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France

When France moves, all of Europe shakes

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Massive strikes and protests are rocking France, with the threat of greater shocks to come as a hated labor law "counterreform" comes to the French Senate for discussion on June 14.

The Socialist Party government led by President François Hollande and Prime Minister Manuel Valls is attempting to force through legislation, known as the El Khomri law, that would eliminate long-held workers' protections. But the law has stirred a massive resistance—expressed in different forms, from the occupation of public squares called the "Nuit Debout" (Up All Night) to a revival of mass working class action, including general strikes. In a Europe where the ruling class has successfully imposed drastic austerity across the continent, and where the far right is growing in influence based on its racist scapegoating of desperate refugees and immigrants, the French strikes and protests show another direction.

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If any country is associated with the "traditions of the oppressed," as described by the German-Jewish socialist philosopher Walter Benjamin, it is France.

From the French Revolution of 1789 to the general strike of May 1968—“not forgetting the Paris Commune of 1871 and the antifascist Resistance during the Second World War”—France was the site of political conflict par excellence. So it's no accident that when Karl Marx listed the three sources for his ideas he named German philosophy, English economics and French politics. French history is replete with plebian uprisings and impatient workers, of conflicts that heat up with their own inner energy, that appear out of nowhere.

If it was not possible to predict Nuit Debout nor the strike wave led by the CGT [General Confederation of Labor, France's largest union federation], we can analyze the reasons for the explosion and try to recover a strategic discussion, conducted in an internationalist key, taking the situation in France as our starting point.

Yanis Varoufakis [the former Finance Minister of Greece under the SYRIZA government] recently commented that France was the only country in Europe in which neoliberal restructuring and counterreforms have not been successfully imposed.

It is necessary to develop this observation in several ways. On the one hand, it is clear that resistance against the counterreforms has, in fact, been more effective in France than in other European countries. The first great battle took place in 1995, featuring gigantic strikes in the public sector against cutbacks in Social Security proposed by conservative Prime Minister Alain Juppé.

Pierre Badiou, an important contemporary intellectual committed to the cause of the working class, as Jean Paul Sartre had been in his time, said of the strikes that they were the first (along with the Spanish general strike in 1988) to win a victory that, if not reversing the neoliberal turn marked by Margaret Thatcher's defeat of the British miners in 1984-85, opened up a field in which it was possible to think about alternatives.

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The antiglobalization movement that arose in subsequent years owed much to the 1995 strikes, which also served as the point of departure for France's rejection of the European Constitution's 10 years later.

Without a doubt, the struggle against neoliberalism has never been limited to trade unions. It has also been organized in the realm of politics and elections. But the 1995 victory contained a paradox: It was the left that organized the strike wave and mass protests, based on hundreds of united workplace committees of struggle. However, the left was not able to translate this into an organized movement with a political perspective. Thus, in the end, the neofascist National Front capitalized on mass discontent with a Europe run in the interests of the elites.

This legacy, which continued through various other upheavals in France, through to 2010, was unable to overturn neoliberal hegemony. As radical authors Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval have explained, neoliberalism cannot be reduced to a complex of regulatory rules, but also encompasses systematic social dynamics that impose themselves as a model of social relations. The structural exclusion of millions of Black or Arab people from "official" society is a direct consequence of neoliberalism's advance into the market and civil society.

The neoliberal advance has broken up defenses constructed by the working class previously to defend itself from capital. This remains the case even if some highly trained and organized sectors of the working class have managed to defend their standard of living—especially public employees who still occupy broad sectors of the economy that have been privatized in other countries.

Two outcomes serve to illustrate the contrast between the explosive resistance of French society and the underlying advance of the neoliberal model.

First, the union sustaining the current strike wave, the CGT, is a radical union whose main leader has come to personify opposition to Hollande. Philippe Marteau, the CGT president, appears as a character plucked straight from a Robert Guédiguian film, French cinema's answer to the British filmmaker Ken Loach. At the same time, the CGT is a very weak union, having shrunk from 3 million to only 600,000 members over recent decades.

On the other hand, the National Front has capitalized on discontent spurred by deindustrialization and the destruction of living communities built around manufacturing in which millions of workers had developed their own collective experiences. Despite having a certain base in the working class, the National Front has called for a hard line against today's strikes, thus exposing its reactionary character—but also the limits of a political left that has lost its connection to the working class.

If there is no obvious straight line between a person's class position and their ideology, it is also the case that France shows that ideas are shaped or conditioned by class relations, and this reality is critical for directing anger in one direction or another.

Based on all this, we must clarify how to read the events that are taking place in France.

It is curious how the mainstream left and right both are pitching their analysis in a "conservative" key. The right along with the social-liberal left, headed by Prime Minister Manuel Valls, insist on labeling the movement as a one "opposed to change." They depict a nostalgic movement tilting against a necessary modernization of French society that, naturally, requires liberalizing labor relations and wiping out the historic gains won by workers in the 1968 general strike.

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By contrast, progress would take the form of settling accounts with history in order to recover a version of France's past utility for the elite. Valls and his Minister of Economy, Industry and Digital Affairs Emmanuel Macron appear in this twisted story as countercultural yuppies who are attempting to set society free by destroying a corporatist and reactionary subjectâ€”that is, union and workplace rights that are defined as "privileges" available to only a few.

Thus, the crisis of social democracy is assuming a particularly perverse form. The Socialist Party is divided between those who realize that these measures will alienate them from their social base and those, like the prime minister, who are convinced that their historic mission is to destroy social welfare.

Meanwhile, when Pierre Laurent, the general secretary of the French Communist Party, declares to the youth of Nuit Debout, "I invite you to join the Communist Party," he only reveals the same conservative incomprehensionâ€”one unable to read today's struggle as a window opening to something new.

However, we can place our wager on a different reading. We might see what is happening as the sort of "leap," in keeping with the subversive thread that runs through French history.

This leap is full of potentials that must be explored. First of all, today's strikes put back on the table, despite all the fetishistic theories we've heard over recent years, the idea that the organized working class retains a specific strategic power capable of paralyzing a whole country by attacking the chain of value in transportation and energy production.

This strike is not merely a question of a specific industrial sector. Rather, it raises the question of who runs the country: the people who generate wealth through their labor or those who live off the work of others.

This is not a minor question, and it places on the agenda different tools and forms of struggle that correspond to different material realities and correlations of strength. In their various combinations (strikes, demonstrations, mass assemblies in public squares, etc.), we see expressed not only needs, but also potentials.

On the other hand, the movement has shown that parallel explosions are possible across different sectors that share common interests. This phenomena of shared interests is based on the creation of precarity and impoverishment of the middle classes, upon which Nuit Debout is based, and of sections of the traditional working class. This is true even if we must emphasize the ongoing failure to link these struggles to the youth of African and Arab origins, concentrated in the poorest neighborhoods.

As social discontent is transformed into active struggle, into real experience, a combative political layer must emerge that is capable of preventing the National Front from posing itself as the main alternative to the political establishment.

Everything that is now happening in France can have profound repercussions throughout Europe.

Of course, I won't try to tell my comrades in France what to do, but I will end with a reflection that carries a certain universal validity, and I think is a lesson learned from experience in other countries: It is important to discuss how to anchor discontent, giving it a political expression that goes beyond defensive demands, even as it is based on these demands, in order to construct a social bloc capable of articulating a new social project.

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The French left, which is unfortunately very atomized and self-referential, faces a historic opportunity to recapture the central role that Marx assigned to it. To do this, as has been shown in other countries, it is critical to construct a political-social instrument that appears new, participatory and open.

Why not do this in the heat of the struggle? Why not discuss this in parallel with how to win today's strikes, how to stabilize structures of struggle and convert them into spaces for organization, so that all the formidable energy on display today can form the basis of a tool that can be used to contest for power?

Of course, this is what we need. We must move forward in France in order to move ahead in the rest of Europe.

The best internationalist traditions have always been conscious that what happens in one country has repercussions in others. In order to change the world, we need friends in many countries. Therefore, building links with France and the struggles of the working people leads us to the most precise meaning of solidarity: Not only do they need us, but we need them.

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