

Unionism of resistance

SUD-Solidaires and radical labor action in France

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IN JANUARY 2009, the French president Nicolas Sarkozy launched a vicious attack against the railway workers' union SUD (Solidaires Unitaires Démocratiques in French), accusing them of having completely paralyzed one of the main train stations in Paris and, by extension, rail transport into and out of other parts of France. Since this time, the national union "Solidaires," of which SUD union locals are a part, is periodically accused by various journalists, politicians, and union bureaucrats of being the source of radical forms of struggle developing in France.

Actually, activists belonging to a number of different unions, as well as non-unionized activists, are participating in these actions. If radical forms of struggle are developing in France, it's primarily due to the fact that workers are facing large-scale attacks, including plant closings, job cuts, wage freezes or cuts, unraveling of the social safety net, etc. And this at a time when the heads of corporations are pocketing huge sums of money.

The permanence of a class struggle tradition

These radical struggles stem in part from the fact that every French person has experienced, at least once in his life, strikes that have partially or totally paralyzed the country. The collective memory of the general strikes of 1936 and 1968 has been preserved through long strikes in particular sectors such as those in 1974, 1995, 2003, and 2007, as well as by periodic mobilizations by youth. For part of the population, these struggles contribute to keeping the idea alive that another world was possible, free from exploitation and oppression.

In the face of this radicalism, the bourgeoisie was forced to agree to not only a series of social rights, but also to write into the constitution a recognition of the right to strike to any group of workers, whether or not they are represented by a union. Of course, this does not prevent the layoffs of strikers for other reasons, especially in small workplaces. But from a strictly legal point of view, it is possible for workers to go on strike at any time. [1] This situation has facilitated the construction of radical trade-union currents in France, which have in turn maintained the tradition of class struggle.

The birth of an alternative trade unionism

The union opposition current out of which the SUD unions formed was for a long time most prominent in the national union CFDT (Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail in French). [2] In 1988, during a massive strike in the postal sector, in which decisions were being made in general assemblies, the national leadership of the CFDT suspended its Paris affiliate. Few of the suspended unionists were ready to join another parent union. To continue to develop a fighting trade unionism, they decided to create a new union organization in the postal and telecommunications sectors. The acronym SUD reflected three of the principal values that workers aim to promote:

- “S,” as in “solidarity,” to indicate that workers want to build a unionism that doesn’t limit itself to a particular profession, but to organize with workers from other sectors too. A unionism that seeks alliances with other unions and social movements: the rights of women, immigrants, the homeless, the unemployed, etc.
- “U,” as in “unified,” to indicate workers’ desire to end sectarianism between organizations, and to seek to work together. This desire for unity is not limited to other union organizations, but is extended to other coalitions and political parties, which, for example, was evident in the 2005 mobilization against the European Treaty.
- “D,” as in “democratic,” to leave control over the struggle to the workers themselves, and to fight all forms of bureaucracy inside the union. Necessary to this process is the absence of material advantages for union leaders and limits on their time in office. Different opinions must be able to be expressed in the organization, in an attempt to find the points at which at least partial consensus can be reached.

These three values can only be put into practice by building a unionism rigorously independent of the state. For the same reason, SUD refuses to be subordinate to any political party. [3]

Not long after its creation, this initial SUD union has become the second most important union in the postal and telecommunications sectors.

Solidaires: a new national union

With the same model used in the postal service and telecommunications, SUD unions were soon constituted in other sectors like health care and the railways. In 1998, the various SUD union locals joined with other unions who were not affiliated with a national union, notably including the tax collectors’ union. This resulted in the creation of Solidaires as a parent union. Today forty-four national unions, in the public and private sectors, are grouped under its umbrella—each with locals cooperating at citywide and regional levels. Solidaires organizes more than 90,000 workers today, and is in fact the fifth most important union in France. [4] Part of Solidaire’s strength comes from its position in strategic sectors like the post, telecommunications, railways, tax collection, and health care, as well as its links with numerous social movements.

Solidaires’ general orientation

In addition to struggles around wages and employment, one of Solidaires’ main concerns is the defense and improvement of public services, which traditionally plays an important role in France in the redistribution of wealth. It also goes on the offensive against cuts to social welfare and old-age pensions, which undermine principles of solidarity, create insecurity, and limit access to services for certain groups.

Solidaires plays a significant role in coalitions struggling for the rights of women, immigrant workers, those with inadequate housing, etc. The unionism of Solidaires seeks to combine the daily struggles, with their short-term objectives, to broader struggles aiming to affect the global balance of class forces. During the great strikes over the defense of old-age pensions, we systematically sought to coordinate the struggle at a national level. In effect, the combined experience of the workers’ movement demonstrates that only mass mobilizations are able to simultaneously win reforms and open the way to a world free from capitalism.

“Workers of all countries...”

In the same way that our activity does not stop at the doors of the individual workplace, it is not

limited by national borders. Facing a globalized capitalism, the struggle for sharing the wealth must necessarily be built at the European and worldwide levels. Solidaires is without doubt the French union that is most involved in the global justice movement and the social forums. Naturally, we seek to establish relationships with unions and social movements in other countries, particularly where we are fighting the same multinational corporations.

P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] A legal restriction was actually instituted in public services and administration, requiring unionists to submit written notice of plans to participate in a strike action several days in advance. But when the balance of forces is sufficient, this limitation of the right to strike is not always respected.

[2] In France, in a single workplace, a worker can choose which union to join.

[3] A certain number of Solidaires activists are members or former members of various left political currents (libertarians, revolutionary socialists, ex-Maoists, Trotskyists, New Anticapitalist Party members, environmental activists, etc.). But they only represent these currents as individuals and cannot speak on behalf of their parties if they hold positions in the union.

[4] The two main national unions are the CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail in French) and the CFDT which have about eight times more members than Solidaires.