for ?Redressement Productif? (recovery of production), declared this decision unacceptable. Yet now they have accepted it, whilst negotiating a few cosmetic improvements to save their own faces.

Since Hollande?s election in May, on a promise to stimulate the economy and create jobs, the freeze in factory closures that preceded the poll has turned into an avalanche of bad news for the workers. A series of big companies have laid-off workers: Peugeot, the drug company Sanofi, Air France-KLM and the supermarket chain Carrefour. Mittal has decided to close its blast furnaces in Florange, where workers have mobilised to resist this for months. Sanofi-Aventis, a pharmaceutical company, has decided to restructure its research division, despite high profits and huge state handouts. Many other employers are following suit.

On the afternoon of the 12th, the demonstration called by the CGT showed the scale of workers' determination to defend their own jobs and their solidarity with other struggles, with 25,000 on the streets in Paris and 90,000 across the whole of France. But it also witnessed the ambiguity and lack of any clear strategy of the union leadership. CGT leader Bernard Thibaut had called it as a ?warning? to the government. Many workers were more concrete and called for a complete ban on closures, an ?interdiction des licenciements?. Some, influenced by the radical left, were chanting, ?Today on the streets, tomorrow in the factories, let us stop the sackings?.

The newly elected President and his government are confronted by a blizzard of bad economic statistics:

unemployment has topped 10 per cent, GDP growth is close to zero, the country may soon be in recession again, and the perspectives for the next year are bleak. The first measures of the new government were substantially below the expectations of the workers who voted for it. It has limply approved the EU fiscal treaty, again with cosmetic changes, a measure it promised to radically change into a pact for growth. Elected on a programme against austerity, it has imposed 40 billion euros? worth of cuts and pledged to reduce the state budget deficit to below 3 per cent of GDP within three years.

While the teachers, to whom Hollande made the most explicit pledges, will be spared for the time being, all other sectors will face years of decreasing budgets and job cuts. Raising the banner of increased competitiveness for French exports, he has encouraged unions and bosses to negotiate in order to lower labour costs, unavoidably at the expense of the workers' rights.

Interior minister Manuel Vals has shamefully boosted his popularity among the right wing by carrying on with Sarkozy?s racist line, including the destruction of Roma camps and deportations, continued police repression of youth in the banlieues, and the stigmatisation of Muslims.

The government is already in a bad situation. Its cuts and the austerity have disappointed millions of workers who voted for Hollande and this translates into plummeting approval ratings in the polls. Of course, the most important question is: what next for the workers' movement?

Here, unfortunately, the government can count on support from the trade union leaders. The largest federation in terms of membership, the Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (CFDT), is only too willing to prolong talks with the government and avoid any action. Force Ouvrière (FO) also refused to join the CGT demo. Both are traditionally closer to the Socialist Party.

The CGT is, of course, still closer to the French Communist Party (PCF), which is now part of the Front de Gauche (Left Front-FdG), which initiated the anti-EU Treaty demonstration on 30 September. But even the CGT will probably only call for another day of action if there is considerable pressure from its rank and file, and even then only with reluctance.

The Front de Gauche is now divided between a PCF-dominated wing who only want to exert pressure on the government for more reforms, and one led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his Parti de Gauche (Left Party) who want a more militant course of street demonstrations. They would like to follow the example of Syriza in Greece, building a large and vocal movement against austerity in the hope of taking over the major electoral role if, or rather, when, the PS fails to handle the crisis.

On the main demonstration on 12th, Mélenchon was clearly the star attraction, with large numbers of workers flocking around him, while Philippe Poutou and Olivier Besancenot of the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) and Nathalie Artaud of Lutte Ouvriere, were yesterday?s celebrities.

The radical left in France is confused and divided. The NPA is still reduced and demoralised after its abysmally low score in the presidential elections and the split of its right wing to join Mélenchon. It calls for a ?left opposition to the government? and for a national campaign against sackings and closures. However, this perspective is weakened in two important respects: the NPA has not given any convincing analysis of the triumph of the FdG nor developed tactics to relate to it.

Secondly, there is no attempt to relate to the consciousness of the workers who voted for Hollande in their millions by demanding that the government do what it promised to do and implement measures to save jobs and improve workers' lives. The key divide will be between those who support the workers and those who carry out the bosses' instructions.

Of course, the left 'knows' that Hollande will do no such thing but that is simply not the case for millions, as the elections showed. Left groups that got pathetic scores in those elections have no right to complacently ignore this or to wait passively for events to teach them how wrong they were. Thirty years of alternating reformist and right wing governments alone have plainly failed to do this. The biggest weakness of the French left is its smug inability to understand reformism or to apply the tactics developed long ago by Lenin, Trotsky and the Communist international to combat and defeat it.

Building a large national movement requires a bold united front tactic towards both of the reformist parties and the trade unions. A key question is to halt the closures and for this demonstrations, or dramatic direct actions against symbolic buildings, are not enough. What is needed is a wave of full-scale occupations of the threatened workplaces - such as took place in the 1930s and 1960s and 70s. At the same time, it is vital to mobilise the millions of unemployed, and the young, precariously employed too, in a mass campaign for well paid jobs, with full union rates and rights.

The campaign must also raise offensive anticapitalist demands - nationalisation of all firms declaring redundancies without compensation, a halt to all the cuts, making the rich pay by steeply progressive taxation, nationalising the banks. The Left should call for the reformist parties, which still have the loyalty of millions of workers, to take up these demands while warning that they will evade and duck such commitments.

Such demands can become the rallying cry of militant workers and youth for a genuine workers' government that will break with capitalism. That is the real lesson from Greece. It is what a real anticapitalist party should be concentrating on, not imitating the left reformist politics of Alexis Tsipras, Syriza's leader. Concentrating simply on a flat, propagandistic 'opposition' to the government will tend to isolate the NPA from the mass of workers in the coming months. It will not be enough to guide the recovery and programmatic reorientation that the NPA so desperately needs if it is to survive, let alone play a key role in leading workers' resistance in the period ahead.

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