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France

# A new beginning in France?

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**France is being rocked by massive protests and strikes against the Socialist Party government of President François Hollande and Prime Minister Manuel Valls and its plans to change longstanding labor rules that favor workers. Now targeting legislation known as the El Khomri law, the demonstrations have grown from their first stage—the Nuit Debout (Up All Night) protests that began with nightly gatherings in the Place de la République in Paris and spread to more public squares.**

The French Senate is set to begin debate on the El Khomri law on June 14, and unions and social movements are ramping up strikes and protests in preparation for the most important political confrontation in Europe since the Greek anti-austerity referendum last July.

Two members of France's New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), Ugo Palheta and Julien Salingue, co-authors of an introduction and postscript to a new edition of Daniel Bensaid's *Stratégie et Parti*, argue that the mobilizations are a new stage in the resistance in France, in an article published in *basta!* and translated by Todd Chretien.

When a social movement erupts, there is a natural temptation to judge it based on the terms of movements that preceded it—for instance, by comparing its slogans and the number of people on protests. Even the new movement's participants may contribute to this tendency by adopting the postures and even the language of past uprisings, as Karl Marx pointed out in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, his famous account of the French Revolution of 1848.

But the historical significance of a movement and its successes—be they immediate or posthumous—are never reducible to the glorious memories they revive nor to the number of individuals they mobilized. Paying too much attention to these aspects often leads one to miss new features that herald unforeseeable upheavals and may reshape the map of what is possible.

In fact, the current movement—whose decline (if not death) was declared by the corporate media immediately upon its birth—has yet to mobilize as many people as those who took to the streets in the defeated mobilizations against pension cuts pushed through by conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy in 2010.

Likewise, the victorious struggle in 2006 against the *contrat première embauche* (CPE, or First Employment Contract), which would have gutted employee rights for young workers, included student general assemblies and demonstrations more massive than what we have yet seen today.

So it can be argued that the movement against the new Labor Code—of which *Nuit Debout* is obviously an integral part—is not simply an extension of the cycle of massive struggles opened by previous victories, most critically those against neoliberal reforms proposed by conservative Prime Minister Alain Juppé in December 1995. Rather, it represents a new beginning: the dawn of a new sequence of social and political struggles in response to years of declining social movements.

A new beginning, but of what exactly? In sum, it is a radical challenge to the world that is imposed on us, and of the lives we lead, under the capitalist regime.

This contrasts to the mass mobilizations in France between 1995 and 2010 that were content to simply call into

question one aspect or another of social and political retreat. These past protests were notably accompanied by the development of global justice rhetoric and the redeeming utopian plea that "Another world is possible."

But they failed to formulate a strategic project of rupture, and they could never really agree on the need to put an end to this world, one almost entirely shaped by and for capital. Today's movement has inherited this legacy, but it has also radicalized its oppositional and utopian edge.

In effect, awareness of police repression, governmental deafness and employer arrogance, which had all previously seemed the exclusive preserve of revolutionary militants, has now become the common sense of a movement that is winning over fresh segments of the population.

This new common sense includes the need for self-organization outside of, but not necessarily hostile to, traditional channels; it is anti-capitalist, going beyond a simple rejection of economic liberalism; it recognizes the strategic necessity of the general strike and the convergence of struggles between precarious young workers with university degrees and the youth in poor and immigrant neighborhoods; it seeks to unite all this with workplace struggles and environmental battles.

Finally, the movement exhibits a reflexive hostility toward the repressive forces of the state apparatus. These traits remain embryonic, and we cannot guarantee they will spread broadly in the future, but they are real and open up the possibility of a future political bifurcation, and the development of anti-systemic forces.

## Crisis of Hegemony of the Propertied Classes

This radicalization from below is developing in tandem with the radicalization of the propertied classes who profited from the 2008 financial crisis, and it is proceeding in relation to recent attempts to deepen, in the most brutal fashion, the neoliberal and authoritarian revolution initiated during the 1980s.

It is also rooted in a political crisis whose depth is generally not known: We are not dealing with a temporary disaffection of voters for their traditional political representatives, but a growing inability of the dominant parties—and classes whose interests they defend—to produce active consent by the people for their political choices. The traditional parties are unable to create organic links between themselves and significant segments of the subordinate classes. This speaks to the sort of crisis of hegemony analyzed by Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci in the 1920s and 1930s.

Therefore, it matters little if one is optimistic or pessimistic with respect to the current movement's immediate prospects, nor should one attempt to score points or teach lessons from the sidelines. It is better to appreciate what the mobilization has already achieved.

In particular, it has had the great merit of tossing overboard the disastrous idea of a "primary of the left," which can only mean increased candidate-driven personalization and de-politicization of politics, as well as confusion over the irreconcilable perspectives put forward by, on the one hand, the Socialist Party (and its satellites) and, on the other, the "left of the left," as we say in France.

The problem facing us should not be reduced to simply renewing the methods used for selecting our masters, or substituting hip young political professionals—whose auditions before corporate boards serve to guarantee their

so-called "modernity"â€”for the exhausted political bosses of the old parties.

# The First Steps Toward De-professionalizing Politics

The practice of giving the old parties a facelift is dead, at least in its capacity to sustainably produce the illusion of gradual systemic change, never mind a commitment to militant party membership. It survives in a zombie state, its decay masked by clever communication advisers and a mainstream media riveted on the electoral calendar. From racist statements to financial scandals, to rhetoric and broken promises, everyone can see the mediocrity of servility and corruption of professional politics.

If the movement against the Labor Code and its capitalist assumptions have another virtue, it is to point to what can be called a "politics of the oppressed," a term used by the late revolutionary socialist Daniel Bensaid. Today, we are seeing the first steps of a process, still in its infancy, of a de-professionalization of politics, one which may allow the majority to take its own affairs in hand, heralding a possible eruption of a real democracy flourishing everywhere from our workplaces to our neighborhoods.

This potential presupposes a rupture inside the movement with those who have previously captured, for their own benefit, the power of the great majority; it means disrupting their monopoly over public affairs; it requires putting an end to politics that serve the accumulation of capital and which can only offer putrid nationalism as an alternative to globalized capitalism.

The world is coming apart at the seams and the radicalization of the propertied classes themselves threatens everything and everyone, the environment and whole peoples are put in danger by a fire that is every day more oppressive and destructive.

Only popular risings that are at once democratic and anti-capitalist, can lead humanity out of this impasse and resolve the political enigma bequeathed to us by the 20th century. That is, how can we build an alternative to a rotting capitalism without giving rise to despotic regimes based on the domination of an unaccountable bureaucracy?

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