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France

Battle for pensions: The discordances of the movement

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The 6 April saw another day of strikes and demonstrations of the same magnitude as 28 March: according to the unions, there were 2 million people in the streets. There were a large number of blockages and spectacular actions, such as a banner unfurled from the top of the Arc de Triomphe. What was most spectacular was surely the number and the massiveness of the demonstrations in many small and medium-sized towns. Also spectacular was the persistent rejection of Macron's reform by 80 per cent of the working population, the vast majority of the working classes.

But, isolated, Macron hopes to be able to loosen the grip of a social movement which, even though less powerful in recent weeks, is now creating a political crisis in the country.

Renewable strikes have clearly marked time in recent weeks, among waste collection and treatment workers, in refineries, at the SNCF. Only the agents of the IEG (electricity and gas industries) maintain a movement of selective cuts. The sectors which, since the beginning of March, had engaged in the stand-off to block economic life by putting all their forces into it have called on the other sectors to join them for a month, not wanting to renew the episodes of "proxy strikes." But real objective difficulties have accumulated in many sectors of the working class - and even among university and high school students up until today - and the choice made by the inter-union coordination of the rhythm of a one-day weekly strike, means sticking to the less mobilized sectors at the risk of not playing the role of a driving force to build renewable strikes with the most combative sectors.

This choice clearly corresponded to a compromise with the position of the CFDT confederal leadership, committed to maintaining the inter-union coordination around the rejection of retirement at 64, the call for strikes, demonstrations and even blockades, but opposed to a tactic of paralysis of the country's economic life. The broad union unity, made possible by the popular rejection of retirement at 64, and helping to consolidate this rejection, has until today had as its corollary this moderation in the confrontation. This does not prevent the multiplication of blocking actions, strikes which often involve CGT, Solidaires, FO, FSU and CFDT teams, helping to maintain, beyond the national days of action, a climate of prolonged mobilization.

The political paralysis of the government has led it for the last ten days to clearly play the card of police repression, violence, the card also of denouncing the "violent far left". In this movement, Macron appears, with Darmanin (his Minister of the Interior), as the defender of order to comfort a shaky electorate, also hoping to sow division in the inter-union coordination and lessen the unfailing support within the population for mobilization and even blockages. On the last two points the failure is total, but Darmanin nevertheless pushes the police to go on the offensive, covering all the violence, the use of weapons and ammunition of war. This choice of increasing repression, which was manifested in Sainte Soline on March 23 and in the charges against union demonstrations, reinforces the determination within the movement. To the rejection of the social injustice of retirement at 64, to the refusal of the institutional violence of 49.3, is now added the refusal of police violence. This rejection has led to strong protests by many associations, first and foremost the League of Human Rights (LDH).

The LDH was at the heart of the denunciation of the behaviour of the police in Sainte Soline, providing audio evidence of the blocking of first aid teams by the police. The LDH is also at the initiative of a campaign for the prohibition of BRAV-M, weapons of war. This democratic action has just led Gérald Darmanin to take a step that no Minister of the Interior had dared to take by directly threatening the LDH, saying that he "was going to look at" the subsidies it receives. Under Macron and Darmanin, policy shifts follow one another, calling into question democratic and social rights that have existed for decades, through declarations and bans on demonstrations and even on the right to strike.

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Faced with powerful strikes in refineries and waste collection, the government had multiplied requisitions of strikers to break the movement. French law authorizes requisitions in the event of "manifest disturbance to public order". The prefect of the department of Seine Maritime had requisitioned personnel from the Total Energies refineries because of "the foreseeable increase in traffic for the Easter weekend". The administrative tribunal had already denounced bans on demonstrations at the last minute. Now it has just judged that these requisitions "carried a serious and manifestly unlawful violation of the right to strike". Obviously, the government is testing how far it can push the interpretation of the laws and wants to prepare the ground for two new laws tabled by the Republicans in the Senate, limiting the right to strike in refineries and public transport. In the register of democratic rights, the Republicans, the National Rally and Macron's deputies have just adopted, in an accelerated first reading, in the Senate and the National Assembly an "Olympic Games" law which, under the guise of security, establishes in a sustainable way control, filtering and mass surveillance devices in public places and transport by video surveillance with algorithmic behaviour analysis tools, which can be stored.

France is thus at the forefront of new techniques which could very easily be new tools against the rights of assembly and demonstration, as well as the criminalization of actions in public buildings.

In recent days, the consequences of the mobilization over pensions have therefore shifted to questions of democratic rights, but the movement is also itself polarized by the decisions of the Constitutional Council of April 14th. This institution, whose members are appointed by the President of the Republic and the Presidents of the National Assemblies and the Senate, serves in particular as a censor of laws, judging their total or partial conformity with the constitutional rules. So the Council will make known on April 14th its decision concerning the Social Security financing law which contains the attacks on pensions and the passage of the retirement age to 64 years. It will also decide whether or not to launch a procedure for a shared Initiative referendum on a project fixing the retirement age at a maximum of 62 years, proposed by the elected representatives of NUPES. If the Council ratifies the law, giving it a veneer of legitimacy, it can be signed into law by Macron.

Macron is not out of the woods, however. The first question will obviously be that of the social movement and its ability to overcome this new obstacle and to do so while maintaining its unity. But for Macron, the question of the continuation of his five-year term will arise in any case.

On the social dialogue with the unions, after having despised the union leaders, the Prime Minister does not have the means of asking them to accept the reform of retirement at 64 and to move on to a new stage of discussion on social issues. Even the CFDT is not ready to do so, given the relationship of social forces that the movement has built. Borne does not have the means either to find, within the National Assembly, a stable majority alliance, as Macron has asked her to do. The Republicans, weakened by their position on pensions, find no interest in being the sticking plaster of the Borne government. The latter's days are undoubtedly numbered, and Borne herself does not believe in her future in her post, but the parameters will hardly be changed in the event of a change of Prime Minister.

The inter-union coordination is calling for a new day of action on April 13th, but without advancing any other perspective for the movement than to await the decisions of the Constitutional Council. Reinvigorating the relationship of forces would require giving specific deadlines, such as a national demonstration or the preparation of a new wave of renewable strikes.

Another problem is increasingly evident. Although in essence the movement is a class movement, bringing together, in action or in support, the vast majority of workers, with in the background the refusal to continue paying for the maintenance of a system that attacks the working classes, there does not emerge in the movement the expression of demands that go beyond the question of retirement at 64. The broad dynamic created by the unity of all the unions has as an immediate limit the impossibility of going further than the question of retirement at 64, since the CFDT, even on the question of pensions, had already accepted the Touraine reform of 2014 which has led to 43 annuities in

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order to have a full pension. Therefore, the inter-union coordination does not put forward any demands on the financing of pensions either, such as the end of exemptions and the increase in employers' contributions, nor of course going back on the Touraine reform and that of Woerth in 2010, which decided on retirement at 62.

Similarly, at the confederal level, there is no common inter-union position on other urgent social issues, which are very much present in the demonstrations, on unemployment benefits or the fight for wages and against price increases. The role played by the national Inter-union coordination has served as a point of support in towns and cities, but it has also limited the extension of the platform by local inter-union structures. This might seem like a secondary question, which has not prevented the development of a mobilization of undoubtedly unprecedented depth. But everyone understands that the relationship of class forces can only be maintained if, in the consciousness of those who participate in the movement or support it, the question of who we are confronting is clearly posed.

The question of retirement at 64 is not the whim of a delirious autocrat, it is decidedly a class political choice that corresponds to the interests of the capitalist groups which have successfully imposed identical reforms in other European countries. It is therefore a question of challenging the distribution of wealth and the choices made in the interest of the capitalists, choices made all over Europe by the parties supporting liberalism, including far-right parties similar to the RN, such as Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia, which imposes a full pension at age 67, within the framework of the budgetary requirements of the European Union. It is not possible to combat the RN's deceitful presentation of itself as a defender of pensions without basing the movement on a platform that questions the capitalist choices of the government and puts forward demands in line with the interests of the working classes. Absent from the movement, silent about any political platform for the defence of pensions, apart from pro-natalism and anti-immigrant measures, the RN is positioning itself to reap the fruits of a social mobilization which, objectively, targets the capitalists.

Macron and Darmanin, on the other hand, never cease to sketch the outline of possible bridges towards the Republicans and the far right, while criminalizing and demonizing the NUPES. Moreover, during a by-election in Ariège, the second round saw a common front of the party of Macron, the Republicans and the National Rally, behind a socialist candidate opposed to the NUPES, in order to beat the candidate of la France Insoumise.

The situation is obviously also made difficult by the lack of construction of a common social and political front at the heart of this movement, by the very absence, outside the National Assembly, of a broad unified political initiative making it possible to conduct a debate and to put forward unitary proposals to build, in towns and cities and nationally, unitary structures on the social and democratic issues of the day, in line with the social mobilization.

The strength of the movement and of the tens of thousands of activists who structure it may be strong enough to overcome these obstacles in the coming weeks.

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