

French Workers Take the Lead Revolt Against Globalization

The front cover of the May/June issue of *Foreign Affairs*, a leading journal of the American foreign policy establishment, frets that: “The world may be moving inexorably toward one of those tragic moments that will lead historians to ask, why was nothing done in time?” The “tragic moment” will come when the millions of victims of the “failure of today’s advanced global capitalism to keep spreading the wealth” take their revenge.

Anticipations of revolt against the existing order are not regular features of this staid house organ of the world’s most powerful ruling class. Only a few years ago, America’s rulers were congratulating themselves on their victory in the Cold War, and toying with the notion that perhaps history had ended and they had landed on top. Two recent political developments reminded them of how unstable their global “New World Order” actually is.

The first of these was Pat Buchanan’s unanticipated success in the early Republican presidential primaries. Buchanan, representing the far-right fringe of bourgeois political opinion, staged a remarkable challenge to the respectable big-money candidates by tapping the anger and resentment of the “little people” victimized by corporate America’s ruthless pursuit of profit. Posing as the defender of blue-collar America against the big bankers and downsizers, Buchanan campaigned on a platform of overt racism, chauvinism and protectionism. Buchanan’s challenge was eventually buried under a barrage of negative publicity. But, for a brief moment, it illuminated some of the enormous pressures building up beneath the surface of the American social order.

The other, far more important, and, for the capitalists, far more worrisome development, was the explosion of class struggle in France late last year. This was lightly covered by the international capitalist media. The ruling classes of Europe and the world desperately want to believe that the strikes that shook France in November and December of 1995 were merely a death spasm of the old world order. But in their heart of hearts they know—as do militant workers around the globe—that France’s winter of discontent was but a prologue.

Ras-le-bol

The Chirac-Juppé regime, whose austerity measures provoked the strikes, could not have been a more fitting symbol of the arrogance and cynicism of post-Cold War bourgeois politics. In May 1995, the Gaullist mayor of Paris, Jacques Chirac, stood for president before the French electorate with promises to end the growing “social fracture,” and to address problems such as unemployment and homelessness. But once installed in the Elysée Palace, and backed by a solid parliamentary ma-

jority, Chirac set his prime minister, Alain Juppé, about the work of implementing his real agenda: balancing the state budget on the backs of workers, retirees and the unemployed.

The “Juppé plan” for reducing the \$45 billion deficit in the government’s social welfare fund was announced in mid-November. It included requiring public employees to work 40 years (rather than 37.5) before collecting their full pensions, and abolishing the century-old right of railway workers—whose life expectancy is ten years lower than the average—to retire at age 50. A series of new taxes on health benefits, retirement and family allocations was projected. Of the revenues the new taxes would bring in, only 11 percent would come from businesses; the balance would come out of the pockets of wage earners. In addition, unions would be deprived of their right, enshrined in the constitution since the end of World War II, to manage health and retirement funds (the *Sécu*) along with employers; *Sécu* directors would now be nominated by the prime minister and approved by parliament. Moreover, the Juppé “reforms” were the companion piece to a “draft plan” to privatize railways, telecommunications and energy, shut down unprofitable railway lines, and promote private clinics at the expense of public hospitals. Thus did Chirac-Juppé, following in the footsteps of Reagan and Thatcher, propose to heal the “social fracture.”

Almost as infuriating to the majority of the French population as these measures was the man who introduced them. A graduate of the country’s elite school of public administration, *L’Institut d’études politiques*, Alain Juppé personifies European capitalism’s arrogant technocratic style. For Juppé and his co-thinkers, his reforms were the only conceivable way of reducing the deficit, thereby satisfying the criteria for entry into Europe’s currency union in 1999. Anyone who called into question this goal was, by his lights, stupid or insane. He branded public-service workers as “privileged,” while using his own high office to procure a well-appointed apartment for a relative at greatly reduced rent. Juppé is by nature secretive and impatient of discussion. His reforms were introduced in the National Assembly by decree, without prior consultation or opportunity for debate. The patronizing tone of France’s ruling political caste was summed up by one striking railway worker:

“In 1968 we confronted the reactionaries head on; it was simple. We knew where we stood. Today we face people who say they are ‘open,’ in favor of dialogue. If we say we don’t agree with them, they answer that ‘you have not understood,’ as if there were no ideology involved, as if the problems were technical, and they explain again. The cleavage is between those who understand and those who don’t. In fact, there is only one ideology: theirs.”

—*Le Monde*, 9 December 1995

France's rulers were soon jolted out of their smugness. On 24 November, railway workers went on strike to protest the Juppé plan, bringing train traffic to a halt throughout the country. Striking workers on the Paris underground, the Métro, likewise made sure that not a single train moved. The strikes spread to include, at different times, postal workers, electrical workers, bank employees, air traffic controllers, miners, truckers, hospital workers, teachers, secondary school and university students. At their height, the massive demonstrations called by the unions brought more than two million people into the streets—a number that Juppé had earlier said would be sufficient to force his resignation. Red flags waved over the marchers, in some places to the accompaniment of the *Internationale*. The sleepest of provincial towns came to life, as thousands demonstrated, occupied city halls and blockaded the streets with cars.

Beginning as limited, defensive actions, the strikes and marches rapidly became more than a protest against specific economic measures, or a defense of particular sectional interests. The most common phrase used to describe the movement was *ras-le-bol*: an overflowing of the cup of discontent. Workers of all occupations, as well as other oppressed groups, saw the movement of November-December 1995 as a chance to strike back for years of declining living standards, harder work, longer hours, humiliation on the job, official corruption and deceit. Opinion polls showed early on that more than 60 percent of the public supported the strike. Strikers were applauded in the streets. Donations in money and in goods flowed to strike headquarters. Unemployed youth from the suburban ghettos of France's major cities, as well as numerous immigrant groups, were prominent in the marches. Respected academics offered their support in the form of newspaper petitions and, on several occasions, personal appearances before assemblies of strikers. In short, nearly all of working and involuntarily non-working France saw the cause of the strikers as their own, and the strikers saw themselves as fighting the fight of the whole working class. One railwayman described the rapid evolution of his consciousness:

"I threw myself into this fight as a conductor. The next day, I felt myself to be above all a railroad worker. Then I took on the identity of a public worker. Now I see myself simply as a worker...."

—*Le Monde*, 12-13 December 1995

As public-service strikes unfolded in Belgium, where thousands of trade unionists marched in Brussels to protest their government's plan to privatize the railroads, and Milan was paralyzed by a streetcar strike, fear grew in banks, boardrooms and editorial offices across the continent that it was not only the fate of the Juppé government, but perhaps that of Europe itself, that hung in the balance. *Der Spiegel* wrote that Chancellor Helmut Kohl, "looks with much apprehension toward Paris," and wondered if, in certain high places in the German government, France was now being regarded as "the sick man of Europe." For a conservative Swedish news-

paper, *Svenska Dagblidet*, the future of the European unity deal signed at Maastricht was being determined "in the streets of France" (quoted in *Le Monde*, 5 December 1995). Perhaps the most celebrated journalistic comment of all was the headline in *Le Monde* which called the strikes the "first revolt against globalization" (7 December 1995). Thus, just as the European capitalists were getting comfortable with the notion that communism is dead, class struggle a thing of the past, and the logic of capital omnipotent, they faced the biggest eruption of social struggle since the great British miners' strike of 1984-85.

French Paradoxes

Yet, looking back, the contrast between the breadth of the strike movement and the meagerness of its results is striking. It is true that Juppé retreated on several key points. The plans for closing down railway lines, increasing the retirement age for railway workers, and restricting the pensions of public employees have been shelved. However, Juppé remains firmly entrenched, and the major provisions of his plan—increased taxes for wage earners, frozen health benefits, removal of welfare funds from union control—are going forward. By May Day, Jacques Chirac felt confident enough to lecture the people more sternly than ever on the need "to be draconian in the reduction of [public] expenditures" (*Le Monde*, 3 May).

One cannot understand why the government managed to resume the offensive so quickly without examining a second apparent paradox. On Tuesday, 12 December, some two million people were in the streets demanding Juppé's resignation and the total withdrawal of his plan. Yet, by the end of the week, Juppé was still in the saddle and the strikers were going back to work. How did such a broad and militant mass movement come to so abrupt an anti-climax? Why did a few significant but limited concessions suffice to extinguish the blaze?

The standard explanation offered by the bourgeois media was that the workers, disappointed that the private sector had not followed their lead, and divided in their response to Juppé's concessions, grew weary as Christmas approached, and decided—perhaps with some misgivings, but more or less spontaneously—to end their strike. This explanation is not confined to the mainstream media. It is echoed on the far left as well. Lutte Ouvrière (LO), the largest French organization claiming to be Trotskyist, commented:

"The strike took a week to reach a part of the public sector, almost two weeks to reach the teachers. To involve the whole private sector would have taken much more time again...."

"Neither the railworkers nor anyone else could hold out for the necessary time. The strike came up against the buffers with the approach of Christmas—the teachers going on holiday, the big industrial enterprises shutting down partially or totally for a week or more."

—*Lutte Ouvrière*, 22 December 1995,
quoted in *Workers' Liberty*, January

Daniel Bensaid, a leading spokesperson for the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), flagship of the ostensibly Trotskyist United Secretariat, made a somewhat different assessment:

“[the strikers] might have obtained even more were it not for divisions in the trade union movement that left the government a margin of manoeuvre. Despite its massive scale, this struggle hardly gave birth to grassroots forms of unitary self-organization. Although the union confederations...found themselves side by side in the streets, there was no trade union front capable of putting forward an overall strategic timetable of mobilization or presenting a platform of common demands.”

—*New Left Review*, January-February

The left tended to avoid the key question of the role of the union leadership. For LO, the latter hardly seemed to exist. Bensaid, whose article is very detailed and precise on many aspects of the strikes, turns decidedly vague when it comes to the role played by leaders. His references to “divisions,” lack of grassroots organization, and the failure to put forward common demands are in themselves entirely insufficient as explanations. In what follows, we will argue that the role of political parties and, especially of the trade-union leaders, was not only an important factor in the outcome of the struggle, but the key element. Only by paying close attention to the chronology of events, and to the response of the leadership at every turn, is it possible to understand how and why the workers could be demobilized as quickly as they were.

Unions and Politics in France

Unlike the Labour Party in Britain, which was created as a political arm of the unions, French unions are essentially the creatures of political parties. They have traditionally been organized along party-political, rather than craft or industrial lines, and engage in fierce competition with one another for members. There are three big union federations. The largest is the CFDT (Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail), closely associated with the Socialist Party. Second in size is the CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail), historically aligned with the French Communist Party (PCF). The FO (Force Ouvrière) is the smallest of the three, and, unlike the others, has its main base not in industry, but among white-collar government workers. It originated in 1947 as an anti-Communist split-off from the CGT, and was built with generous technical and financial assistance from the CIA. The FO flaunts its pro-capitalist credentials by refusing to join with the other unions in the traditional May Day parade.

This time it was not the openly pro-capitalist FO leadership, but rather the head of the Socialist-Party-affiliated CFDT, Nicole Notat, who played the role of strikebreaker. A former schoolteacher with little experience of class struggle, Notat sought for her union the role of “privileged interlocutor” with the Juppé government, i.e., recipient of special favors in return for class collaboration. Notat therefore took a position of “critical support” for Juppé’s reforms—a stance for which she was

repudiated publicly by a sizable portion of her own membership, and driven bodily from the first of the big union demonstrations in Paris on 24 November.

The relatively militant posture taken by Marc Blondel, Gaullist president of the FO, was conditioned by his recent ejection from the “privileged interlocutor” role in which Notat sought to replace him. Partly as a reward for its services in the Cold War, the government had accorded the FO one third of the administrative posts in the management of the *Sécu*. But with the “Communist menace” defeated and union membership at a post-war low, the French ruling class was no longer so inclined to make concessions to the workers. One of Juppé’s proposed “reforms” was to cut the unions out of the management of the *Sécu* altogether.

Realizing, in his own words, that there was no longer “any grain to grind,” Blondel suddenly discovered within himself unsuspected reserves of militancy. For the first time since the 1947 split, the fiercely anti-Communist FO joined its traditional arch-rival, the CGT, in demonstrations and strikes. This accommodation occurred partly at the urging of a layer of FO leaders aligned with the pseudo-Trotskyist Pierre Lambert’s Parti des Travailleurs (PT). But the main reason for Blondel’s switch was that the CGT, with its extensive industrial base, was crucial to any successful resistance to Juppé.

While its leadership is reformist to the core, the CGT has historically enjoyed a reputation as the most militant and combative of the union federations, and has tended to draw around it the most class-conscious elements of the labor movement. But the CGT leadership never lived down its infamous betrayal of the revolutionary hopes that stirred the working class in the struggles of May-June 1968. Following the lead of the Stalinist Communist Party, the CGT brass were openly hostile to the student radicals who ignited the rebellion, and spared no effort to deflect the growing revolutionary mood among the workers into harmless, bread-and-butter trade unionism. This betrayal was compounded by the CGT’s shameless class collaboration during Mitterrand’s Union of the Left government in the early 1980s, in which the PCF initially held the ministry of transport. The CGT discouraged strikes, especially on the railways, to avoid giving offense to Mitterrand’s Socialists, who were in turn eager to prove their respectability to the bourgeoisie. But sections of the CGT’s base remained combative in defiance of their leaders. A major strike took place at the SNCF (France’s government-owned railways) in 1986 in response to then prime minister Chirac’s plans to lay off thousands of workers.

The Socialist Party and its allied union federation, the CFDT, were at first more skillful than the Stalinists in exploiting the radical impulses of 1968 for their own reformist ends. For a time, it was the CFDT rather than the CGT that attracted the more militant workers. However, years of Socialist Party austerity, combined with Notat’s overt defection to the class enemy, left the field open for the CGT. The anger of much of its base, and

especially railroad workers, over the Juppé plan provided the CGT and its leader, Louis Viannet, with a long-sought opportunity to refurbish their militant credentials.

Public Strikes & Autoworkers

The public workers' strike was initiated by the CGT leadership, but as a limited defensive action. The union bureaucrats understood that the Juppé plan was an unprecedented attack, and aimed to pressure the government into negotiating. But the strike movement soon went beyond its intended limits. As one French academic, Francois Dubet, observed:

"On all evidence, the strikes and demonstrations of December have not been directed from on high, and the political and trade-union general staffs appear as astonished as the government by the success of the mobilizations."

—*Liberation*, 26 December 1995

It is always difficult to evaluate the dynamics and potentialities of social movements from afar. But one thing is beyond doubt: even in the early phases, the idea of spreading the strike to the private sector, i.e., of a general strike, was gaining ground. During the first two weeks, half of the postal sorting centers had followed the example of the railroad workers; power workers had also come out, reducing production of electricity by one third. The action was spread by contingents of union militants that went from one work site to another. A striking railworker told an assembly of postal workers in Paris:

"We must toss the Juppé plan into the dustbin of history...The SNCF [railroads] and the RATP [Métro], that is not enough. It will take postal and electricity workers. We can win, but it will take everyone to do it. We must paralyze the economy. We must go to the factories and explain."

—*Le Monde*, 30 November 1995

The same team went to another mail sorting center. Again, a railroad worker spoke:

"Juppé has deliberately introduced the reform of the *Sécu*, knowing that we would be the first to react. He wants to play on the divisions within the unions and turn public opinion against us. Today the RATP has joined our action, yesterday the bus drivers, tomorrow, why not private enterprises? A general strike becomes possible. We must make a liar of Juppé!"

"As time passes," the article adds, "the more does the idea of a general strike raise the spirits of the workers." *Le Monde* of 5 December further reported how Métro strikers hung the red flag over the main RATP depot in Paris, and how the slogan, "No, the Commune is not dead!" appeared on the walls of the Gare du Nord. At the Gare d'Austerlitz:

"One CGT delegate explains in an almost anodyne tone that 'there are 180,000 railway workers on our side, but now we must speak of a general strike involving millions of comrades.' CGT representatives from the Bank of France have come to announce that they will launch their strike appeal on Thursday. 'With us, there is a feeling that goes beyond trade-union organizations. People say to us: 'it is becoming possible; we have to do something.'"

Meanwhile, back at the RATP depot:

"Maryvonne, agent of the National Treasury, regrets having to refrain from striking. 'We see the wealth that is accumulated as a result of fiscal policy. Certain departments have doubled the number of tax deductions for the big fortunes, and there are now 5 million living in poverty [*exclus*] in France!' For a little while, Maryvonne, with her tailor-made clothes and her pearl necklace, joins the striking RATP worker who hung out the red flag at the entrance of the depot; she explains that 'this situation will last as long as the revenues of capital remain more important than those of labor.' She too wants a general strike."

On 2 December, Marc Blondel of Force Ouvrière appealed to "all sectors of activity to enter progressively into the strike" to demand the withdrawal of the Juppé plan. A hundred and sixty-eight militants of the CFDT defied Notat's treacherous leadership and published a petition demanding a "general strike everywhere."

Nevertheless, the strike failed to take hold in the private sector. With an 11 percent unemployment rate, the workers were cautious. Also, Juppé's demand that public-sector workers work 40 (instead of 37.5) years before collecting pensions had already been conceded by unions in the private sector. Unlike 1968, there were no spontaneous mass walkouts in the factories, and private-sector participation in mass demonstrations was spotty.

Yet it is generally acknowledged that most private-sector workers saw their public sector comrades as striking for all of working France. The private sector, moreover, was not untouched by the struggle. In the provinces, truckers struck, demanding, among other things, the right to retire at 50 like railway workers. In Lorraine, 15,000 miners went on strike for two days over wages, and 2,000 of them engaged in a pitched battle with police in front of management offices in the town of Freyming-Merlebach. Fifty people were injured, five of them seriously. The question thus arises of whether a determined initiative by the union leadership, particularly the CGT, could have succeeded in spreading the strike to the private sector.

We will never know because the attempt was never made. We do know that Louis Viannet and the upper layers of the CGT recoiled at the prospect of a general strike. While never condemning the idea outright, they engaged in a behind-the-scenes effort to avoid calling on private-sector workers to join the battle. A reporter commented:

"If the FO can eventually appeal for a general strike in the private sector without being ready to take the consequences—the great majority of its apparatus being in the public sector—it is not the same for the CGT, for whom an appeal for a general strike would have a strong impact."

—*Le Monde*, 6 December 1995

France's biggest working-class battalions are in the auto industry. The decision of auto workers to stop production was the turning point of the general strike of 1968. At state-owned Renault, in particular, the CGT is deeply entrenched. Unlike in North America, where union membership is often a condition of employment, and dues are automatically deducted each month by the

employer, in France there are no union shops nor dues check-offs. Joining a given union and paying monthly dues is a strictly voluntary act. Each union has a core of dedicated militants, who must go among the workers and argue for the organization's policies at regular intervals. An appeal by the central leadership of the CGT for a general strike at Renault or other CGT bastions would therefore have had real impact, whatever the ultimate outcome.

Yet the CGT at Renault proceeded with extreme caution. In the CGT stronghold of Le Mans in northwestern France:

"Renault workers move with determined but prudent steps. They know that their attitude will set the pace for the whole region and deliberately refrain from inciting an intensification of the strikes. 'We are not strike fomenters; for the present, we do not envisage an unlimited strike,' insists Alain Boulay, a CGT official."

—*Le Monde*, 5 December 1995

Resolutions of solidarity with striking public-sector workers were passed at general assemblies of Renault workers. Contingents were sent to the demonstrations on the "days of action." There were three and four-hour symbolic work stoppages. But, to the surprise of management, during the three weeks of confrontation production never actually ceased. There was undoubtedly some reluctance to strike on the part of the rank and file. But it was a reluctance the CGT leadership made no attempt to overcome.

The reasons for the CGT leadership's "prudent course" are not hard to fathom. So long as the strike was confined to public workers, it remained a trade-union struggle, albeit a particularly militant one. Juppé was attacking government employees, not private-sector workers. A strike on their part would therefore have signified the transformation of the trade-union struggle into a political struggle; it would have meant the beginning of a general working-class confrontation with the government, a situation the CGT officialdom was determined to avoid.

The CGT Congress & the General Strike

The CGT's forty-fifth annual congress took place outside Paris from 3 to 8 December, when hopes for a general strike were at their peak.

"While the week [of the congress] will be decisive for the different social movements that are unfolding, M. Viannet knows that his organization holds the key to any solution. The CGT has the upper hand in the movements now in progress. At the SNCF, unlike 1986 with the spontaneous formation of strike committees, the CGT maintains its authority with the strikers. In the postal sorting centers, it co-directs the strike with the SUD [a left-reformist union] and, at the RATP, it has a preponderance among the unions."

—*Le Monde*, 5 December 1995

In the first days of the congress, the issue of spreading the strike to the private sector—about which Viannet was extremely vague—became the subject of intense debate. Several delegates protested Viannet's retreat from his earlier declaration that Juppé had to withdraw

his plan as a precondition for negotiations. About half the delegates intervening from the floor spoke in favor of appealing for a general strike, arguing that, without such a clear-cut call to action, the position of the CGT was "blurry" and "ambiguous."

But this is exactly how the leadership wanted it. In the end, a motion was adopted "to generalize the strike for the withdrawal of the Juppé plan and the attacks on the retirement system" (*Le Monde*, 6 December 1995). To the uninitiated, the difference between calling for a general strike and the "generalization of the strike" might seem trivial. But for working-class militants and their enemies, the deliberate avoidance of the words "general strike" was significant. Even the ambiguous formulations about "generalizing the strike" had been resisted by the leadership. According to the LCR's *Rouge* (14 December 1995):

"The CGT position on the current strike was discussed four times....But the vigilance of delegates was necessary each time to avoid the ratification of resolutions on the current situation, proposed and read at top speed by the presidium, in which the words, 'generalization of the struggle' were absent, and, each time, reintroduced at the request of the body. On the evening of Thursday, 7 December, Louis Viannet himself had to take the floor amid unmistakable discontent. The turnout for demonstrations called for that day had been massive. Certain sections of the membership, particularly the railway workers, expected a firmer commitment, which did not seem to be forthcoming from the leadership. Viannet thus toughened up his text in a full session of the congress, after interventions from the delegates."

The leadership and its supporters did not come out and assert that the idea of a general strike was mistaken, but merely that it was not up to the CGT congress, but rather the federation's component unions, to issue such a call. Said one delegate, "We have over the years played the game of calling push-button strikes. This is not the moment to revive the schemas of the past." Another declared: "Only the workers can vote on the course of the movement" (*Le Monde*, 6 December 1995). Thus the leadership sought to disguise its fear of intensifying the struggle behind a veneer of concern for democratic principle.

The delegates, however, were the elected representatives of CGT workers. And a general strike, although it may begin spontaneously, requires some form of centralized leadership. While the CGT did not represent the entire working class, it was the single most powerful workers' organization in the struggle, and a general-strike call from the CGT congress would have enormously accelerated the spontaneous movement in the ranks. The hyper-"democratism" of the CGT leadership was therefore nothing more than a new disguise for a time-honored Stalinist tradition: betrayal.

The new disguise was, however, fully in keeping with the latest French intellectual fashions. In the mid-1970s, as revolutionary ardor began to fade, a gaggle of renegade '68ers came forward to sell their literary talents to the bourgeoisie. Styling themselves the *nouvelles philosophes* ("new philosophers"), they recycled the old canard

that Stalinism was not a hideous negation of Bolshevism, but, on the contrary, the inevitable end-product of Lenin's vanguard party, and indeed of Marxism itself. Such reactionary notions have become widely popular among France's intelligentsia.

But not only among the intelligentsia. The "reformed" Stalinists of the CGT also appear to be taking a few cues from the Bernard-Henri Lévy and André Glucksmans. Claiming to have renounced Stalinist organizational methods, they equate such methods with *any* attempt to lead the workers in struggle. They also argue that democracy does not involve the direct intervention of workers and the oppressed to resist their oppressors, but rather can only find true expression through parliamentary elections.

There are two other things about the CGT congress that should be noted. First, a motion to suspend the proceedings of the congress so that delegates could attend the 5 December mobilization (called by the CGT itself) was defeated in favor of the leadership's proposal to send only a delegation. It seems that Viannet and friends were worried that the congress might become infected by the spirit of the streets. Secondly, the congress, like Tony Blair's New Labour in Britain, voted to eliminate a call in the preamble to its constitution for "the suppression of capitalist exploitation...by the socialization of the means of production and exchange." Inserted in its place was a piece of social-democratic drivel that designated capitalism as one among many forms of oppression, and proposed a "democratic society" as the remedy:

"the CGT works for a democratic society free of capitalist and other forms of exploitation and domination, and against discrimination of all kinds—racism, xenophobia and social exclusion of all sorts."

—*Rouge*, 14 December 1995

Various commentators remarked that Louis Viannet succeeded in walking a thin line between the "conservatives" (old-line Stalinists) and "renovators" (Stalinists cum social-democrats) at the CGT congress. But, on this last point at least, the "renovators" seem to have scored a clear win. There is a certain irony in the fact that, just as the right-wing "consensus" was being shattered in the streets, the bureaucrats of the leading "left-wing" union federation were codifying their rightward political shift.

Juppé Retreats

On 5 December, Alain Juppé responded to a motion of censure against him by the opposition in the National Assembly with a defense of his "reform" plan, and a reaffirmation of his unwillingness to negotiate. He was immediately backed by both Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who were meeting in Baden-Baden. Chirac's visit with Kohl was designed to help him appear above the fray, while emphasizing that it was not only the French government that had a stake in the success of the Juppé plan. The Paris bourse responded favorably to Juppé's "firmness" in the face of the mounting protests. The French employers' associa-

tion, the CNPF, declared its unanimous support for the government, while the Bank of France lowered one of its key interest rates as a show of solidarity. The motion to censure Juppé failed by a wide margin.

Yet, five days later, on 10 December, Juppé appeared before the television cameras to announce a series of concessions to the strikers. All the gestures of ruling-class support had done nothing to alter the views of the rest of the population. Transportation remained paralyzed, and the miners of Lorraine went out on strike along with schoolteachers across France. December 7th saw the largest mobilizations since the beginning of the protests, as well over a million people took to the streets. The turnout in the provinces was especially strong. Faced with a rising tide of anger, Juppé was forced to give ground.

His concessions were not negligible. The Le Vert Commission, a special parliamentary task force charged with civil service reform, was suspended, along with the demand that public employees work longer to collect their pensions. Plans to raise the retirement age of railroad and underground workers were scrapped, as was (at least temporarily) the shutdown of thousands of miles of unprofitable railway lines. The head of the railroad system was accused of insensitivity to workers and replaced. And, in perhaps the most dramatic symbolic gesture of all, Juppé finally brought himself to utter a word that he had in previous weeks found it impossible to pronounce: negotiations. He announced that he would meet individually with the heads of the union federations the following Monday in preparation for a one-day "summit on employment" on 21 December, at which he would sit down simultaneously with union chiefs and employer representatives. The prime minister added that the suggestion of reducing the working day to alleviate unemployment "doesn't scare me."

If, in response to massive pressure from below, Juppé went further than he was initially prepared to, his 10 December television appearance was nevertheless a calculated move. His concessions were announced just before Christmas, when the pressure on workers to return to their jobs would be greatest. They were, furthermore, intended to satisfy the particular grievances of the most militant of the strikers, the railway and Métro workers, while leaving intact the core of his "reforms": increased taxes to help pay the government debt, taxes on medical care and family allocations, and elimination of all union control over health and welfare funds.

It was widely recognized that Juppé's gambit was a crossroads for the strike. *Le Monde* headlined its editorial "Last Chance for M. Juppé." During the week that followed, government propagandists, and those of the pro-government unions, aggressively promoted the idea of a return to work. Juppé was at pains to point out that "there is no longer any motive for striking." Speaking before his Council of Ministers, Chirac declared full confidence in his prime minister, stating that it was necessary to "stay on course" and "there are no other politics" than those of the government (*Le Monde*, 15

December 1995). One by one, the various leaders of Juppé's right-wing coalition trooped to his offices at the Hôtel Matignon to offer their support.

The union chiefs who had opposed the strike were quick to follow suit. CFDT leader Nicole Notat declared that the strikers must decide "democratically on the conditions of their resumption of work," and "cannot but have a positive appreciation" of the results of their action. Alain Deleu, head of the smaller Catholic union federation, the CFTC (Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens), stated that: "the demands concerning the status of public workers and their benefits have today been satisfied, permitting a return to normal." He said his federation would decline to participate in further mobilizations, and repeated the famous dictum of the former Communist Party chief, Maurice Thorez, when he pulled the plug on the 1936 general strike: "It is necessary to know how to end a strike." A *Le Monde* reporter speculated:

"if the assurances concerning the special benefits of public workers are publicized, and if the prime minister can succeed in his meeting with the union confederations on Monday, the national demonstration called for Tuesday could possibly be nothing more than a final *baroud d'honneur* [a fight made solely in order to maintain one's honor]."

—12-13 December 1995

Thus spoke official France. But everything depended on the response of the other France, the striking workers and those who marched with them—students, retirees, immigrants and unemployed youth.

'The Movement Has Become a Torrent'

It would be an exaggeration to claim that the popular response to Juppé was one of unanimous rejection. Any social movement this broad is bound to be uneven in its levels of consciousness and militancy. The working class was undoubtedly demoralized by fifteen years of overt class collaboration on the part of its leaders. The tendency of the strikes to transcend sectional interests, while on the ascendant, never reached the level of 1968.

Even before Juppé sounded the retreat, the miners of Lorraine had returned reluctantly to work for a small raise. The student movement, which had unfolded simultaneously with the strikes, was weakened by divisions between those who wanted to throw their lot in with the workers and those who wanted to focus on narrow student demands. There was far less enthusiasm for the strike among professional and white-collar employees than among railroad workers. And on the railroads themselves, the strike was weaker in the northeast than in western and southern France. The political offensive of the right-wing unions also took its toll on the strikers' resolve. Some railway workers, mainly in the provinces, decided to return to work as a result of Juppé's maneuver.

Yet, during that same crucial week, there were also strong signs of renewed militancy, indeed of an increased politicization and radicalization of the movement, which, on balance, outweighed the sentiment in

favor of retreat. In the days following Juppé's announcement, all eyes turned toward the striking railroad workers. At the Gare du Nord, perhaps the most militant of the strike centers, *Le Monde* reported workers saying that "[Juppé's] televised intervention last night marks the beginning of his end." The prime minister's words were described as "saccharine and sinuous," and a ploy to "divide and rule." "We have not fought for two weeks simply to hear the word 'negotiations!'" "Whatever Juppé does has the smell of a circling wolf."

At another strike bastion, the main RATP depot, the response was similar: "On Tuesday [the day of the last big demonstrations], Juppé sprained his ankle, tonight [the night of his television interview] he banged his knee, tomorrow he will break his face." "If he has retreated, it is a victory that will galvanize us." The report continues:

"For fifteen days, they have discussed much and thought about much. Their speech has been enriched, as well as their demands. The withdrawal of the Juppé plan remains an 'absolute precondition' for the halt of the movement. But that is no longer enough. 'We are not fighting only to defend our gains. We have wives and children in the private sector. My father fought for the *Sécu* and for his pension. Me, I'm fighting to improve these benefits. To return at least to thirty-seven and a half years for retirement in the private sector....' But that is not all. They also want radical political change..."

"They speak of the defense of public service, of the struggle against pollution—with the aid of public transport—taxation of profits, justice, dignity..."

—*Le Monde*, 12-13 December 1995

Later that week, another reporter asked workers at Paris's Gare d'Austerlitz if they would miss their December pay:

"The question surprises them. 'This is not the time to ask about such things!' Such questioning seems to them mean-spirited and beside the point. What? They are living 'a page in history' and someone is talking to them about 'pennies?' They are asserting 'power,' 'solidarity' and the 'will of the people,' and someone wants to know if they have 'paid their bills at the chemist?' They fight for the 'right to live decently,' but also for 'respect,' for 'honor,' and someone thinks they calculate their monetary losses every night? To underscore the point, one picketer...explains: 'What we are living through is truly exceptional. During several days of struggle, many things in this country have changed. They will say "before '95" and "after '95".'

"Yannick, twenty-seven, controller...doesn't want to think about money. 'Come what may! I'm convinced we will win. In striking today, I earn money for tomorrow."

"His comrade also doesn't want to talk about cash balances...'One month, two months, three months. I no longer have anything to lose. I will take to my bills the same attitude that Juppé takes toward the people in the street: "nothing for you!"...I will fight this fight to the end, to the death if necessary! This is not a question of money!"

—*Le Monde*, 15 December 1995

This attitude of renewed resolve was confirmed three days after Juppé's television appearance by some 200 delegates at a general assembly of striking railroad workers in the Paris region. Their overwhelming sentiment was that, although Juppé had backed away from

attempts to attack their historic gains, they were now in a position to demand improvements. More than that, it was felt that railroad workers had a responsibility to more than themselves. If they were to go back now they would be letting down many others, in both public and private sectors. They therefore decided, by a near-unanimous vote (with only two abstentions), to hold out for the total withdrawal of the Juppé plan.

In the provinces there were some capitulations. In Lyons, a federation of autonomous unions that had taken the government's side, the FGAAC, representing a third of the conductors, held a separate assembly, which voted for a return to work. But they were not able to restore rail traffic in the region due to the continuation of the strike by the other workers. There was a definite weakening in the east, where the strike movement had been subdued to begin with. At the instigation of the CFDT, the workers in the Alsatian city of Mulhouse decided to go back, as did workers in Reims. Yet these were the only reversals. The general assemblies of all other cities and regions stood solid for the continuation of the strike.

The hesitation by a minority of railroad workers was more than counterbalanced by the response to the call by the CGT and FO for mass demonstrations on the twelfth of December. Juppé had earlier said that if two million people descended into the streets he would be finished. The unions claimed that 2.2 million marched that day, in the largest demonstration since the confrontation began. Some carried signs proclaiming, "I am two million and one!"

All the big cities of France saw giant turnouts, but since transportation was paralyzed, demonstrators in lesser towns and villages were unable to assemble at regional centers. Records for public turnout were therefore broken in one provincial town after another. A former mayor in the area around Chartres said that: "in thirty years, none of the struggles, the great popular movements that followed the Liberation, not even May 1968—he is certain of it—caused such a stirring...." A resident of another town, watching 8,000 march past, remarked: "So many people in the streets of a modest town like Orléans, that means something is happening."

As the demonstrations unfolded in a holiday atmosphere, many were also struck by their increasingly political character. "Slogans hostile to Juppé," remarked *Le Monde*, "are more and more giving rhythm [to the marches]." In Paris, at the Place de La Bastille, with strains of the revolutionary anthems, the *Carmagnole* and *Ça ira*, as a fitting accompaniment, one railwayman said that "each day of the strike becomes more wonderful." He continued:

"One is supposed to make sacrifices for a society that knows how to produce nothing but unemployment and insecurity. Money flows and the society is inhuman."

—*Le Monde*, 14 December 1995

A professor commented:

"We were never mobilized while the socialists were in power. They conducted a liberal, monetarist policy. In 1936, if the left did things [under the Popular Front gov-

ernment of Léon Blum—ed], it is because the people moved."

A 45-year-old railway worker who voted for the Socialist Party added:

"I was deceived by the reformist current.' I voted for Maastricht; I even believed in the overture toward the political center.' He excused himself for talking 'like a Communist. But all the same! The Socialists wanted to manage a supposed "crisis." Capital has never been as well off. And it is a Europe of money they are heading towards. We can't level everything downwards."

In Toulouse:

"The procession drew between 80,000 and 100,000 demonstrators, making it the longest line of march that Toulouse had seen in thirty years. Observers noted another record: the strongest participation of the private sector since the beginning of the movement, with the presence of 8,000 aerospace workers, who walked off the job for the occasion. The tone was combative and determined. 'It doesn't matter all that much whom we are demonstrating against. We have had enough...It's the revolution.'"

In Marseille, where 100,000 turned out to break another municipal record:

"I have attended all seven demos these last two months,' observed a secondary-school teacher. 'I've seen them grow in volume and in determination.'

"This demonstration is distinguished, it would seem, by a growing politicization and a generalized set of demands. The signs saying 'Juppé Resign' were many. The prime minister was taken to task in all tones....

"For the first time, they sang the *Internationale*...while the black flags of the anarchists floated over the parade...The demonstrators, among whom were mixed militants of Act Up, homeless advocates, and others, were not content to stop at the theme of the *Sécu*, but equally demanded 'work for all' or proposed 'Together, to invent the future.' Secondary-school students have put back on the order of the day a slogan of May, 1968: 'Be realistic, demand the impossible!'

"The monster demonstration in Marseille, often marked by a sort of fraternal exaltation, did not look anything like a *'baroud d'honneur'*. 'The dynamic, the tenacity and the confidence,' says Marcel Carbasse, general secretary of the regional CGT, 'are in the camp of those who protest. Relaxing the pressure is out of the question. We have opened a breach. We must make it bigger.'"

Another measure of the changing mood was the fact that mass action did not stop on Tuesday, 12 December. It continued in the days that followed, assuming various forms. In Toulouse, three postal sorting centers were occupied by workers. Schools were closed because teachers were striking. A demonstration took place in support of an FO official who had gone on hunger strike to demand the withdrawal of the Juppé plan. Bordeaux drowned in uncollected garbage due to a sanitation strike. The town center was paralyzed by an "inter-professional" car rally. In Rouen, electrical workers protested the planned privatization of their industry by giving electricity to clients around the clock at nighttime half rates. Railway workers blocked a bus depot, occupied the offices of the Crédit Lyonnais (a bank), installed barriers at the entrance of the town to control the flow of traffic, and sent delegations to private-sector

workplaces to persuade the workers to come out. Two hundred agents of Posts and Telegraphs occupied the offices of France Telecom (the government-owned phone company).

In Caen, bus drivers blocked the principal intersections with their buses, and like their comrades in Rouen, established barricades to control the flow of traffic. At Roanne, 2,000 people demonstrated on 13 December for the tenth time since the beginning of the movement, and students occupied the university of Chambéry. The city hall in Marseille was blocked by three hundred cars belonging to strikers, who demanded an audience with the mayor.

All of these events point inescapably to the conclusion that the masses of people who joined battle against Juppé's attacks at the end of November did not, on the whole, lose the initiative as a result of his carefully calculated partial retreat. On the contrary, "the movement," in the words of one striking Paris Métro worker, "became a torrent" (*Le Monde*, 12-13 December 1995).

A 'Crisis of Leadership'

At this crucial juncture, the two union federations leading the strikes, the FO and the CGT, but especially the latter, held the keys to the situation. It was apparent shortly after Juppé announced his concessions that FO head Marc Blondel was looking for an opportunity to be reinstated as a "privileged interlocutor" with the government. He was anxious to end his partnership with the CGT, in which he had been consigned to the junior role. Blondel declared that he was ready to call off the strike in return for "global negotiations," i.e., broadening the agenda to include all points of disagreement between the government and his union. The 14 December *Libération* noted that he had "no longer any interest in prolonging the conflict," particularly as "[the FO's] unions are not firmly implanted in the bastions of protest of the SNCF and the RATP." "Only the CGT," continued the journal, "can settle the situation: everyone, even Matignon [Juppé's residence], agrees that it alone has the capacity to get the strikers back to work."

In public, CGT chief Louis Viannet continued to take a tough line, remarking that Juppé's concessions only changed the implementation, not the substance, of his "reforms." Viannet vowed to continue the strikes and protests and called for another "day of action" on Saturday, 16 December. But there were already indications that Viannet's real attitude differed considerably from his public stance. Since the CGT head is hardly known for his candor, one must infer his actual aims from his actions.

One clue to Viannet's attitudes can be found in the policy of the French Communist Party (PCF), with whom the CGT has always been closely associated, and whose members remain prominent in the CGT leadership. For decades the PCF sought to forge a durable electoral alliance with the Socialist Party (PS), and remains anxious not to offend the PS leadership. But the PS has for fifteen years been carrying out the austerity

policies of which the Juppé plan was only a logical extension. While they could not denounce the strikes without risking alienating their working-class base, the PS leaders did nothing to encourage the movement. Their line from the start was that "reform" of the public sector was necessary, but that Juppé was going about it in too authoritarian a fashion. Throughout the crisis, the PS limited its opposition to parliamentary motions. They did not endorse the union demonstrations, and, when the demand for Juppé's resignation was echoing in the streets, PS leader, Lionel Jospin, made it clear that he was *not* calling for the prime minister's head.

Throughout the month-long confrontation, the PCF, although rhetorically more sympathetic to strikers and demonstrators than the PS, was careful never to transgress the political boundaries set by the latter. When PCF members criticized their leadership for the party's low visibility in the demonstrations, and its utter lack of interest in leading the strikes, Robert Hue, the PCF's chairperson, responded: "It is not necessary to say of the movement that which it does not say of itself. The movement today is not for political change" (*Le Monde*, 8 December 1995). According to Hue, the business of the PCF was politics; the business of conducting strikes was best left to the unions. Any attempt to infuse a trade-union struggle with political consciousness would be infringing on the prerogatives of others: something that the new, de-Stalinized, decentralized, oh-so-democratic PCF would simply never dream of.

This became a little harder to argue as the movement underwent a spontaneous politicization. But, even then, the PCF conspicuously insisted on characterizing the movement as "social" as opposed to "political." Besides, argued former party chief George Marchais, why call for a "change at the 'head' [of government], since any prime minister taking the place of Alain Juppé would necessarily pursue the same politics" (*Le Monde*, 14 December 1995).

The Deal is Cut

While the movement in the streets and railway terminals was taking a more radical turn, a very different drama was unfolding behind the scenes. Before his television appearance of 10 December, Juppé, who still refused to meet directly with union chiefs, had initiated a series of lower-level contacts. A special mediator was appointed to meet with the striking railway workers, including the CGT, while Jacques Barrot, Minister for Labor and Social Affairs, met individually with the heads of the union federations. Thus the union bureaucracy and the government had an opportunity to sound each other out in a low-profile way, while maintaining a tough posture toward one another in public.

Le Monde (12 December 1995) reported an "avalanche of signals" in the days preceding Juppé's television appearance. On the morning of Saturday, 9 December, Barrot, who had expected to meet a CGT secretary, found himself face to face with Louis Viannet, who assured him that he would be "available at any moment

to respond to an initiative from the prime minister.” At the CGT congress that had just adjourned, Viannet had made a point of *not* joining Blondel in demanding the withdrawal of the Juppé plan as a precondition for negotiations. Soon after, when Blondel visited Barrot, he too dropped his demand for withdrawal. Now, “global negotiations” would be enough, said the FO potentate. “On Saturday afternoon and all day Sunday,” *Le Monde* observed, “discreet and even secret contacts multiplied between the government and the unions” (*Ibid.*). The article continued:

“The CGT and the FO, whose two leaders talked to each other by phone on Sunday afternoon, maintained their demand for wider negotiations, but also made it known that certain signs [from the government] would make a de-escalation more likely: the suspension of the Le Vert Commission, the indefinite postponement of plans to restructure the railroads, guarantees on the retirement age of railway workers.”

Thus, “Alain Juppé had all the cards in his hand before his intervention on Sunday evening.” In other words, the union chiefs had told Juppé what it would take to end the strikes.

On the morning of Friday, 15 December, as the mood of strikers and demonstrators was turning more militant and growing numbers were becoming convinced that they had Juppé on the run, a tersely worded communiqué from the central office of the CGT railway division arrived at strike headquarters. It read: “The CGT proposes a modification of the form of the current movement, while preserving its unity and vigilance....” (*Le Monde*, 17-18 December 1995). Although couched in typically evasive language, the message was clear: end the strike. The “democratic” scruples that had prevented the CGT leaders from broadening the strike were set aside when it came time to call it off.

The reaction, at least among the most class-conscious of the strikers, was one of indignation. One 26-year-old mechanic from the Gare du Nord said:

“I have slept here every night since Monday. What nauseates me is the communiqués of the unions that are weakening. They pull back and that demoralizes me. If we settle for these petty corporatist concessions, we will be taken for clowns. It is not correct to put aside the demands for the withdrawal of the Juppé plan, while that is what they are clamoring for in the streets.”

The 17 December *Le Monde* article continued:

“An official of the CGT does not hide his bitterness to see the old strike-ending reflexes of the federations and confederations. This was more than a simple economic struggle. It had become a critique of the élites, of liberalism imposed with baton blows and downsizings, of wealth not shared, of a society that is not made for human beings. At this point, the movement needed to be political. It was leading to an awakening of consciousness and they did not have the right to betray it.”

While the strikers’ assembly in Paris voted overwhelmingly to continue the strike, there was no organized alternative to the existing leadership. As doubt and demoralization grew among the ranks, the strikers’ assemblies became increasingly divided. As the unity required to maintain the strikes dissipated, a return to

work became inevitable. Once the railway workers, the backbone of the resistance, abandoned their strike, other public workers soon followed.

The most politically advanced elements understood what had happened. In summing up, one CGT official said:

“On the level of the railworkers union, our complete victory is undeniable. On the national level, Viannet thought he was in a much better negotiating position because he had not sought an absolute confrontation with Juppé. He thought that there was no alternative to Juppé. There had to have been several consultations with the PCF...”

An FO delegate at the Gare Saint-Lazare in Paris pointed to the sabotage by the bureaucrats:

“The national leadership of the FO and CGT never wanted a general strike. Viannet and Blondel shit in their pants at the idea. The movement was becoming too spontaneous, too autonomous. They saw that happening on the ground. They slammed on the brakes rather than allow the organization of general strike committees in each locality.”

Results and Prospects

As in 1936 and 1968, the mobilizations of 1995 were brought to a premature halt by the treachery of the official leadership of the workers’ movement. Because the crisis was of shorter duration and less explicitly political than the other two, the betrayal was perhaps less apparent. But for anyone making a close analysis of the events and willing to call things by their proper names, the evidence is clear. As in the other two great episodes, the problem was not the backwardness of the workers, but the duplicity of their leaders. It is the duty of revolutionaries to draw the lessons for the working class—to make it known, first, that they were betrayed by their leaders, and then to explain why and how they were betrayed. Yet, as we indicated above, this is something that France’s self-styled Trotskyists, with their significant implantation in the unions, apparently lack the political backbone to do.

The strike wave was, first of all, a reaction against an attempt by the French ruling class to increase profitability by lowering the living standards of the workers. Such “reform packages” are not unique to France; capitalists around the world are currently demanding similar concessions. Sometimes this takes the form of direct attacks on wages, and sometimes, as in France, attacks on government policies and programs which lessen class inequalities through a limited redistribution of wealth. One major function of European integration is to create a zone in which capital can flow unimpeded across national frontiers. To the extent that social programs are partially funded by taxes on profits, increased social spending tends to act as a disincentive to capital investment. Moreover, the existence of such programs tends to make workers less fearful, and therefore less docile on the job. In order to make its national economy as attractive as possible to investors, each country is thus supposed to reduce taxes on corporate profits, financial transactions and investment earnings. At the same time,

bankers demand a stable currency to ensure that their loans will not be paid back in depreciated money.

Because government expenditures in excess of revenue tend to be inflationary, and can result in monetary instability, the capitalist ideologues proclaim that “we” can no longer “afford” to maintain the current level of social benefits. Thus the capitalists use European integration, and/or “globalization,” to pit workers of the various capitalist states against one another in a race to the bottom. The Juppé plan, as the French workers realized, was their bourgeoisie’s starting pistol in this race.

In response to the capitalist offensive, the labor bureaucrats pursue distinct aims of their own. Their principal concern is to preserve their role as intermediaries between the working class and the capitalists. That role, however, depends upon certain institutional arrangements. During what the French call “*les trente glorieuses*”—the thirty years of relative prosperity following World War II—the arrangement, in France as in other advanced capitalist countries, was that the capitalists made various material concessions to the workers, for which they allowed the labor bureaucracy to take a certain amount of credit. In return, the bureaucracy—whether Stalinist, social democratic, or openly pro-capitalist—used the authority derived from their ability to “deliver the goods” to keep the class struggle safely within the bounds of the existing order.

Today those arrangements are unraveling. An important factor in this is the triumph of counterrevolution in the degenerated Soviet workers’ state. The USSR originated from the victory of the Russian Revolution of 1917, and, despite the profound bureaucratization which it underwent under Stalin and his successors, its very existence tended to act as a restraint on the capitalists’ inclination to engage in frontal assaults on the working class. Today the “Red Menace” is gone, and the pressure on the capitalists to increase profitability has led them to conclude that they no longer need to maintain the post-war class equilibrium. Instead, they are turning to confrontation. This creates a dilemma for traditional, class-collaborationist labor lieutenants, whose authority rests on the ability to deliver certain limited concessions to the workers. When the capitalists demand concessions, the labor bureaucrats and reformist politicians react in different ways. Some abandon any pretense of fighting for the workers at all, and sign on as out-and-out pawns of the ruling class, like the “New Realists” in Tony Blair’s British Labour Party. Others, fearing that the capitalist assaults will ultimately cost them their sinecures, are prepared to defend their intermediary role through partial mobilizations of their working-class base.

This is essentially what happened in France last December. Realizing that they were no longer being accorded the respect to which they were accustomed, Blondel and Viannet felt they had no choice but to bring the public sector out on strike. As the movement developed and assumed a broader and more radical character, the union leaders were compelled to assume a public posture militant enough to remain in control. But, when

the popular movement began to push the envelope of reformism, and Juppé indicated that he was willing to compromise, Blondel and Viannet managed—if only narrowly—to put on the brakes.

The compromise they reached with Juppé settled nothing important. The government made a temporary tactical retreat on a few of its more audacious demands, but its war on the French working class is being pursued with renewed vigor. The French workers, on the other hand, have not been defeated. Although their struggle was derailed, they demonstrated to themselves, and to the world, that the forces of capital are not unassailable, that the working class still possesses the will to resist, and the objective capacity to triumph. The battle will soon be joined again. This is what gives the lessons of November-December 1995 a particular importance.

What Was to Be Done?

The main immediate weakness of the strike movement was its failure to throw up any structures capable of challenging bureaucratic control. Although there were elected assemblies in each workplace and locality, they never coalesced into an authoritative body capable of coordinating the strike on a national level. The absence of any sort of national strike committee allowed Blondel and Viannet to retain central control of the strike, and to sabotage it at the crucial moment. One of the key lessons for the future is the necessity of an elected, representative national coordinating body. The election of strike committees at a local, regional and national level could also provide an opportunity for revolutionary militants to intervene and compete for political influence.

The French events demonstrate that, in a period when the ruling classes are on the attack, even defensive struggles of the working class cannot long remain confined to the economic sphere. The strike of railway workers soon became a magnet for the entire proletariat and other oppressed groups. They quickly began to demand not only the withdrawal of the Juppé plan, but the resignation of Juppé himself. But who was to replace Juppé? In the larger, strategic sense, a general strike would have posed the question of political power, at least implicitly. In such situations there is no substitute for a revolutionary party capable of contending for state power.

Yet the absence of such a leadership does not imply that the most advanced elements in the class should simply have sat on their hands or, what amounts to the same thing, insisted that “building a revolutionary party” was a pre-condition for confronting Juppé aggressively. It is of course impossible to guarantee a victory in advance, particularly given the treacherous character of the union leaderships, but to use the possibility of betrayal as a reason not to advocate broadening and generalizing the struggle, or directing it against the Juppé government, can only be called surrender.

The appropriate tactic was to agitate for a general strike with the aim of junking Juppé’s plan and ousting his government. Such an initiative could have exacer-

bated divisions in the ruling class and rallied the support of the broadest layers of the working people behind the organized labor movement.

A defeat for Juppé would likely have created a pre-revolutionary situation, which might, or might not, have been channeled into a new round of elections. Even if Juppé had been replaced by some other bourgeois or social-democratic politician, the workers would still have won a victory, and Juppé's successor would think twice before going on the attack again. A victory over Juppé, based on the development and extension of the workers' assemblies, would have greatly accelerated the growth of revolutionary sentiment within the working class, and could have presented important opportunities for a small revolutionary organization to grow rapidly through direct recruitment, and more importantly, through splits in the cadre of the larger ostensibly revolutionary organizations.

The working class cannot become a contender for political power solely on the basis of its own narrow economic interests. It must simultaneously champion the cause of all the oppressed—immigrants, youth, the unemployed, women and minorities—and combat attempts to divide it along ethnic, racial or national lines. This is not a matter of altruism, but of survival. Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front (which is the deadliest enemy of the union movement) has already had some success in channeling the rage of the most debased and ignorant lumpen and petty-bourgeois layers into hatred and violence against immigrants. The National Front has recently gained ground among the backward elements of the working class.

The French bourgeoisie, while it disdains Le Pen, instinctively seeks to direct plebeian anger at targets other than itself. Immigrants provide the most convenient scapegoat, and Le Pen the best trained attack dog.

With an anti-immigrant police sweep called Operation Vigipirate, and proposed legislation aimed at further restricting immigrants' rights, the government is flirting with Le Pen, and stirring the racist cauldron. Any working-class leadership worthy of the name must demand full citizenship rights for immigrants, and take the lead in the fight to build broad united-front mobilizations against the ultra-right.

Finally, the workers' movement must be clear about its long-term objectives. The mobilizations of last winter took to task the existing social order with only the vaguest of ideas about what to put in its place. But the current attacks against the working class are not the whim of a particular set of politicians. They express the most pressing immediate needs of a social system based upon private ownership and production for profit. It is called capitalism. *Nouvelles philosophes* and CGT bureaucrats notwithstanding, the solution remains that advocated by the most advanced detachments of the workers' movement for the past 150 years: the removal of the major means of creating wealth from private hands, and their conscious control by society as a whole. This is called socialism. It cannot be attained without the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist class and the destruction of its state. If socialism is in disrepute today, it is not because it is intrinsically deficient, but because of the ideological pressure of the bourgeoisie and the countless betrayals committed by the Stalinists and Social Democrats in its name.

In France as elsewhere, the revival of revolutionary socialism within the working class requires the conscious, organized presence of those who espouse it. Only thus can a successful conclusion be written to a new chapter of class struggles in France—and Europe—the origins of which may one day be traced to the upheavals of December 1995. ■