Guest Post: Christophe Cerniou on the New French Resistance, Résister, c'est créer

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Last summer, Sarkozy was basking in what he considered solid public support for his "reforms" aimed at undercutting the power of France's labor unions -- "these days, when someone has a strike, nobody notices."

More than a million French workers staged a general strike and marched in massive protests around the country Thursday to vent their anger over the global economic crisis and denounce President Nicolas Sarkozy's business-friendly approach to containing the damage.
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"Workers in France are angry about what they see as insufficient government efforts to protect both public- and private-sector jobs. People are also upset that union and employee concerns over stagnating salaries and slumping purchasing power were ignored when the government drew up its $34 billion economic stimulus package." . . .

"In economics, they talk about the invisible hand that regulates the market," Icelandic author Andri Snaer Magnason told Solnit. "In Iceland, the free market became so wild that it was not fixed by an invisible hand, but an invisible guillotine. So, in one weekend, the whole class of our newly rich masters of the universe lost their heads (reputation, power and money), and all the power and debt of the newly privatized companies fell into the hands of the people again."

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Sarkozy.s "nobody notices" comment, shortly before the crisis erupted, reflected the growing acceptance in France that a market economy and flourishing business environment were the best recipe for prosperity. This marked an erosion of labor unions' traditional political power and a fading of the idea that strong state controls were needed to guarantee a fair share for workers.

For many of the protesters Thursday, the economic crisis has proved that the changes were ill-founded and that the market economy needs more controls than Sarkozy is willing to impose on his friends in business.

"This is a message from the people of modest means to the president of the wealthy," read a handwritten sign held by a gray-haired woman watching the protesters go by. Another sign, carried by a youthful marcher, read: "Sarkozy, can you notice us now?"

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Reuters today Increasing the pressure on Sarkozy before Wednesday's "social summit," the opposition Socialists have called for a 1 percentage point cut in value-added tax and a 3 percent rise in the minimum wage to give a boost to consumer spending. . . "France is the only country not to act massively and immediately in the direction of purchasing power, while a consensus has been established by economists on the need for such measures alongside those in favour of investment," prominent Socialist Dider Migaud said last week.

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In France, Olivier Besancenot, the presidential candidate of the Revolutionary Communist League (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, or LCR) who received 4 percent of the vote in the 2007 elections, has been thrust into the ranks of the country's leading political figures.

"Besancenot, a postman in his day job, is a star," according to an early February edition of *Newsweek*. "And as storm clouds gather, he has become the country's most influential opposition figure. Besancenot has achieved a 60 percent popularity rating, with 45 percent of those polled saying they want to see him have more influence in the future, ahead of mainstream leaders like the centrist François Bayrou (44 percent) and new Socialist leader Martine Aubry (42 percent)."

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During the 1975 period, France experienced unprecedented (4.5% on average) and a boom, leading to the coinage of the term Trente Glorieuses ("Thirty Glorious [years]").