

## FRENCH REVOLUTIONS<sup>1</sup>

Rick Wolff©

In France, refinery workers blockaded oil depots, leaving as many as one third of the nation's gasoline stations dry last week. Protestors temporarily blocked access to the Marseilles airport. Rolling labor strikes have been ongoing for weeks, with major union leaders calling for two new strike days in the weeks to come. On Monday, the French government estimated that the protests had cost the economy up to 400 million euros per day.

### A Democratic Uprising

The historic protests are in response to the French government's proposed austerity measures (reductions in government services, the most unpopular of them a decision to delay the pension age by two years). An alliance of trade unions, students and young people, and leftist political parties has mobilized millions to challenge the French establishment with an intensity not seen for decades. Many of the protesters would define "austerity" as making the mass of people pay for fixing the global economic crisis that they did not cause. Having suffered the unemployment, foreclosures, and other deep social costs of the crisis itself, they are now told to accept more suffering as their governments offset the costs of supporting failed corporations. A clear two-thirds of French people support or sympathize with the goals of the demonstrators and strikers.

In France, a genuine democratic upsurge has surprised all those who thought, hoped, or feared that such an upsurge could no longer happen in Western Europe. For many weeks, public opinion polls have shown that a clear two-thirds of French people support or sympathize with the goals of the demonstrators and strikers.

Those goals? They demand that the costs of fixing capitalism's crisis be paid chiefly by taxes on banks, large corporations, and the wealthy. These groups are declared to be (1) those most able to pay, (2) those who benefited most from the risky speculation that led up to the collapse, (3) those whose investment and business activities were key causes of the crisis, and (4) those who got the biggest, earliest bailouts from governments subservient to them.

### A Government By and For Whom?

Though the French struggle against austerity is larger, more unified, and better organized than parallel struggles elsewhere, many nations are facing the same issue: First governments borrowed to bail out an economic system that had exploded and stopped functioning, and now governments need to raise the money to pay back the borrowed funds with interest. So they propose policies such as cutting teachers in public schools, reducing help to the unemployed, and renegeing on decades of promises to workers about when they will get retirement pensions. What governments do *not* do is tax corporations and the wealthy to raise the money needed to fix their messes.

The strikes are rendering the Sarkozy government increasingly isolated and ineffective. Even the French elite—known there as the *patronat*—wants Sarkozy to preside effectively over a peaceful, docile, and profitable France, not one convulsed by such powerful oppositions. Meanwhile, workers re-learn—and remind everyone else—that without their work, the economy

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stops. Corporate executives and politicians may bark orders, but nothing happens unless and until workers comply. In their solidarity, the French rediscover the taproots of their political power.

Meanwhile, workers re-learn—and remind everyone else—that without their work, the economy stops. Inspired by the strikes and demonstrations in Greece, the French have raised the stakes of the struggle against austerity. Elsewhere in Europe, people follow the French events with the intense interest of those who sense that they are seeing their own futures unfold. What will be the outcome of a mass movement that says no to the subordination of people and governments to the profits, crises, and bailouts of a poorly functioning capitalist system?

### **What About the United States?**

In the United States, unemployment rose twice as much after the crash as it did in France. Meanwhile, austerity is well underway. Federal law denies states and municipalities the right to borrow money to balance their operating budgets. Hence, their response to sharp declines in tax revenues caused by the economic crisis has been to lay off workers and cut government services.

This only worsens unemployment and deprives people of public services when they most need them. It is widely rumored that President Obama's Deficit Reduction Commission will propose, after the election, that eligibility for Social Security retirement benefits be pushed back some years (just what Sarkozy tried). That would keep older workers from retiring, blocking the unemployed and younger workers from replacing them.

As in France, there is an opportunity to inspire those dissatisfied by the current economic system and increasingly interested in moving beyond it. But U.S. workers so far remain much more quiet and docile than our French counterparts. France has witnessed 2 million or more citizens repeatedly gathered in coordinated, overwhelmingly peaceful, countrywide demonstrations. France has one-fifth the U.S. population; here, comparable demonstrations would include 10 million people. Yet the only criticism in the U.S. that so far expresses itself in a public movement comes in the form of the Tea Party. As in France, there is an opportunity to inspire those dissatisfied by the current economic system and increasingly interested in moving beyond it. Once before, after all, a revolution in France inspired one here.