

Report from Paris by Jacques Cheminade

How the strikes can be stopped

A policy of economic growth through investment—not crisis management—is required to meet the labor unrest.

The strike movement that has shaken up France since mid-December, as well as the previous student revolts, can only be understood from the standpoint of the paradigm shift taking place in times of crisis. Fear of the future and of unemployment, even in relatively privileged categories such as railway personnel, causes a rejection of any new measures of “rationalization” or “modernization,” terms which, as in steel production or heavy industry, usually mean unemployment.

This fear, which the disastrous economic policy of both the former Socialist government and of the present one, led by Premier Jacques Chirac, legitimizes, is then exploited and manipulated by political forces seeking to undermine the government. These forces go well beyond French parties or institutions; they are run from Moscow as part of the new Gorbachov strategy for taking over Europe after softening it up by exploiting its political weaknesses rather than using Moscow’s own forces. Moreover, certain financial interests delight in seeing a public institution like the state railroad company (SNCF) collapse, and their own control over the economy then seems justified.

To stop the disaster, the government must adopt at long last a Gaullist and Colbertist social and economic policy.

The strike was not launched by the communist-linked CGT trade union nor by the French Communist Party, the PCF, but by the conjuncture of the rank and file who fear losing their jobs

and the meddling of Trotskyist agitators. As in the big strike movements of 1936 and 1947, Trotskyist groups are the detonators. One example: The strike coordination committee, the spearhead of the strikes, was set up by Daniel Vitry, a member of the leftist-Trotskyist “Workers’ Struggle” (*Lutte ouvrière*).

The wages of the mobile personnel (those working on the trains, as opposed to the ones in the stations) cannot explain why they are fed up. They earn somewhat above the average, 8,000-12,000 francs per month for a 33-hour work week, of which 18 hours are spent “on the road.” The average number of kilometers covered per year is 30,000, whereas truck drivers, for example, cover more than 100,000 kilometers. Working conditions are also not an explanation; although mediocre and demeaning, they alone would not have justified such a deep and strong wave.

Rather, the train drivers think—and correctly in the present circumstances—that layoffs will come about if the “Astrée Project” is applied. This project aims at centralized satellite control and regulation of all rail traffic and units. The relative autonomy of train driving would disappear in favor of centralized and automated junctions. Human intervention would be very slight.

In these conditions, especially given the recent tendency to lower safety conditions, increasing accidents, and generally putting only one driver per train, instead of the normal two, it is no surprise that the drivers

reacted to the decision to change their status—somewhat favoring merit over seniority—by considering it a first step toward “rationalization-layoffs.”

Likewise, the drivers of the Paris metro, also on strike, fear that full automation of the subways will do them out of their jobs.

This fear of “being modernized” is what gives the strike its “defensive” or “corporatist” character, especially in the state rail or Paris transit strikes—just as it was in the student movement of November-December, where the students were more afraid of the selection and elimination process implicit in the Devaquet law, rather than of the bill itself. These are movements of survival, not demands

From there, the policial manipulation begins. The leadership of the Trotskyist groups are no innocent lambs from the left, but the latest Gorbachovian breed, out to reactivate France’s longstanding anarcho-syndicalism. The Communists and their CGT union intervene at this point, to try and generalize what was begun by others.

Even if Premier Chirac manages to break the strike, he will continue his austerity policy, which carries in itself the potential for new conflicts. The European Labor Party, Lyndon LaRouche’s associates in France, urges Mr. Chirac not to “manage” this crisis but to end it, with a program to: 1) take necessary sanctions against sabotage actions on the rails or power system, which could cause deaths; and 2) establish a productive investment policy.

That means the government must impose and apply a Colbertist reform of the economy, on the basis of an agreement between workers and industrialists against financial speculation. Without this alliance, the present government will have the same fate as the last one.