

Protests Shrink as Police Attack Fourth Day of Action against French Labour Law

By [Alex Lantier](#)

Global Research, April 29, 2016

[World Socialist Web Site](#)

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

Hundreds of thousands of people marched across France yesterday in the fourth day of action called by trade, high school, and university student unions against the labour law reform of Socialist Party (PS) Labour Minister Myriam El Khomri. Rail, airport, and port workers walked off the job. Riot police, who have savagely attacked youth on every protest against the El Khomri law, again clashed with protesters in cities across the country.

While estimates varied widely of how many people marched—170,000 according to the authorities, 500,000 according to the Stalinist General Confederation of Labour (CGT)—it was clear that participation was sharply down from the over 1 million people who protested on March 31.

This does not reflect any lessening of the broad opposition among workers and youth to the El Khomri Law. Even pollsters, whose findings generally conform to the needs of the ruling class, admit that the law remains wildly unpopular. It would lengthen the work day, undermine job security for young workers, and allow trade unions to negotiate contracts inferior to the standards set by the Labour Code. Rather, the protest is coming up against a key obstacle: masses of workers and youth marching in the protests do not have a viable strategy for a struggle against the PS government.

Several youth asked questions of WSWS reporters at rallies yesterday on how to really oppose the PS. This reflects a basic political reality: the organisations controlling the protests are allies of the PS and have not mounted any real struggle against the El Khomri Law. They defend the PS. The CGT's political ally, the Left Front, together with the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), called for a vote for President François Hollande in 2012. All have worked for decades in various alliances with the PS.

They have not called for any broad mobilisation of the workers against constant police attacks on the protests, fearing this could bring down the extremely weak and unpopular PS government of President Hollande. The workers have largely ignored their calls for impotent symbolic protests. This has allowed the PS to try to impose its law with brute repression, under the pretext of the state of emergency: relying on the unions to demobilise the workers, thus isolating student protesters, police savagely attacked the youth at each successive day of action.

Even today, when it is clear that the PS is determined to forcibly impose the austerity agenda advanced across Europe by the European Union, and trample the opposition of over 70 percent of the population, these organisations are only proposing more impotent appeals to the PS. As the government prepares to present the El Khomri Law to the National

Assembly on May 3, the unions have issued a statement proposing that holding strike meetings in work places would allow workers to “obtain new collective guarantees to produce social progress.”

These false and empty promises, designed to give political cover to corrupt bureaucracies allied to the PS, go against the experiences thousands of workers and youth are passing through. The PS and the other parties in the National Assembly are determined to slash wages and working conditions and will stop at nothing to accomplish it.

The only way that the working class can defend itself, in France and across Europe, is by mobilising

en masse in an open political struggle for socialism—in France, against the Socialist Party government and its pseudo-left allies. The central difficulty facing workers and youth in France is that currently, no political party advocates such a struggle. Every nominally “left” party has for decades treated the PS, a big business party, as a representative of socialism and of the workers movement.

As a result, though Hollande is France’s most unpopular president since World War II, broader layers of workers have not entered into struggle, and a small layer of protesters is forced into fruitless street battles, facing off against hordes of riot police.

Clashes broke out in and around protests including in Paris, Le Havre, Lyon, Rennes, Nantes, and Marseille. Police assaulted youth protesters in Marseille and confined a number in St. Charles train station, while a car was burned during fighting between police and protesters in Nantes.

WSWS reporters attended the main protest in central Paris, attended by a number of delegations of trade union officials, members of PS and Left Front youth organisations, and groups of students from various local schools and universities. They spoke to a student from the 13th district of Paris who has participated in the Paris demonstrations against the El Khomri Law.

She strongly opposed the El Khomri Law, saying,

“We’re already precarious enough, if we lose even more on job security, it will not be pretty. There is nothing good in it for the future of the youth, and not just of the youth, for employees, for workers of all descriptions.”

She attacked the state of emergency imposed by the PS, calling it “a good cover to prevent people from going out and marching on the streets ... But there is a good turnout, so that’s good, their plans are not working so well.”

She also criticised the PS government’s sudden floating of a reactionary proposal to ban the Islamic veil in French universities as a measure to divide students protesting the El Khomri Law. She said,

“They are bringing up the issue of banning the Islamic veil in the universities now, by pure coincidence, when all the youth are out on the streets protesting a government measure ... I do not agree with this.”

She also criticised the war in Syria:

“Western policy is not for nothing in what is happening in these countries, either Gaddafi’s fall or his death. Youth today who leave France, Belgium, Germany or wherever to go in Syria or the Middle East, it’s not for no reason. It’s maybe that they were sort of pushed to go, and it was made clear to them that here they had no future ... I feel sadness for those who were killed in the [terrorist] attacks, the victims, and for youth who see no other solution than to leave for those countries. And behind it all, there is a lot of manipulation.”

WSWS reporters attended a youth rally in Marseille and spoke to several students. One high school student told a WSWS reporter that he opposed the El Khomri Law because it

“constrains our future, because wages are not going up though working time is going up. Even if work is less physically demanding than it was in earlier periods, they are making us work much more.”

He also sharply opposed police violence, particularly in Marseille, where police have steadily escalated their deployments and the PS have called for sending in the army to impose law and order. He said, “I think people have to open their eyes. It’s not just at the protests that there is police violence, there are certain areas of Marseille where there are those problems every day.”

He regretted that no political organisation in France defends social equality, saying, “I want equality for all, but that’s a utopia because no one is pushing for it, especially in the workplaces. But I think we are in a society where we have to help each other.”

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Articles by: [Alex Lantier](#)

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