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France

A class struggle response

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The strike movement of May-June 2003 marks a significant stage in French social struggles. The Raffarin government, which came to power a year ago, set as its objective the realization of numerous neoliberal reforms, remodelling the role of the state and attacking the living conditions of wage earners.

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/13france.jpg>]

Whereas many European Union (EU) countries have already taken important steps in dismantling the social entitlements won following World War Two, France has, from a capitalist viewpoint, been lagging behind in areas like employment, social protection, public services and pension.

From its accession to power in June 2002, the Raffarin government proclaimed its intent to accelerate privatization, following a path already set by the Jospin government, led by the Socialist Party. EDF-GDF (electricity and gas), Air France, and France Télécoms were the targets chosen by the government which, in the name of compliance with EU demands, has also introduced competition into rail freight and new sectors of the postal services.

In autumn 2002 these attacks led to numerous mobilizations of employees in the sectors concerned, while teachers were already mobilizing massively against the suppression of jobs of educational assistants. However, these responses remained scattered, while the leaderships of the trade union movement appeared paralyzed by the defeat of the political left at the presidential election of May 2002 - disoriented also inasmuch as the reforms often continued the policies of the plural left.

Thus in December 2002 the government decided to begin the privatization of EDF/ GDF through the creation of a pensions fund to manage the pensions of employees in this sector - previously the company integrated its pensions allocation directly into its accounts. With the exception of the Force Ouvrière and SUD unions, no union leadership in this sector opposed the plan. Despite this broad union support, in a referendum on January 9 the majority of employees rejected the reform. This vote laid the ground for a massive rejection of the pensions reform that the government was to propose some weeks later.

Attack a long time coming

The pensions reform had been anticipated from before the presidential election as an obligatory rite of passage for whichever new government came to power. Both the plural left and the right presented this question as a demographic imperative - they argued that the equilibrium of the share-out pensions system demanded that, by 2040, there should be an extension of the period in which employees paid in contributions by employees. Whereas retirement in France practically begins on average at 58, Jospin and Chirac committed themselves at the EU heads of state meeting in Barcelona in March 2002 to extend this by five years. French employees have the right to participate in the share-out pensions system at full rate from the age of 60. A first attack had already been made in 1993 by the right wing government of Balladur, which had introduced reforms meaning that workers in the private sector had to pay in for 40 years to receive the full pension. This attack took place without any reaction from the workers' movement. Thus the Raffarin government presented its reform as a matter of social justice - it was a process of harmonization of the private and public sector. Fearing a 'remake' of November-December 1995, which had seen the country paralyzed by striking rail workers, the government announced that employees benefiting from a special pensions regime - rail workers (SNCF), Parisian transport workers (RATP), electricity and gas workers (EDF-GDF) - would not be affected by the proposed reform. But everyone knew in advance that they would be the

next targets.

From January, the objective had been fixed - by the end of June Parliament would vote through legislation extending the period of contributions in the public sector to 40 years, opening the door to a later extension for all employees. The government did not seek an agreement signed by the union confederations, but counted of course on the goodwill of the Socialist Party and the support of at least a part of the union movement, in the framework of a meeting of 'dialogue' to take place in February.

The union leaderships started on the defensive, refusing to challenge the setbacks of 1993 and defend the 37.5 years for everybody. Instead of preparing for a central trial of strength on a choice for society, they sought the least bad compromise with the government. Thus in January 2003, all the big union organizations - CGT, CFDT, FO, CGC, UNSA, CFTC, FSU [1] - adopted a platform, marked by the orientation of the CFDT, which did not axis its demands around respect for the 37.5 annuities and did not stigmatize the governmental project as a socially reactionary employers' offensive. The confederal congress of the CGT in March 2003 supported this line, even if there was much opposition.

The motor of national education

On Saturday February 1, 2003, the trade union front organized a national day of demonstrations - more than 700,000 employees demonstrated in more than 100 towns. Everywhere the demand was for defence of the 37.5 annuities, challenging the basis of the inter-union appeal.

In the following days, discussions started between the government and the unions. The leaders affected ignorance of the brutality of the government's objectives and all spoke, in the style of the CGT leader, Bernard Thibault, of 'ambiguities' in Raffarin's discourse.

Believing its pensions reform was on the rails, the government launched a direct attack against technical personnel in national education (ATOS), the school psychologists and careers advisers (Copsy). About 110,000 personnel were to lose their status as civil servants and transferred to local government, in the framework of the decentralization of a great number of state functions. This attack compounded the suppression of educational assistants' jobs.

In the midst of several national strike days by the personnel in national education, March saw the beginning of 'renewable strikes' in schools and colleges, particularly in Bordeaux and Paris.

From this time onwards the movement in national education became the motor of social mobilization. Threatened both by the decentralization projects and pensions reform, the sector mobilized massively, forming the bulk of demonstrators on new days of mobilizations launched by the confederations, on April 3 (without the CFDT) then Mayday - everywhere inter-professional meetings were stimulated.

In the following days, eight years after the anti-neoliberal revolt of winter 1995 against the Juppé plan, the country experienced a social and political convulsion of exceptional breadth. This movement had several important characteristics:

– A bigger strike than in 1995. Millions of workers participated in strikes, among them many youth, marking the entry into the social movements of new generations of wage earners. This phenomenon was obvious in national education which was the backbone of the strike, but it was notable in every sector.

- The national dimension of this movement - nearly all the towns and communes of the country saw demonstrations, local initiatives and inter-professional meetings.
- A renewable general strike in teaching, lasting more than two months in some regions. This element is historic, unprecedented since May 1968 in terms of length of strike by a professional sector.
- Seven days of action, strikes and national demonstrations, February 1, April 3, May 6, May 13, May 25, June 3, June 10 - as well as May 1, 2003, marked by the mobilization of millions of workers.
- Partial renewable general strikes in a number of sectors, like the SNCF, the Post Office, France Télécoms, taxes, or the ANPE.
- A significant participation by the private sector in the big mobilizations. Bigger than in 1995, and more important in the provincial towns than in the Parisian region.
- The setting up, at the instigation of the teachers usually, 'interpros', in towns, neighbourhoods, taking numerous initiatives for mobilization.
- Renewable regional general strikes, of a specific type, in several regions of the country, notably in the Bouches du Rhône and Puy de Dôme.

Another important element is the strength of alternative responses by the strike movement. Here is felt all the weight of the movement for global justice, the work of associations like the Fondation Copernic or ATTAC, the many revolutionaries present in the teachers' movement as in the other mobilized sectors. The question of the distribution of wealth and the demand for social justice are among the themes taken up by the movement.

An aborted general strike

From the early days of May the government was haunted by the spectre of 1995. While reaffirming its determination (Raffarin declared on the evening of May 7 that "it's not the street that governs!"), it partially changed its tactics and pushed the CFDT leadership to rapidly sign up for the proposed law. This it did on May 14, the day after a strike day supported by nearly 2 million demonstrators with high rates of support in all sectors of the civil service and numerous stoppages in the private sector. This signature led to a deep crisis in this confederation and broke the trade union front built in January but was not enough to break the movement. On May 9, the leadership of the main union in national education, the FSU, called for a renewable general strike, which was already a reality since May 6 in many establishments, both in primary and secondary education. After May 13, extension of the renewable strike to the SNCF, France Télécoms, the Post Office and taxes in particular was possible. However, the CGT leadership did not want a showdown. Claiming a risk of becoming cut off from the private sector, the CGT federations opposed the renewable strike calls, notably in the SNCF and the Post Office sorting centres. Despite the combative positions of many CGT sections, of Force Ouvrière or SUD unions and of CFDT structures rejecting the position of their leadership, the biggest union confederation weighed heavily in the balance. The massive mobilizations in the days of action that followed, the dynamism of the teachers, was not enough to reverse things.

The social force of the movement, and its limits, throws a new light on the state of social and political relations of force in France. It confirms the resistance of broad layers of the population to neoliberal counter-reform. For 20 years, the dominant classes supported by successive governments have scored a series of points against employees

- reorganizations, deregulation, privatizations, lower wages, an increase in precarious work. Nonetheless, all these attacks have not overcome mass resistance and neoliberalism has not conquered the country. This is the most important point of analysis of the national political situation. At the same time, the social-liberal transformation of the traditional left and the "recentering" of the dominant sectors of the trade union movement towards a trade unionism of negotiation, the negative effects of the crisis of consciousness, organization and leadership of the labour movement, the weakness of an anti-capitalist alternative weighed on the outcome of the fight.

The mobilization of spring 2003 is, in its way, the response of the social movement to April 21, 2002. [2] On that day, the social and political crisis which had been incubating for years, the disillusionment with the traditional parties, were expressed, mainly, by the impact of the Front national and its presence in the 2nd round of the presidential elections. The commentators relativized another political phenomenon, the three million votes for the far left. Today, this crisis is apparent in the eruption of millions of employees onto the political and social scene, responding through action and social mobilization to the problems arising from the neoliberal policies followed for years. April 21 clarified the nationalist, reactionary response to liberalism. Spring 2003 is a 'class struggle' response. That gives a double dimension to the mobilization: social and political.

Politically, the government has not won the battle of public opinion. On the contrary, more than 60% expressed, in the midst of the mobilization, their sympathy with the strikes. The strike reinforced a crisis of legitimacy of the institutions. It is a reminder that Chirac only won 19.88% of votes cast in the first round of the presidential election. Contrary to Raffarin's claim that "the street does not govern", the mobilization of millions of teachers and employees appeared, for much of the public, as legitimate if not more than the UMP majority in the assembly. The government sought a showdown, by accumulating all the key projects of reform - pensions, decentralization, and autonomy of the universities. Under the pressure of the strike, it has to move back partly on the last two projects. And if it succeeded in imposing the Fillon law on pensions, it remains disputed by the social power of the movement. The government won over pensions but the social movement has not come out of the battle defeated. We do not have a situation comparable to that in Britain in the 1980s, where the Thatcher government succeeded in crushing a strike movement and breaking the trade union movement durably. The international context is no longer the same - neoliberal counter-reforms are disputed. The movement for global justice exists. And the dynamic of the social spring of 2003 is not that of a defeat.

There was an exceptional social mobilization, millions of employees in movement - why then, wasn't there a general strike?

The limits of the movement

There are explanations related to the general situation in the labour movement - a total weakening of the traditional labour movement, the weight of the employers' pressures in the private sector. The height of the social and political stakes in this general context also caused a series of hesitations, interrogations, barriers to mobilization. For months, pensions reform was presented as a demographic, technical, necessity. The left-right consensus on the passage to the 40 annuities was obvious at the EU summit in Barcelona in March 2002.

The strike movement in national education and its transformation into a renewable general strike upset the applecart. By taking the head of the battle the teachers (in their majority women!) also gave the movement a radical content.

This situation created a change in spirit among employees on the pensions reform. There was a swing between February- March and April, May and June, where according to polls, the majority of those questioned supported withdrawal of the Fillon plan or the opening of new negotiations. That did not remove the problems of trade-union

division or minority mobilizations in certain sectors, or the real unpreparedness of many trade union teams for a showdown and the possibility of a general strike.

But, in spite of these obstacles, the mobilization managed to extend and reach out to all layers of society. Thus the responsibility of the confederal leaderships is crushing. The role of the CFDT leadership is unsurprising. As in 1995, it supported a rightwing government and neoliberal counter-reforms. A new crisis has opened in this confederation. But the leadership of the CGT, and in its way that of FO, did not want a renewable general strike. On four occasions - May 7, May 14, May 26 and June 4 - the CGT leadership refused to commit all its forces to renew the strikes. And the CGT's arguments against calling for a general strike? They were:

1. A general strike cannot be decreed. Admittedly! But it can be prepared, in particular by laying down objectives commensurate with the challenge being posed by the government. The leadership of the CGT would not do it.
2. The private sector has to be involved. Invoking this argument, the CGT refused to demand the 37.5 annuities or the withdrawal of the Fillon plan. In a word the CGT did not want to call a civil service general strike, something which would however have had a decisive strength. The private sector was partially engaged in the battle. More than in 1995. In some large companies strikers, while in the minority, were significant - Renault Cléon, les Chantiers de l'Atlantique, Gaz de Lacq, Michelin. Many small companies in the provinces stopped work during demonstrations. In the private sector, more over, a call for a general strike could constitute a constitutive element in the relationship of forces. Fears of a public-private opposition, of the populist use Le Pen could have made of a civil service strike, found a stinging contradiction in the popularity of the movement, in spite of the powerful pro-government propaganda relayed by the media.
3. Strikers were too much in the minority to continue. Here too, the question must be discussed in detail. With the SNCF, the strikes of May 14 and 15 were minority but more significant than in 1995. Strikes which were minority in the beginning could, as in teaching, become majority strikes. There was no lack of political good will!

Destabilized by the CFDT-government agreement and an exceptional teaching mobilization, the CGT leadership rejected a convergence of struggles which would have led to a movement that it could not control.

More substantially, as indicated by the report of Le Digou to the National Confederal Committee of the CGT on June 11, the leadership of the CGT has implemented its 're-unionization' strategy: "Our strategy is not political. It does not seek to bring down this or that government or to show that this is a right wing government... There is no slogan for a general strike, something the CGT has moreover called for only under exceptional conditions." Clearly, the CGT was not about to open a governmental political crisis. Whereas it was necessary to concentrate fire, to centralize confrontation with the government, it took the wind out of the sails of the mass movement through successive days of action. As for the FO leadership, it tardily adopted the slogan of an 'inter-professional general strike', but throughout the movement it followed the calendar of the CGT.

Only the FSU - under the pressure of the movement and the proposals of the most combative sectors of the federation - and the Union syndicale G10 Solidaires (which in particular involves the new SUD trade unions), called for a general strike without having the force to carry it out.

The most telling argument was that of the absence of political alternative. However, the strike movement itself raised issues about choices of society and political questions about an alternative to capitalist neoliberalism politics, the distribution of wealth and the financing of pensions by making inroads on profits.

A powerful democratic dynamic

The determination of the most combative sectors gave a completely exceptional dynamic to this movement. The power of the movement overcame the division in the unions resulting from the agreement between the government and the CFDT. The CFDT apparatus was unable to stop the development of the struggle. Led by the teachers who realized their unity through general assemblies, unions and co-ordinations, the other sectors in general organized their mobilization in unitary fashion. This process of self-organization involving general assemblies and trade union sections in the struggle and inter-professional coordination at the rank and file level is one of the fundamental gains of this movement and promises much for the future.

This movement will have consequences for trade union recomposition. It has sketched the grand axes of reorganization through the content and dynamic of the movement. For it is clearly the vector of an alternative choice for society on the key issues, pensions, public services, social protection. The movement will render problematic the CGT-CFDT axis advocated for several years by the two confederal leaderships. It points to the convergence of the FSU, the US G10-Solidaires and critical sectors of the CGT and CFDT.

A political confirmation

On the political level, the balance sheet confirms the lack of synch between the parties of the former "plural left" and the demands of the movement. It also confirms the existence of a radical left on the same wavelength as these demands, whose activists have been totally involved in the movement and whose political responses sketch a project of a society based on social needs, putting on the agenda the need for a force to build it. There are certainly two lefts, one tainted with neoliberalism, the other clearly anti-capitalist.

At the Dijon congress of the Parti Socialiste (PS), held in the midst of the movement, the delegates voted for a motion demanding the withdrawal of the Fillon plan. But this proclamation was annulled by internal dissent and above all by the logic of the amendments put by the PS deputies to the National Assembly during the debate in June. Jospin's commitments at the Barcelona summit were reflected in the acceptance by the PS leadership of the lengthening of the period of contributions. Nonetheless, the movement could allow the PS, a posteriori, to take its place as candidate for government at the next elections. The Greens, totally silent in this movement, supported the PS approach. The PCF, while more involved in the movement, avoided taking a position on the mobilization and necessity for a general strike. Fundamentally, the Greens and the PCF remain riven by the imperatives of electoral agreements with the PS... and outside any logic of social radicalization.

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/17france.jpg>]

The LCR, for its part, combined appeals for unity of action of the entire social and political left, on the basis of the demands and forms of struggle of the movement and discussion on global political orientations.

Lutte Ouvrière also intervened to launch, lead, extend the strikes, but there have been two problems with this organization - firstly, its refusal to take up the objective of the general strike. Beyond a problem of terminology, there was undoubtedly a divergence of appreciation on the dynamic of the movement. LO did not think it realistic that a strike of teachers, against the position of the CGT, could be the motor of a general strike.

The second problem relates to democracy in the mass movement. For LO, the key question, as they stated during the debate with the LCR at the LO fÃate in June, is "the efficacy of the struggle, democracy only relates to forms of struggle". Thus the co-ordinations are only envisaged as gatherings of radicals - radicals around LO - and not as the expression of a self-organized, unitary democratic mass movement. All the democratic mechanisms of representation of the movement in elected co-ordinations are thus relativized. This divergence was affirmed throughout the movement, in the co-ordinations of employees in national education. The LCR and LO intervened, "side by side" and

not "together". Nonetheless, for the broad public, the militants of the far left were pushing in the same direction and were the sole militant political organizations in the movement, which gives them political responsibilities.

The LCR identified itself, from February 1, as the organization which proposed that the social movement face the challenge of the government's offensive, preparing a general strike to force the government back. All its militants participated actively in the movement. It appeared, both through the positions taken by Olivier Besancenot and its initiatives in demonstrations, the street, the media, politics as a political party which is situated at the heart of the movement.

Emergence of new generations

The French social and political situation remains exceptional. In one year, the country has experienced three waves of mobilization of hundreds of thousands, indeed millions of people - against Le Pen, against the war, against the neoliberal reforms. The essential positive point in this battle is the emergence of new generations in struggle, of trades unionists and young teachers organizing co-ordinations.

In late June and during the summer, the movement resurfaced in spectacular fashion in the renewable general strike of artists and technicians in the entertainment industry, in a fight against an agreement threatening their unemployment fund, an agreement which once again had been signed by the CFDT leadership. [3] This movement would take spectacular forms, leading to the cancellation of dozens of festivals. Again there was a significant level of self-organization, with the setting up of co-ordinations and a democratic management of the conflict.

The gains of the inter-professional links, the demands tracing the path of an alternative to neoliberal capitalism, should be preserved to serve as weapons in the coming battles. Many structures met during the summer, have taken initiatives, promising to restart a mobilization against the government's reforms in the autumn.

Finally, what is striking is the absence of a radical political force, organized, implanted in all the popular sectors. This movement has been the confirmation, on another terrain, of the electoral results of the far left, confirming the necessity of an alternative pole of attraction to the left of social liberalism.

The LCR has big responsibilities in building this pole of attraction and will decide, at its Summer University and its meetings in the autumn, the best initiatives to take with political, trade union and associative activists to pursue this objective.

[1] French trades unionism is very "plural" and is much more fragmented than is the case in other countries: the Confédération générale du travail (CGT) remains the biggest trade union force. Led since the war by the PCF, its leadership has for some years launched a process of autonomization in relation to a decaying party which has lost the essential of its electoral base (its candidate, Robert Hue, only obtained 3.37% of the vote at the last presidential election of 2002, less than a million votes and less than the two candidates of the far left!) and integration inside the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). The Confédération française démocratique du travail (CFDT), the second biggest confederation, emerged from the radicalization of Christian trades unionism in the 1950s and 1960s. Boosted by the movement of May 1968, for a time it advocated a self-managed socialist project and unity of action with the CGT. From the late 1970s its leadership undertook a process of "normalization", increasingly openly opposed to collective struggles (which led to the emergence of unions like SUD in posts and telecommunications and CRC-SUD in health, built by activists expelled in 1987). The third confederation, CGT-Force Ouvrière, emerged from the social democratic split from the CGT in 1948. After a long time during which it favoured negotiations over industrial action, Force Ouvrière adopted

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a more combative language during the neoliberal counter-reforms of the 1990s. Like the CFDT, Force Ouvrière is part of the ETUC. The Fédération syndicale unitaire (FSU) emerged from the majority of activists of the defunct Fédération de l'éducation nationale (FEN, which had rejected the split between the CGT and CGT-FO in 1948). The Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens (CFTC) has been a small organization since the departure of its great majority which founded the CFDT in 1962. The Union nationale des syndicats autonomes (UNSA) regroups several autonomous organizations mainly in the civil service, including the Syndicat des enseignants. The Confédération générale des cadres (CGC) is another civil service union. Finally a new grouping - l'Union syndicale Groupes des 10 Solidaires - has been created at the initiative of the SUD unions. Outside these organizations the Confédération nationale des travailleurs (CNT), anarchist in inspiration and generally opposed to participation in trade union elections, has a certain presence on demonstrations and in some workplaces.

[2] On April 21, 2002 the first round of the presidential election was marked by a growing political polarization - an increased vote for the candidate of the Front national, Jean-Marie Le Pen on the far right, a breakthrough for the candidates of Lutte Ouvrière (Arlette Laguiller) and the LCR (Olivier Besancenot) on the far left (the three candidates of the far left gained together nearly three million votes, or 10.44% of votes cast!), a collapse of the vote for the social democratic candidate, the outgoing prime minister, Lionel Jospin and a significant setback for the candidate of the "republican right", the outgoing president, Jacques Chirac. The particularly undemocratic electoral system allowed only two candidates to go forward to the next round, leading to a contest between the candidate of the right, Jacques Chirac (elected with more than 82% of votes cast) and that of the far right, Jean-Marie Le Pen. See IV [May 2002](#), [June 2002](#) and [July-August 2002](#).

[3] The CFDT was virtually absent from the entertainment artists and technicians strike; the Fédération CGT du spectacle represents more than 80% of union members.