

TRADE UNIONS AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN EUROPE

Country Study France

Michel Noblecourt

February 2023

FRAMEWORK CONDITIONS OF THE TRADE UNIONS IN FRANCE

The French trade union landscape is characterised by its fragmentation into eight competing confederations of various sizes, each representing different ideological and strategic positions. According to trade union figures, they have a combined membership of almost three million (including both workers and pensioners). According to the Ministry of Labour, 10.3 per cent of employees are organised (7.8 per cent in the private sector, 18.4 per cent in the public sector and state enterprises). These statistics show membership today to be 0.7 per cent less than it was in 2016 and put France as one of the European countries with the lowest level of union membership. Five major confederations are recognised as having the power to negotiate and with which state and employers' organisations can join in agreements at the national, occupational, and sectoral levels: *Confédération française démocratique du travail* (CFDT; French Democratic Confederation of Labour); *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT; General Confederation of Labour); *Force ouvrière* (FO; Worker's Force); *Confédération française de l'encadrement – Confédération générale des cadres* (CFE-CGC; French Confederation of Management – General Confederation of Executives); and *Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens* (CFTC; French Confederations of Christian Workers). These organisations are also represented in most sectors and fare the best in company worker representation elections. Other relevant federations include the *Union nationale des syndicats autonomes* (UNSA; National Union of Autonomous Trade Unions), *Union syndicale*

solidaires (Solidaires; Solidarity Trade Union Federation), and the *Fédération syndicale unitaire* (FSU; Unitary Trade Union Federation).

Election results for workers' representation at the company level are a critical component of a trade union's capacity to negotiate and be recognised as a partner. In France, unions need to receive at least

Table 1
Trade unions and workers' representation elections

Union	Union Membership	Share in the elections for the term of office 2017–2020 (in per cent)
CFDT	610,144	26.77
CGT	600,000	22.96
FO	350,000	15.24
CFE-CGC	148,000	11.92
CFTC	140,000	9.50
UNSA	200,000	5.99
Solidaires	110,000	3.68
FSU	160,000	n.d.

Source: Data from the Ministry of Labour, Full Employment and Vocational Integration, and the Confederation of the French trade unions; own calculation (2021). N.d. = no data.

10 per cent of employee votes in a company to negotiate agreements with the employer. The election results from the past four years paint a valuable picture of the influence and balance of power of trade unions in the French social system.

Each trade union confederation consists of local and regional inter-occupational federations and branch organisations. These organisations are responsible for collective bargaining in all of the sectors and branches in which they are represented. The organisational uniqueness of the French system is exemplified by the high number of branches in each confederation and that their sphere of responsibility does not always coincide with the economic structure. Therefore, the fragmentation of the trade union ecosystem can be found not only between confederations but also within them.

Because the overarching inter-occupational federations are involved in the negotiation of important topics related to employment and social policy, the sector-specific organisations' scope of action is smaller in France than it is in other European countries. The most important sector-based organisations can be found in the public sector (public services, health, and the social sector). The teacher-based *Fédération syndicale unitaire* (FSU; United Federation of Trade Unions) is particularly influential in the education sector.

The French Constitution (specifically, the preamble to the 1946 and 1958 Constitutions) guarantees trade unions' freedom of organisation and association. At the national level, trade unions are recognised as negotiating partners by the state and must, at a minimum, be formally involved in discussions on government social policy reforms. The rights and duties of trade unions as they pertain to the companies and sectors in which they operate are regulated by law and can be expanded upon through the social partnership.

The Labour Code (*code du travail*) establishes important labour relations regulations, including the national minimum wage, the 35-hour work week, minimum vacation time (5 weeks per year), and occupational safety. For these, the provisions outlined in the code take precedence over regulations negotiated between social partners. At the national and inter-industry level, social partners negotiate with state and employer organisations on employment and social policy issues. At the sectoral level, the social partners are able to negotiate on items such as wage floors, occupational classifications, and provisions on equality, as well as deviate from the national and legal standards on issues such as probationary periods and fixed-term employment contracts.

THE POLITICAL SYSTEM IN FRANCE

Since the passing of the 1958 Constitution in France, the country has operated under a presidential-parliamentary system of government. The President of the Republic has been elected by universal suffrage since 1962 and wields considerable political power: He (no woman has ever been elected to this position) appoints the Prime Minister, is the head of the armed forces, and has the capacity to dissolve the National Assembly. In special circumstances, the president can also order a referendum. Thus, he is untouchable, unaccountable, and can only be held responsible in cases of high treason. While France might appear to be something of a 'Republican Monarchy', there are strong parliamentary oppositional forces. The Republic is represented by three chambers: the National Assembly, the Senate, and the Economic, Social, and Environmental Council (CESE; *Conseil économique, social et environnemental*). The Prime Minister determines and directs national policy and answers to the National Assembly. They do not have to win the parliamentarians' confidence but can be removed through a no-confidence vote supported by a majority in the assembly. Furthermore, the National Assembly has the final say in the passing of legislation.

France has many political parties. The party of the current president Emmanuel Macron was founded in 2016 under the name *En Marche!*. From 2017 to 2022, it went by the name *La République en marche!* (LREM; The Republic on the Move!). A merger between LREM and *Agir* (Action) and *Territoires de progrès – Mouvement social-réformiste* (TDP; Territories of Progress – Social Reformist Movement) led to the party being renamed *Renaissance* (RE) on 17 September 2022. RE's current General Secretary is Stéphane Séjourné.

The government majority is a coalition that includes the party *Mouvement Démocrate* (MoDem; Democratic Movement). This party was founded on 10 May 2007 by François Bayrou after he received 18.57 per cent of the vote in the presidential election that year. He ran again in 2012 and only received 9.13 per cent. In 2017 and 2022, he supported Macron in the first round of voting. As of 2022, the party has 51 representatives in the National Assembly. *Horizons*, another political party, was founded on 9 October 2021 by former Prime Minister Edouard Philippe, is also part of the present government, and has 27 representatives in the National Assembly.

Les Républicains (LR; The Republicans) is the strongest centre-right party, founded on 23 April 2002, through an initiative of Nicolas Sarkozy, emerging from the *Union pour un mouvement populaire* (UMP; Union for a

Popular Movement), which ended in 2015. Defining itself as a Gaullist party, LR follows in a long line of parties espousing this ideology.¹ The party's presidential candidate for the 2017 election, François Fillon, came in third with 20 per cent of the vote; since then, the party has found itself in an existential crisis. In December 2022, it elected Eric Ciotti as new chairperson to fill the seat held by interim chairperson Annie Genevard. As of 2022, LR has 61 representatives in the National Assembly and 138 in the Senate.

The *Union des démocrates et indépendants* (UDI; Union of Democrats and Independents) self-identifies as a centre-right party. Founded on 21 October 2012, the party sees itself as a continuation of former President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's party, *Union Pour la Démocratie Française* (UDF; Union for French Democracy), which existed from 1978 to 1998. The UDI supported François Fillon in 2017 but split from the LR in October of that year. Nevertheless, the party supported LR candidate Valérie Pécresse in 2022. The chair of the UDI, Jean-Christophe Lagarde, elected on November 13, 2014 and subsequently compromised by several legal disputes, resigned on 20 October 2022. The party has six representatives in the National Assembly, 38 in the Senate, and has grown closer to Emmanuel Macron. However, it has not joined his majority government.

The political centre is also populated by several smaller parties, including the *Parti républicain, radical et radical-socialiste* (PR or Parti Radical; Republican, Radical and Radical-Socialist Party or Radical Party); the *Mouvement Radical (social libéral)* (MRSL; Radical, Social, and Liberal Movement), which was formed on 9 December 2017 by PR; the *Parti Radical de Gauche* (PRG; Party of the Radical Left); the *Alliance Centriste* (AC; the Centrist Alliance); and *Les Centristes* (LC; the Centrists).

The left wing of the political party spectrum in France is also diverse. As of 2022, the most important party on the left is *La France Insoumise* (LFI; France Unbowed), which was founded on 10 February 2016, by Jean-Luc Mélenchon. The LFI is, however, more of a movement than a party, not unlike RE. Mélenchon led the party until 2021. As of 2022, LFI has 75 members of parlia-

ment (MP). The *Parti Socialiste* (PS; Socialist Party) was founded in 1969 and given a new orientation during the Epinay Congress in 1971 by François Mitterrand, who was PS' first secretary. This post has been held by Olivier Faure since 2018. The party has 31 MPs in the National Assembly and 61 senators. The older *Parti Communiste française* (PCF; French Communist Party) was founded in 1920 and has been led by National Secretary Fabien Roussel since 2018. It has 12 MPs and 14 senators. *Europe Ecologie-Les Verts* (EELV; Europe Ecology-The Greens) was founded on 13 November 2010, after several environmentalist movements joined forces. Julien Bayou held the National Secretary post for this party from 30 November 2019 to 26 September 2022 resigning after allegations of psychological violence were brought about by an ex-girlfriend. His successor Marine Tondelier was elected on 10 December 2022, with 90.8 per cent of the vote. The party has 16 MPs and eight senators.

Right-wing populism in France is dominated by Marine Le Pen's party, *Rassemblement National* (RN; National Rally), which evolved out of the Front National (FN; National Front) in June 2018. FN was founded by Jean-Marie Le Pen, Marine Le Pen's father, on 5 October 1972. Marine Le Pen took over as party leader on 16 January 2011 at the Tours Congress and held the post until 13 September 2021. On 5 November 2022, Jordan Bardella won the party's top seat in an election against Louis Aliot, the mayor of Perpignan. The RN has 89 MPs in the National Assembly.

The extreme right-wing party *Reconquête!* (R!; Reconquest) was founded on 30 April 2021, to represent Éric Zemmour's candidacy in the 2022 presidential election. Initially called *Les Amis d'Éric Zemmour* (Friends of Éric Zemmour), the party's name changed to *Reconquête!* on 5 December 2021. It has two senators and three MPs in the European Parliament but has no MPs in the National Assembly.

The small, national-populist party *Debout la France* (DLF; France Arise) was initially a faction within the *Rassemblement pour la République* (RPR; Rally for the Republic) from 1998 to 2008, before Nicolas Dupont-Aignan left and founded *Debout la République* on 23 November 2008. The party was renamed *Debout la France* on 12 November 2008. Nicolas Dupont-Aignan has run for president three times, in 2012 (winning 1.8 per cent of the vote), 2017 (4.7 per cent), and 2022 (2.06 per cent). He is his party's only MP in the National Assembly. *Les Patriotes* (LP; The Patriots) was founded on 29 September 2017 by Florian Philippot after he split from the FN. LP joined forces with DLF in the 2022 parliament elections and does not have any elected representatives.

¹ *Rassemblement du peuple français* (RPF; Rally of the French People) from 1947 to 1955; *Les Républicains sociaux* (RS; Social Republicans) from 1955 to 1958; *Union pour la Nouvelle République* (UNR; Union for the New Republic) from 1958 to 1967; *Union des Démocrates pour la V^e République* (UD-V^e; Union of Democrats for the 5th Republic) from 1967 to 1968; *Union des Démocrates pour la République* (UDR; Union of Democrats for the Republic) from 1968 to 1976; and *Rassemblement pour la République* (RPR; Rally for the Republic) from 1976 to 2002.

Anti-immigration sentiment in French politics is concentrated in the RN and R! parties. However, the most radical and violent (youth) movement was *Génération Identitaire* (GI; Generation Identity), the direct descendent of *Unité Radicale* (UR; Radical Unity). UR was administratively dissolved in August 2002 after an attempted attack on Jacques Chirac. As the successor to the 2002 *Jeunesses Identitaires* (Identitarian Youth) and the 2009 *Une autre jeunesse* (Another Youth) movements, GI initially came to prominence through their occupation of a construction site for a mosque in Poitiers in 2012 as the youth arm of *Bloc Identitaire* (BI; Identitarian Bloc). The movement became independent in 2016 when the “Bloc” was renamed *Les Identitaires* (The Identitarians). GI has had multiple run-ins with the justice department for their violent actions, notably in the Calais “Jungle” migrant camp and the Hautes-Alpes department on the border with Italy. GI was dissolved by decree from the Council of Ministers on 3 March 2021 for inciting discrimination and violence against others through hate speech targeting people for their origins, race, or religion. Furthermore, the group had some of the characteristics of a private militia as well as links to extreme right-wing groups that espouse theories of racial hatred and supremacism. GI’s appeal before the state was rejected on 2 July 2021. A number of former members participated in Éric Zemmour’s presidential campaign and started the group *Argos France*.

The results of the 2022 presidential election are as follows. In the first round, Emmanuel Macron received 27.85 per cent of the vote, Marine Le Pen 23.15 per cent, Jean-Luc Mélenchon 21.95 per cent, Éric Zemmour 7.07 per cent, Valérie Pécresse 4.78 per cent, Yannick Jadot (EELV) 4.63 per cent, Jean Lassalle 3.13 per cent, Fabien Roussel 2.28 per cent, Nicolas Dupont-Aignan 2.06 per cent, Anne Hidalgo (PS) 1.75 per cent, Philippe Poutou (*Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste*) 0.77 per cent, and Nathalie Arthaud (*Lutte Ouvrière*) 0.56 per cent. In the second round, Emmanuel Macron was re-elected with 58.55 per cent. 41.45 per cent of the vote went to Marine Le Pen.

The results from the second round of the 2022 parliamentary election are as follows. The presidential party alliance *Ensemble pour la majorité présidentielle* (Ensemble! Together for the Presidential Majority) received 38.57 per cent of the votes and a relative majority with 244 MPs. The new party alliance *La Nouvelle Union Populaire Écologique et Sociale* (NUPES; The New Ecological and Social People’s Union), formed by the parties LFI, PS, PCF, and EELV, occupied 127 seats in the National Assembly with 31.60 per cent of the votes. In addition, there are 22 MPs from other parties

on the left. The RN, with 17.30 per cent of the vote, took 89 seats. The LR, with 6.98 per cent of the vote, won 61.

THE RIGHT-WING FRONT AGAINST TRADE UNIONS

Marine Le Pen’s anti-unionist sentiment was on hold during the 2022 presidential campaign. Nevertheless, a few weeks after the elections, her original stance returned. Louis Aliot, the Perpignan mayor, let his mask fall when he declared on France’s BFM TV channel on 25 August 2022, “Trade unions are the morticians of the economic and labour world. They aren’t good for anything”.

A bitter hatred of the trade union movement appears consistently throughout the FN and the RN’s electoral programme. In 2002, FN described the movement as trying to get “different representatives of workers to discuss and build something together [...] in large trade associations and on equal terms, i.e., where workers and employers have an equal weight”. Moreover, “freedom of labour is restored through the criminalisation of picketing and the requirement of a secret ballot before every strike”.

In 2007, the FN decried trade unions for being “obsolete and unrepresentative”, stating that the “misguided and moribund French trade union movement is one of the main reasons for the stagnation of our economy and one of the largest obstacles to the necessary reforms in French society. [...] Opting exclusively for a disruptive strategy (strikes and systematic opposition to any form of change), the trade unions prevent individual sectors from collective bargaining, the only honest and concrete component of the social dialogue”. To “accomplish a much-needed renewal of the trade union movement”, the FN called for an abolition of the “monopoly of the first round” of voting in works council elections.

In 2012, Marine Le Pen praised “a major trade union reform”, demonstrating absolute ignorance on the subject: “The monopoly of representativeness that was established after liberation will be abolished and the system for electing workers representatives will be reformed”; “More representative unions will be in a better position to adopt the logic of constructive voting and less tempted to engage in power struggles (i. e., strikes and demonstrations) to compensate for their lack of legitimacy”.

Item ten of Marine Le Pen’s 144-point presidential plan from 2017, reaffirmed in 2022, was formulated as follows: “Establish proper trade union freedom through

the abolition of the monopoly of representativeness and improve the ethicality of the trade union system through public control of funding”. It must be made clear here that the “trade union monopoly” is a fabrication. In order to participate in lists in the first round of elections, trade unions must be independent and respect the republic’s values. Public control of trade union funding was already established by a 2008 law. In October 2022, the RN even brought forward several amendments to the National Assembly, which were, of course, rejected. One amendment intended to prevent foreigners from participating in works council elections through the ‘*priorité nationale*’ principle (‘national priority’; the ‘French nationals first’ policy gives French citizens priority over foreigners for housing and jobs), another demanded proficiency in French as a condition for participation in representative bodies. For Laure Lavalette, RN representative for the Var department and the author of these proposed amendments, the intention is to prevent “any attempt at foreign influence or communitarian demands through the representation of foreigners in these bodies”.

Nevertheless, the FN previously tried to infiltrate the trade union movement by suggesting candidates in Labour Court elections for seats not reserved for representatives from trade union confederations. Thus, the FN has created its own unions and attempted to strategically infiltrate trade unions known for being unstable.

In the Labour Court elections of 10 December 1997, the *Coordination française nationale des travailleurs* (CFNT; French National Coordination of Workers), which does not self-define as a trade union, put 132 lists forward in 34 French departments. It received an average of 5.91 per cent of the vote, with its best results in Mantel-la-Jolie (10.1 per cent), Dreux (9 per cent), and Nice (8.9 per cent). While 18 CFNT candidates won in this election, they were declared ineligible by the courts due to their ideological dependence on the FN. Elisabeth Guigou, Minister of Labour and Solidarity, led the passing of an anti-discrimination law on 16 November 2001, which banned political parties and all organisations that praise discrimination and thus “pursue a goal contrary to the institution of the labour court” from participating in labour court elections.

Since 1996, at the instigation of FN General Secretary and advocate of a “social front on the labour front” Bruno Gollnisch and FN General Delegate Bruno Mégret, the FN has tried to strengthen its involvement in various work sectors. By the 6 November 1995 elections, a police union, the *Front National-Police* (FNP; Police Union of the National Front), affiliated with the FN had already been established, winning 7.4 per cent

of the vote in workplace elections. This was followed by the establishment of a number of sector-specific FN unions, including for local public transport (February 1996), the Front National des territoriales (May 1996), for prison workers (September 1996), postal workers, and an educational movement known as the *Mouvement pour un Enseignement National*. All these unions were subsequently banned by the courts. The 10 April 1998 landmark ruling by the *Cour de cassation* (Court of Cassation) on the FN’s Police Union was binding. France’s highest court confirmed that “the FNP is simply an instrument of the political party that founded it, whose interests and objectives it exclusively serves by emphasising differences based on race, skin colour, and national or ethnic origin”. According to the court, the FNP was founded with an illegal purpose, which meant it could not legally call itself a trade union. Thus, de facto or de jure, all these organisations have since disappeared. Dominique Andolfatto and Thierry Choffat, in their book *Les faux semblants du Front national* (The false claims of the National Front), highlight how the split from the FN had “fatal consequences for them, as they were led by Bruno Mégret supporters” (2015).²

Despite this setback, the FN did not give up. Instead, they followed Bruno Mégret, who said: “We have to circumvent this problem, that they’re banning our unions, by infiltrating companies in disguise.” The CFE-CGC and the CFTC had already been targeted by the FN in the 1980s, as they were seen as weak points. These attempts, however, failed in the face of trade union resistance to their efforts. While it was not possible to prevent trade unionists from also being members of the FN, in a few rare cases, FN members who were also union members were barred from participating in positions of responsibility in a trade union or *Union départementale* (UD; Departmental Union). No unions forbid their members from belonging to a political party, but a clear emphasis on a political direction during a union election is not permitted.

ELECTION CAMPAIGN STRATEGIES OF RIGHT-WING POPULISTS

The Solidaires union describes the FN as adopting a predatory strategy targeting a populist electorate for election campaigns. Six union members ran in the March 2011 cantonal elections on the extreme right’s lists, though they emphasised their union affiliation:

² Bruno Mégret resigned from the FN following a disagreement over the future strategy of the FN and personal differences with Jean-Marie Le Pen in December 1998. He then founded the *Mouvement National Républicain* (MNR; National Republican Movement).

Fabien Engelmann (CGT), Daniel Durand Decaulin (CFDT), and Thierry Gourlot (CFTC) ran in the Moselle Department; Annie Lamahieu (FO) in Nord; and Robert Demassieux (CFDT) and Franck Pech (SUD) in Pas-de-Calais. The CFTC withdrew all mandates from SNCF employee Thierry Gourlot, who is known for having founded the *Cercle National des Travailleurs Syndiqués* (CNTS; National Group of Unionised Workers) with Louis Aliot. He subsequently left the CFTC to join Éric Zemmour's controversial political party.

The most outstanding case is that of Fabien Engelmann. Coming from the extreme left, with involvement first in *Lutte ouvrière* (LO; Workers Struggle) and later in *Nouveau parti anti-capitaliste* (NPA; New Anti-capitalist Party). He even ran in the Thionville municipal elections as an LO candidate before later switching to the right via the website *Riposte Laïque*. On 9 March 2011, then General Secretary of the CGT Bernard Thibault sent a letter to all the unions in the CGT confederation stating: “Despite all the protests, the FN cannot be considered a normal political party, neither by the CGT nor by other trade unions. The FN's positions, and specifically the priority given to French nationals, are against the principles of the Republic and international conventions. [...] In this regard, it is our responsibility to be vigilant and respond collectively.”

Pascal Dubay is an educator in Meurthe-et-Moselle, General Secretary of his trade union sub-district (UD), and member of the Executive Committee for the CGT. At the CGT, he led the collective aptly named “*Lutte contre l'extrême droite et le racism*” (Fight against right-wing extremism and racism; henceforth the Collective for Combating Extremism) and remembers this affair as a “real trauma”. Dubay remembers Engelmann, former CGT union secretary for the mayor's office in Nivange, as a “lively activist [...] including in defence of the LGBT community”. In this affair, “the Moselle UD and the *Fédération des Services Publics* gathered all the members of Engelmann's union to take on the story. It was only when a majority of members deemed the situation abnormal that proceedings against the union were initiated by the Executive Committee; the union was eventually removed from the federation”. Engelmann was elected mayor of Hayange in 2014 as a member of the FN political party. As a member of the regional council, he represented Laurent Jacobelli, then RN deputy for the department of Moselle. This served as a precedent for the events that unfolded with the CGT. A memo by the Collective for Combating Extremism published on 10 October 2022 was titled *Memo on the extreme right's attempts to instrumentalise the CGT*. While confirming “the freedom to run in political elections,” the memo reiter-

ates that “it is unthinkable to have the CGT represented at any level from an activist or member who openly proclaims to adhere to the concept of ‘priority for nationals’, which is a central tenant of the extreme right and the *Rassemblement National* in particular, in the name of freedom of expression in the CGT. The acceptance of the far right's theses, including the ‘French nationals first’ concept, the blaming of immigration as a cause of unemployment, or the rejection of the integration of irregular immigrants, is absolutely incompatible with the CGT's values”.

“Therefore, the CGT cannot permit trade unionists who have violated these principles to remain members,” the memo goes on to explain by providing the following procedures: “First and foremost, the organisation implicated must initiate appropriate procedures in strict compliance with their rules and regulations. The Executive Committee of a UD or FD may not replace union leadership when it comes to initiating expulsion proceedings. [...] The affected party must be given a summons and granted a hearing before a final decision can be made, even if the statutes do not expressly mandate such a hearing in their internal disciplinary guidelines. [...] It is crucial that the disciplinary procedures be supported by a political work of debate and argumentation within the affected organisation, so the motive for the process can be established.”

Pascal Dubay mentions about 50 activists, extreme right candidates for the elections, especially the municipal elections: “Either we had to exclude them or they left on their own”. He cited the case of an FN candidate for municipal elections in Saint-Avold in Moselle in 2014; “He was not shut out. But he was quite upset and admitted that he had ‘messed up’”.

Marine Le Pen's FN list for the 2015 departmental elections included “8 CGT, 9 CFTC, 5 CFDT, 7 FO” candidates on her FN list. The independent mayor of Rans in the Jura department and CFDT representative for Solvay, Stéphane Montrelay, was an FN candidate and was subsequently expelled. In the 2014 municipal elections, a labour judge with CFDT Paris, Dominique Bourse-Provence, was an FN candidate in the 10th arrondissement and refused to resign. The story unfolded as follows: when he was a CFDT trade unionist, “the motto was: ‘we accept all parties except the FN’”. As an FN regional councillor for Ile-de-France, he had advocated for the ‘national priority’ policy, which had led his union, the *Syndicat National des Personnels des Organismes* to expel him. In response to his expulsion, he took legal action under the name of “freedom of expression”. In November 2017, the appeal was dismissed by the *Tribunal de grande instance* (TJ; now re-

named *Tribunal judiciaire de Paris*, Judicial Court of Paris) on the grounds that his expulsion was “due to his consistent behaviour of taking a public position on specific topics that are absolutely contrary to the beliefs and guidelines” of the union to which he had belonged. Since leaving the CFDT, this particular trade unionist has joined Florian Philippot’s party *Les Patriotes* and participated in a demonstration against so-called “Anti-Corona-Madness”. The CFDT invokes this particular ruling as an example of a rare ‘betrayal’ of its values.

In the *Force Ouvrière* (FO) union, the newspaper *La Vox du Nord* revealed that a regional deputy belonged to the FN in the 2011 cantonal elections. She was subsequently stripped of her authority. In 2021, after 30 years of activism in the CFTC-Dunlop union, Philippe Théveniaud, who was at the time the President of the *Caisse d’allocations familiales* in Somme, ran in regional elections. As the top candidate on the FN list for Somme, he subsequently gave up his CFTC membership. While he was not a member of the RN, he was close to the party and self-identified as a “socialist Gaullist” and an activist in the *Avenir Français*, which “often opposed Jean-Marie Le Pen”. As a deputy for the RN’s MP for Somme, Jean-Philippe Tanguy, Théveniaud left the CFTC in 2022 “because those responsible did not respect the statutes for independence when they called for votes for Emmanuel Macron”. The RN MP for Oise, Philippe Ballard, continues to present himself as a CFTC representative.

FRENCH TRADE UNIONS AND THE EXTREME RIGHT

Uncompromising opposition to right-wing extremism is part of the DNA of France’s trade unions. After the Vichy regime dissolved the unions on 15 November 1940, the CGT and CFTC secretly drew up a joint text on French trade union principles. Titled the *Manifesto of the Twelve*, this document affirmed from its start the centrality of “respect for human beings without regard for race, religion, or creed”.

In this manifesto, “under no circumstances and in no way can the French trade union movement accept differences between people based on race, religion, origin, opinions, or wealth. Every human being deserves equal respect. They are entitled to free and full development so long as it does not oppose the interests of the community”. The document rejects “above all, anti-Semitism”.

In the preface to the 1995 and 2016 revisions of the union statutes, the CGT, which was first founded in 1895,

sets a clear tonal precedent: “Through its analysis, proposals, and actions, it acts so that the ideals of liberty, equality, justice, secularism, fraternity, and solidarity [...] prevail in society. It is for a democratic society, free from capitalist exploitation and other exploitation and domination and is against all kinds of discrimination, racism, xenophobia, and all exclusions.”

For the CFDT, originally founded in 1964, the preface to the 2018 amended statutes proclaims that the “alienation of people and any form of violation of their dignity and fundamental rights are incompatible with humanist, democratic, and secular values, social progress, and long-term performance of the economy. This can take different and sometimes complex forms, depending on the status, gender, place, time, origin, or beliefs of each individual”. Article 1 places individual and collective emancipation, solidarity, and equality in the foreground, alongside democracy, i.e., “combatting all forms of exclusion, discrimination, sexism, racism, and xenophobia”.

As the former General Secretary of the *Union Nationale des Syndicats Autonomes* (UNSA; National Union of Autonomous Trade Unions), Alain Olive, underlined at a Jean Jaurès Foundation and Friedrich Ebert Foundation joint conference held in March 2022, “Marine Le Pen’s RN places importance on specific issues that were close to her father’s heart, especially [...] his intense hostility toward trade union confederation and the trade union movement as a whole”. This anti-union sentiment has a long history. Under the Vichy regime, the *Charte du travail* (Labour Charter) established by former CGT functionary René Belin, and who was Philippe Pétain’s Minister of Labour, sought to make a “definite break from the old system of class struggle [...] Trade unions will therefore be mandatory so as to be strong, united in order to be free. Their activity will henceforth be strictly limited to their respective sectors”.

TRADE UNIONS UNITED AGAINST THE RIGHT

The first united trade union response against the far-right in France can be dated to 17 March 2011. In a joint statement, the unions CFDT, CGT, FSU, Solidaires, and UNSA shared the decision: “to no longer express casual indifference to the use of the social sphere to promote specific ideas in the public debate, as practised by the National Front. The ‘priority for French nationals’ is incompatible with the basic values of the trade union movement. Exclusion, rejection of others, the isolation of France and the closing of its borders, the use of scapegoats, and the denunciation of immigration as the basis of all evil are all attitudes

that, as history has shown us, can only lead to the worst. [...] Trade union actions are grounded in the values of the trade union movement, such as solidarity among all workers and the fight against all forms of discrimination.” The five unions announced their readiness “to prevent the instrumentalisation of the trade union movement by the National Front, which is not a typical party and whose inclinations are in conflict with union values”.

On 15 June 2015, a few months after the attack on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, the unions went much further. In a carefully organised production at the *Bourse du travail* (France’s labour council) in Paris, seven trade union leaders unveiled an unprecedented and historic declaration. Laurent Berger (CFDT), Philippe Martinez (CGT), Philippe Louis (CFTC), Carole Couvert (CFE-CGC), Bernadette Groison (FSU), Luc Bérille (UNSA), and Cécile Gondard-Lalanne (Solidaires) presented a manifesto titled *Living and Working Together after January 11th, 2015*. The groundwork of this text, which is eight pages long and includes five chapters, was first laid out on 20 January 2015 and then revised during five joint working meetings led by Jean-Louis Malys (CFDT) and Pascal Dubay (CGT). The manifesto is a “call to assemble in companies to oppose populism, the ideas of the extreme right, demagoguery, and to resolutely stand up for the values of the trade union and the principles of the Republic”.

Without “wanting to erase diverse sensitivities”, the seven unions underlined that the “trade union movement is enriched by the very diversity that is the basis of a democratic society. Equality, fraternity, solidarity, and respect for human rights and freedom are at the very centre of the trade union’s values. Its actions are incompatible with the logics of discrimination, sexism, racism, or anti-Semitism”. “The growth of populism”, the declaration continues, “radical right-wing ideas, xenophobia, sectarianism, and fundamentalism correspond to an extremely unsettling reality in all of Europe and in France in particular. [...] History has shown that exclusion, rejection of others, the isolation of France and the closing of its borders, and the denunciation of immigration as the basis of all evil are attitudes that lead only to discord, conflict, and failure”.

The only downside to the declaration was that the worker’s movement FO was not included, and the FN was not named explicitly. Nevertheless, the message was strong. In April 2017, FO General Secretary Jean-Claude Mailly affirmed: “Crises are the soil in which far-right ideas grow.” The FO declared that it was “in its genes to fight against racism, xenophobia, and anti-

Semitism. The principles of the republic, such as fraternity, secularism, and democracy, are indispensable values”.

On 5 June 2015, Philippe Martinez directly decried the FN in front of the press, stating “this party only represents the employers’ interests” and called for discussions to take place in the companies themselves so that “nothing is swept under the rug”. Seven years later, Laurent Berger and Pascal Dubey jointly stated that “this declaration has led nowhere”. Even in 2015, there was hardly a response. In December 2015, a number of trade unions – the CFDT, CGT, UNSA, and the FSU – called for open opposition to Marine Le Pen’s party and Philippe Louis, the president of CFTC who had put Christian values in the forefront in order to “bring down the National Front”.

Indeed, the trade union wall of protection against the right turned out to be rather weak. In 2002, when Jean-Marie Le Pen defeated Lionel Jospin, thus qualifying for the second round in the presidential election, all unions mobilised against the FN on the First of May. Only the FO held back, in the name of trade union freedom. With help from the leftist parties as well as numerous associations, 1.5 million demonstrators took to the streets across France. However, this was not repeated when the same scenario presented itself in the second round of a presidential election in 2017 or 2022. The unions each celebrated May Day in their own way, each giving priority to their own movement.

THE ELECTORAL BEHAVIOR OF TRADE UNIONISTS

When focusing solely on France’s presidential elections, though the same trends can be observed in regional, parliamentary, and European elections, there is an unsettling increase in votes for FN by trade union members. Several polling institutes analysed the votes in the first round of the presidential election by trade union affiliation. These surveys should be treated with caution, as they indicate an affinity for the party, not party membership. Nevertheless, there is a clear picture of a recent slight weakening but an overall strong rise of the FN among workers and those living in increasingly desolate rural areas.

According to the *Conseil supérieur de l’audiovisuel* (CSA; Superior Audiovisual Council), in the first round of the 2002 presidential election, Jean-Marie Le Pen received 19 per cent of the vote of CFTC members, 15 per cent of FO members, 12 per cent of CGT and

CFE-CGC members, 10 per cent of CFDT, and 3 per cent of *Solidaires* members' votes. As per Harris Interactive's data from the first round of the presidential election in 2012, Marine Le Pen was the candidate of choice for the following percentage of union members: 25 per cent of FO supporters, 16 per cent of UNSA, 15 per cent of CFTC, 12 per cent of CFDT, 11 per cent of CFE-CGC, 9 per cent of CGT, 4 per cent of *Solidaires*, and 3 per cent of FSU.

In the first round of the 2017 presidential election, Marine Le Pen had 24 per cent of the vote from FO, 15 per cent from CFTC and UNSA, 13 per cent from CFE-CGC and *Solidaires*, 9 per cent from FSU, and 7 per cent from CFDT, according to a large sample study by Harris Interactive.

In another survey by Harris Interactive, an online survey of eligible voters with a sample size of 6,523, the candidate from the far right received 31 per cent of the FO members' votes (7 per cent more compared to 2017), 29 per cent of CFTC voters (up 15 points), 22 per cent from CGT voters (up 7 points), 19 per cent UNSA voters (up 5 points), 17 per cent CFE-CGC voters (up 4 points), 15 per cent CFDT voters (up 8 points), 14 per cent *Solidaires* voters (up 1 point) and 10 per cent FSU voters (up 1 point). Over five years, Le Pen won votes from unionists. In 2022, the RN candidate also made gains among civil servants, winning 38 per cent of their vote, up 9 points from 2017. In particular, 25 per cent of teachers voted for Le Pen (up 7 points from 2017).

According to an October 2015 survey of work council secretaries conducted by an institute specialising in works councils, 61.4 per cent of secretaries declared sympathy for a party: 28.6 per cent for the left, 20.1 per cent for the right, and 2.6 per cent for FN. In contrast, 38.6 per cent did not declare affiliation with any party. Numerous leaders of the CGT, UNSA, and several from the CFDT made anonymous observations of freedom of expression at the trade unionists' assembly. Others did not hesitate to declare their interest in the positions put forward by right-wing extremists.

"When it comes to the demands," said an FO member, "we are unintentionally playing the Front National's game, since they have taken over our demands. My comrades report that FN spies are present at meetings. After the meetings, we find the exact wording of our demands in their treatises".

"The right-wing extremists have clever tactics," says Pascal Debay, "I'd describe them as a chameleon. They know exactly how to talk to steelworkers in Moselle

and to the craftsmen in Var, and to others too. They adapt their content and form. When they write, 'no second-rate minimum wage', that could have come from a trade union."

Philippe Martinez expressed shock by this: "The FN is winning over more and more, including those in our ranks. On social issues, they don't hesitate to peer in to our demands. This right-wing upwell must be fought relentlessly". The trade union leaders, however, have not hesitated to resign themselves to a massive (masked) increase in FN/RN activists so long as it increases the expected number of new members.

The true proportion of RN voters with official union membership varies greatly across the union federations.

TRADE UNION POSITIONS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST RIGHT-WING POPULISM

An analysis of trade unions shows their respective positions and approaches to the fight against right-wing populism.

CFDT

The CFDT is consistent in its fight against right-wing extremism. In the second round of ballots for the presidential election in 2017 and again in 2022, it called for people to "use the only possible ballot to fight right-wing extremists and vote for Emmanuel Macron". At the 50th congress in Lyon (13–17 June 2022), which took place just before the general elections, Laurent Berger said: "Don't give a single vote to the right-wing extremists. But that alone is not enough. Civil courage is comprised of saying exactly who to vote for to defeat the far-right. Blocking the far-right does not mean condemning or despising those who vote for a far-right party. As the oldest trade union in France, it is up to us to address the workers who succumb to this temptation. We have to show them that this derogatory attitude toward "others" is only a fallacy that in the end always works out to the workers' disadvantage".

According to Laurent Berger, the act of "blocking the extreme right" is comprised of "the daily search for solutions, democratic confrontation – in the best sense of the word: it sometimes leads to clashes, but mainly brings a conclusion to the fore". The CFDT resolution adopted at the Lyon Congress underscores that it "does not support any party, but defends its values and social project". It stands in opposition to the fanciful, monolithic, and homogeneous image of

the people and fights the parties that incite hatred, sexism, or racism. The CFDT defends democracy, the separation of powers, secularism, the rule of law, the values of the republic, and civil society and rejects all forms of discrimination.

CGT

It certainly cannot be said that the CGT has not displayed overt hostility towards the far-right. On 16 April 2022, during the presidential election, Laurent Berger and Philippe Martinez signed their first-ever joint column in the *Journal du Manche* calling for votes against the far-right: “We are two engaged stakeholders who, despite our differences, believe in the power of dialogue and collective action to create a more just society. We are both responsible for organisations that have not resigned to the concept of seeing the far-right in power. The Rassemblement National is a danger to the fundamental rights of citizens and workers. This party cannot be trusted to be a respectful party of the republic or guarantor of our motto, ‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity.’ We must not hand it the keys to our democracy, or we will lose it”. The General Secretary of the CGT has always affirmed that “due to the many promises that have not been kept, it’s undeniable that various governments are responsible for the citizens’ mistrust”.

In 2022, Philippe Martinez refused to publicly call for votes for Emmanuel Macron. During an Executive Committee debate on the subject, supporters of this “specified vote” were a minority. Previously in 2017, however, he dared to take this step, publicly wishing two days before the second round of votes that “Marine Le Pen would get the lowest result and Macron would get the highest possible result”. During that year, thirty CGT functionaries, including Pierre Krasucki, son of former CGT General Secretary Henri Krasucki, and Pascal Dubay campaigned in the newspaper *L’Humanité*, saying that “voting for Macron” was an “anti-fascist vote”. However, they also warned that they would “be the first to fight his destruction of ‘social benefits’”.

FO

In 2002, the FO General Secretary Marc Blondel refused to support Jacques Chirac in the second round of the presidential election in the name of trade union independence. This act was sharply criticised. His successors, Jean-Claude Mailly (2017) and Yves Veyrier (2022), also adhered to this principle. In 2014, the FN and one of its satellites, the *Collectif Racine*, put out

a call for support for FO candidates in elections for the regional administrative body. This support was rejected by the FO and condemned as ‘provocation’. At the same time, the then second-in-command at the FN, Florian Philippot, proclaimed to have “observed a greater willingness in the environment of the FO than at the CGT or CFDT”. The FN threatened Jean-Claude Mailly with a trial when he responded to a question about a possible meeting with Marine Le Pen with the quip, “National Socialism isn’t my thing”.

The new FO General Secretary Frédéric Souillot is on the same wavelength and has assured that he would not have signed the 2015 Trade Union Confederation Declaration, specifying instead that the FO should send its demands to all presidential candidates with the exception of Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour. The FO has since strengthened its tone against the far-right. In November 2021, Yves Veyrier emphasised that the FO will “strongly defend its fundamental values without concessions: this means the rejection of racism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia, and the denunciation of slogans and policies that scapegoat foreigners and migrants instead of providing legal solutions in the economic and social spheres. We have nothing in common with these positions or practices that set people against one another, divide them into hierarchies, and separate and discrimination; not today and not in the future”.

A further sign of this hardening can be seen in the reaction of members of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) to the publication of puff pieces published by the Polish trade union *Solidarność*’s weekly magazine *Tygodnik Solidarność* with interviews of Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour. In response, Yves Veyrier, Laurent Berger (CFDT), Philippe Martinez (CGT), Cyril Chabanier (CFTC), and Laurent Escure (UNSA), sent a joint letter to *Solidarność*’s president Piotr Duda to criticise initiatives that “violate the principle of independence in the trade union movement” when “participating in strengthening democracy and social progress in Europe”.

CFE-CGC

President of the CFE-CGC François Hommeril does not regret signing the 2015 Declaration. However, he vigorously rejects making any recommendations about candidates or parties during political elections, as this is not part of the trade unions’ tasks. “This rule protects us,” he says. For the 2022 presidential election, the CFE-CGC sent its demands to all candidates without exception and took no ballot position in the second round of the election.

François Hommeril reminds that the union's statutes "forbids standing for election and pretending to be a member of the CFE-CGC". He's aware of the "tendency" of the members of the police union to be aligned with the FN; however, "we rely on intelligence in the face of populism. When the government says that the rights of the unemployed should be cut, that is populism and it panders to the lowest instincts". The CFE-CGC makes a case for its guidance document Religion at the Workplace, which promotes respect for "the principle of non-discrimination on the grounds of origin, gender, customs, sexual orientation, [...] actual or presumed membership or non-membership of an ethnic group, nation, alleged race, political opinion, trade union activity, or membership in a trade union, mutual society, or religious belief".

CFTC

In the run-up to the 2022 presidential election, the CFTC's National Committee took a vote by hand after the Executive Director, Cyril Chabanier, brought up that a presidential candidate "did not respect the values of the CFTC". Like in 2017, he called for votes against the far-right, though not specifically for Emmanuel Macron. In 2016, the union's climate was marred by two events. First, its Vice President Joseph Thouvenel participated in a demonstration of the "La Manif pour tous" movement in October 2016 on the same side as Marion Maréchal Le Pen, the then-FN MP for Vaucluse. "As a private individual", he had previously denounced the "blogosphere" and proclaimed his desire to resist "the commercialisation of the human". His behaviour was frowned upon, and a communique was disseminated, reminding that "the Front National's positions, which in particular praise intolerance toward women and men of other origins, mean that the CFTC is in total disagreement with the party and this thus prevents any relationship". Second, the CFTC had to sever the ties between its police union and the *Fédération Professionnelle Indépendante de la Police* (FPIP; Independent Professional Federation of the Police) because of the group's nearing to the FN.

UNSA

At the beginning of the 2022 presidential elections, UNSA General Secretary Laurent Escure put forth the following stance: "no invalid votes, no abstentions, no Le Pen", fearing that support for Emmanuel Macron could "lead to more votes for Le Pen". Nevertheless, he ultimately decided to support the incumbent

president without endorsing his programme. "We have members who are happy with the union but vote for the RN anyway", he complained.

In the foreword to the union's charter, the UNSA affirms its "adherence to the secularism of the Republic, to democracy, liberties, social justice, solidarity, defence of the public service, right to work, fraternity, and tolerance, and faithfulness to the principle of trade union independence. At UNSA, the fight against discrimination belongs to its fundamental principles".

FSU

For Benoît Teste, FSU General Secretary, "the rise of the extreme right is linked to individualism and stems from the inability to form a collective. Many feel excluded from society and perceive the precarification of their work. They ask themselves, why not the RN? Macron is partly to blame", he adds.

The FSU statutes are silent on party affiliation for members. For officials, "there is no overlap between our activists and the FN". True to the 2015 statement, Benoît Teste also affirms "the need for a united fight against the far right, though this could lead to complicated debates". For the presidential election, he noted, "we called for mobilisation against the far-right before the second round, but not to vote for Macron. However, we do say that Macron is not the same as Le Pen".

SOLIDAIRES

For SNCF employee and SUD-rail activist Frédéric Bodin, who leads the working group Union response against the right-wing extremists, "the values of the trade union movement are incompatible with right-wing extremism". In both the 2017 and 2022 presidential elections, Solidaires promoted the slogan "No vote for the far-right", albeit without a call for voting for Emmanuel Macron. "We have two enemies," explains Frédéric Bodin, "one wants to fight us [Macron], the other wants us to disappear [Le Pen]. It's not about having the same project or the same oppositions. Politically, it's very different".

In the summer of 2022, Solidaires dedicated an issue of its magazine *Les Utopiques* to the "trade union movement against right-wing extremism". "Our statutes do not explicitly forbid the extreme right," explains Frédéric Bodin, "but it is clear that the supporters have no place here with us". Solidaires is heavily involved in the inter-union association *Vigilance et initiatives syn-*

dicales antifascistes (VISA; Union Anti-fascist Vigilance and Initiatives); 80 out of the 115 involved are Solidaires unions. Other unions involved include some local CGT and FSU unions and a few from the CFDT. VISA is involved in educational actions and recently published a booklet of the 89 RN MP's biographies, the "imposters", titled *Light on a brown National Assembly*. Education is a weapon used by all confederations. The CFDT has a module for combating right-wing extremism in all its educational courses. At the CGT, Pascal Dubey has been leading thematic training days since 2015: "In the first four months of 2022, we offered 48 training days." A four-day module was recently set up at the Confederal Educational Centre "to unmask the extreme right's programme". The module material included several learning sheets; "On labour issues, the FN is on the side of capital"; "the FN lies about purchasing power"; "the FN's legislative proposals on taxation are particularly favourable to the rich and to companies"; "the FN lies about the 'defence' of public services and 'on immigration'"; "the priority for nationals: the foundation of social protection"; "the FN hates the trade union movement and trade unionists", and so on. The module also includes an 11-minute film titled *Yesterday and Today: The Fight of the Extreme Right*. This film was made by the CGT's *Institut d'histoire sociale* (Institute for Social History) and is used similarly by the FSU and Solidaires.

On 30 September 2022, the CGT, Solidaires, and several organisations issued a communiqué that called for refrainment of "any contact with members of the RN parliamentary group" against the backdrop of muffled concern that a catastrophe similar to the results of the 2022 Italian elections where the extreme right came into power could happen in France in 2024. This looming danger may lead the unions to work together against the extreme right in the spirit of the 2015 declaration.

ABOUT THE AUTOR

Michel Noblecourt is a journalist for the French newspaper *Le Monde*. He specialises in trade union issues and the political left.

IMPRINT

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e. V.

Godesberger Allee 149
53175 Bonn | Germany
Email: info@fes.de

Issuing department:
International Cooperation | Global and European Policy

Responsible for content and editing:
Dr Marc Meinardus | European Trade Union and Social Policy
marc.meinardus@fes.de

Design/Typesetting: [pertext](http://pertext.de), Berlin | www.pertext.de

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES). Commercial use of media published by the FES is not permitted without the written consent of the FES. Publications by the FES may not be used for electioneering purposes.

© 2023

