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France

The mass movement has defeated the government - what now?

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After two months of a mass campaign against the CPE (First Employment Contract), on the morning of April 10 the French government finally caved in and withdrew the measure. The CPE would have enabled employers to sack young workers under the age of 26 in the first two years of their employment, without having to give a reason. Its defeat was the first time a mass movement had blocked one of the government's neo-liberal measures since the Right came back to power in 2002. The government forced through a reform of pensions in 2003 in spite of months of demonstrations and strikes. The following year it imposed a reform of health insurance. Why did it fail this time?

In the first place, the CPE was aimed at a very specific part of the population, young people. And those young people who would have been directly affected, university and high school students, mobilized massively against it. There is a tradition of powerful student mobilizations in France, and this is not the first time one has been successful.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/PM10a.jpg>]

In 1986 the government was forced to withdraw an education reform and in 1994 a measure similar to the CPE was defeated. Last year there was a four-month long movement of high school students, not always massive but very militant. The fact that there are regularly movements among students, sometimes national, sometimes just local, means that there is a frequently renewed layer of activists.

Secondly, there was broad unity against the CPE. The trade unions - all of them - supported the movement from start to finish. One reason for the defeat in 2003 was that one of the main unions, the CFDT, defected early on and accepted the government measure in exchange for insignificant concessions. It lost many members as a result. This time everyone stayed on board throughout the movement. Only a few months ago a measure similar to the CPE, the CNE, went through with little opposition.

The CNE (New Employment Contract) allows employers in companies with less than 20 employees to sack workers in the first two years of their employment without giving a reason. A day of strikes and mass demonstrations against the CNE last October 4 was not followed up and the measure went through. The workers most directly affected, those working in small companies, are poorly organised and in an unfavourable relationship of forces with their employers. Only a national campaign by the unions that mobilised stronger sectors could have compensated for that, and it wasn't forthcoming.

What was different this time was that the initiative was not with the union leaderships but with the students. And the student mobilization, which started off slowly, steadily expanded. By the end of the movement three-quarters of universities were occupied or blockaded and over a quarter of high schools.

And it really was a movement that involved the mass of students. General assemblies of several hundred were daily occurrences, and mass meetings of several thousand students took place in the most militant universities. In the latter stages of the movement, students engaged in forms of direct action - blocking train stations and motorways, occupying offices of employers' organisations and the government party. It is worth noting that many of the most militant contingents of the high school movement came from schools in the suburbs which were at the centre of the revolt of mainly immigrant youth last November.

The support of the unions was a key factor in the victory - there was throughout the movement a united front, the Intersyndicale, of eight trade union organisations and four student unions. But it was the youth who were the

locomotive, the driving force of the movement.

Unions representing both university and high school students were actively involved in the movement, but its leadership was the Student Coordination, comprising representatives elected by mass meetings, which met every weekend in a different university and which was dominated by left-wing militants. The movement was supported by the entire French Left, from the reformist Socialist Party to revolutionary organizations like the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) and Lutte Ouvrière.

Thirdly, the demand for the withdrawal of the CPE had mass support. As people understood what was at stake, opposition to it rose to around 70 per cent of the population - 80 per cent among young people. And more and more of them were ready to take to the streets. The first day of action on February 7 mobilised 400,000 demonstrators, which in French terms was only a modest success. The next one a month later had a million, then 1.5 million on March 18, three million on March 28 and even more on April 4. Particularly on the last two days the number of those on strike was significant but not really massive - not as big as the biggest strikes in 2003.

The bitter experience of the movement against pension reform three years ago demonstrated that a series of one-day strikes was not enough to make the government back down. This time it was the combination of the massive nature of the protests and the fact that the higher education system was progressively paralysed that brought victory. As the movement grew, usually conservative university presidents were calling for the CPE to be withdrawn and splits developed in the governing UMP party, with Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, who had introduced the CPE, becoming more and more isolated.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/PM8a.jpg>]

Underlying the whole movement is an ongoing refusal of French public opinion to accept the inevitability of neo-liberal capitalism. In an editorial in its March 31 edition, the London-based Economist informed its readers, in a tone of exasperation, that only 36 per cent of French people thought the "free market" was the best possible economic system, as against around two-thirds of people in Britain, Germany and the US. This is a reflection of a deep-rooted attachment to the ideas of equality and solidarity among wide layers in French society.

The degree of resistance to the neo-liberal agenda was demonstrated at the polls when the projected European Constitution was defeated in the referendum on May 29 last year after a dynamic campaign for a "No" from the left. It has just been demonstrated in the streets, and the activists who built the mass mobilisations were often the same who campaigned against the European Constitution. In fact, there is now in practically every town a network of militants, who come from different unions and political organisations, from the global justice movement ATTAC, who are used to working with each other.

Some politicians and commentators in France and abroad have argued that it is "undemocratic" for mass protests to be able to over-rule the decisions of elected representatives. This reveals a touching faith in France's democratic institutions

It is worth recalling that the UMP, which thanks to the peculiarities of the French electoral system has an absolute and indeed substantial majority in Parliament, won just 33 per cent of the vote in the 2002 elections - a figure that goes down to 22 per cent of registered voters when you take into account the 35 per cent of electors who abstained. Representatives elected under those conditions and subject to no kind of control or recall by their electors are ill placed to give lessons in democracy. In 2003, then Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin famously declared: "It is not the street that governs". On that occasion he won.

Three years later, if the street did not exactly govern, it showed that it could block a measure that the government

was trying to impose against overwhelming public opinion.

The victory over the CPE has left an arrogant right-wing government in disarray a year before next year's presidential and legislative elections. Calls for De Villepin's resignation are mounting. He is now becoming mired in the Clearstream scandal, where it appears that there was an elaborate conspiracy to smear leading politicians, including the main right-wing contender (and De Villepin's rival) for next year's presidential elections, Nicolas Sarkozy, with accusations of corruption.

This victory is worth celebrating, but there is no room for triumphalism. In spite of often widespread opposition to their policies, successive governments of right and left over the past fifteen years have been steadily pushing forward the neo-liberal agenda - privatisations, labour flexibility, job insecurity, counter-reforms in health, pensions, education. Periodically mass mobilisations slow the process or block particular measures, though sometimes even massive mobilisations are defeated, as in 2003.

But they do not stop the process. Of course the union leaderships bear considerable responsibility for defeats. Particularly in 2003, it was their refusal to call an all-out general strike that gave victory to the government. The experience of 2003 has made many workers sceptical about the utility of repeated days of action. And if opposition to the CPE had been limited to that, it is unlikely that victory would have been won. What made the difference was the permanent mass mobilisation of the students.

Where do we go from here? Symbolic as it was, the CPE was only one component of the ironically named "Law on Equal Opportunities" which has been adopted by Parliament, and which provides among other things for 14-year-olds to start work as apprentices, whereas up to now there was compulsory schooling till the age of 16. And the CNE is still in force. But to follow up the victory over the CPE by defeating these measures too would require continued unity and leadership from the unions and the left parties, and it would provoke a political crisis which most of them do not want.

There is also the problem of the lack of a credible political alternative. A defeat of the Right in the 2007 presidential and legislative elections is possible, though not certain. But as has been repeatedly shown over the last 25 years, a return to power by the Socialist Party would not mean the end of neo-liberal policies. Since 1981, there has been a change of government from right to left and left to right at every legislative election.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to speak of centre-right and centre-left. Because over and above differences on details, there is a broad consensus in defence of neo-liberal policies. The Socialist Party, under pressure from the student movement and public opinion, was prepared to oppose the CPE. On the much more fundamental issue of the European Constitution, the party fell into line and supported it (though a minority campaigned against it). And nothing indicates that a Socialist victory in next year's presidential and parliamentary elections would in any way challenge the neo-liberal consensus.

That presents the anti-capitalist Left with a challenge. It has to move from campaigns and even victories on single issues to providing a political alternative. Following on the victories over the European Constitution and the CPE, the next step could be united candidacies of the forces to the left of the Socialist Party in next year's elections. Both the Communist Party and the LCR have come out in principle in favour of such candidacies.

The basis could be a programme that broke with the left-right neo-liberal consensus and a refusal to participate in an SP-led government. On this latter point the Communist Party still has to completely clarify its position - though it is clearly wary of repeating the experience of 1997-2002, when it participated in the SP-dominated government of Lionel Jospin, serving merely as a left cover for neo-liberal policies and paying the price in the 2002 elections. There would also have to be agreement on the programme of any alliance. But if the obstacles can be overcome and agreement reached, a united campaign could begin to give directly political expression to the widespread rejection of

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neo-liberalism and mobilise many activists from the social movements.