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France

A new wave of struggles

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The first three months of 2005 have seen a change in the social and political situation in France. On the one hand, there has been a definite upturn in the class struggle, of which the most visible manifestation has been a series of nationwide strikes and demonstrations. On the other, the campaign for the referendum on the proposed European constitution is gathering speed, with a real possibility of a victory for the "No". The combination of these two elements is creating a climate of growing political instability and potential crisis.

The last major social confrontations in France took place in the spring of 2003, with the mass mobilizations against the government's plans for pension reform, of which the backbone was a three month long teachers' strike. In spite of its scale and militancy this movement was defeated, essentially because of the refusal of the main union confederations to build towards a general strike that could have forced the government to abandon its plans.

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/20janvier05107A.jpg>]

Following this defeat there was a sharp downturn in the class struggle, which enabled the government of Jean-Pierre Raffarin to successfully launch further attacks. A reform of the health insurance system in the spring of 2004 went through with resistance at a much lower level than in 2003. The process of privatisation of the state electricity company EDF was begun, in spite of considerable resistance from the employees directly concerned, who were left by the union confederations to fight alone. Driven back on the social front, working-class voters used the ballot box to hit back at the government, by voting massively for the Left, and in particular for the Socialist Party, in the regional elections in March 2004 and then in the European elections in June of the same year.

The government's electoral setbacks did not of course make it change course and the SP had nothing more to say to voters than "wait for 2007 and put us back on power". The result was to foster a climate that in the autumn of 2004 was being widely described as morose. The question that remained open was how far the defeat of 2003 was conjunctural, and how far it would have a lasting impact on working-class combativity.

A new wave of resistance

The answer to this question began to be given in the first weeks of 2005. There is no doubt that the cumulative effect of the neo-liberal measures that have been carried through by governments of both right and left over the last twenty years has pushed the working class back. Unemployment is never far from 10 per cent, the labour market is being deregulated and job insecurity is spreading. Public services and the Welfare State have been steadily eroded. Wages have stagnated while shareholders pocket juicy dividends.

All of this has worsened the material conditions of workers and pushed them onto the defensive. Nevertheless, it has been shown repeatedly over the last decade that the capacity for resistance remains strong, especially when the unions call united actions, and this has again been confirmed in recent weeks.

From 18-20 January there were three days of strikes and demonstrations. On the 18th, postal workers struck and demonstrated against plans to cut jobs and close post offices, in what is clearly perceived as the run-up to privatisation of postal services. On the 19th, it was the turn of rail and electricity workers, protesting at plans to cut jobs. And on the 20th the mobilisation involved public sectors workers as a whole. More than 300,000 demonstrated in 70 towns and cities. January 20 was marked in particular by a strong mobilization of teachers, who struck and

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came out onto the streets on a scale that had not been seen since the defeat of their strike in 2003.

The next national initiative came on February 5, a Saturday. More than half a million workers from both public and private sectors demonstrated in 120 towns and cities across France. The demonstrations were initially called in defence of the 35-hour week, under threat from government plans to “soften” the law to permit longer working hours. But the issues of wages quickly came to the fore. When the Socialist Party-led government introduced the law on the 35-hour week, it was accompanied by a wage freeze and increased job flexibility. With the present government’s attack on the 35-hour week, workers are now faced with working more for less. On February 5th they said no on both counts.

Parallel to these strikes and demonstrations by workers a massive movement of school students took shape. It began in protest against the Fillon Plan, which threatens to lower the quality of education for the mass of school students, reinforce selection and in particular devalue the baccalauréat, the examination that gives students access to higher education.

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School students demonstrate against education reform

But the movement was also an expression of a wider malaise, a protest against the gap between the ideal of equal education for all and the reality, a reflection of the anxiety produced by the pressure to succeed and the perspective of increasingly uncertain employment prospects. The movement appeared on a limited scale on January 20. But it quickly snowballed. More than 100,000 school students demonstrated on February 10. The movement was disrupted by the February holidays, staggered across France’s three education zones. But when they were over, on March 8th there were even bigger demonstrations - 165,000 across France.

The movement was marked by a high level of self-organisation, although the two school student unions linked to different currents in the Socialist Party tended to monopolise media access. In spite of - or perhaps because of - the scale of the movement, teachers’ unions failed to really co-ordinate their own actions with the school students’ mobilization.

In these demonstrations, particularly in Paris, there appeared the phenomenon of the casseurs (“smashers-up”), gangs of youth who came to the demonstrations not just to break shop windows, as had happened in previous movements, but to attack and rob demonstrators. Some of these youth were dropouts but many were still at school, though mostly in the technical high schools.

They tended to come from poor neighbourhoods in the North and East of Paris and its suburbs and to be very largely from immigrant backgrounds. It was of course necessary to defend the demonstrations against these youth, who were taking out their frustrations not on those responsible for their situation but on other young people whom they saw as privileged. But the scale of the phenomenon is an indication of the alienation of a whole layer of youth whom the process of social selections has relegated to a future of unemployment or dead-end jobs. It is a problem that the workers’ movement and the left will ignore at its peril.

On March 6 a demonstration expressed another facet of what was developing into a generalised challenge to neo-liberal policies. In semi-Arctic conditions 6,000 people came from all over France to demonstrate in the town of Guéret, capital of the largely rural Creuse department. The site of the demonstration was no accident. Last autumn more than 250 mayors and councillors from the department had resigned en masse in protest against closures and cutbacks in public services. All the parties of the left were represented at Guéret, including the Socialist Party in the person of its First Secretary, François Hollande. However many demonstrators felt that the Socialist Party leader was somewhat out of place in a demonstration in defence of public services, since his own party had largely taken part in dismantling them and he himself is currently defending a neo-liberal constitution whose ethos was the antithesis of

public service. As a result, Hollande was welcomed by a hail of snowballs and a few eggs.

The biggest mobilization since 2003

The next day of action called by the unions took place on March 10. It was the biggest mobilisation since the spring 2003 movement. A million people took part in demonstrations in 115 towns and cities, most of them striking to do so, since this time it was a working day. As usual, the biggest contingents were from the public sector, including for example bus and underground workers who had not struck in January. But without any doubt the most significant development was the widespread participation of private sector workers. This involved not only traditionally militant sectors like engineering and cars, but also the food industry and many smaller factories and service sectors.

In 2003 the private sector was not directly affected by the pension reform, although many private sector workers still took part in the big days of action. This time wages, a burning question in both public and private sectors, were at the centre of the mobilization, and the private sector was more strongly represented than in the one-day general strike on May 13, 2003, which represented the high point of the movement two years ago.

February 5 and March 10 were called by all the main union confederations, including the usually reticent CFDT, which has still not lived down its desertion of the movement in 2003. The composition of the demonstrations confirmed the decisive weight of the CGT, which can generally mobilize at least as many demonstrators as the other unions combined. But the March 10 demonstrations also had significant contingents from other confederations like Force Ouvrière, UNSA, the CFDT and among teachers, the FSU. The militant Solidaires confederations (which includes the SUD unions) also had a significant presence.

The social climate cannot just be reduced to the big national mobilisations. These are taking place against the background of a multitude of local disputes, many in the private sector, often of short duration, mainly centred on wages and not infrequently successful. A prime example was the victorious strike at the Citroen car factory at Aulnay, north of Paris. Citroen has a notoriously anti-union management and this was the first strike since 1984 and the first victorious one since 1982. And in a highly positive development, it was spearheaded by a layer of militant young workers.

Although wages are at the centre of most disputes, not all strikes are over directly economic issues. Some are in protest at the human consequences of staff cuts and the new "enterprise culture". In January the rail network was hit by a wave of spontaneous strikes after a woman ticket collector was raped when she was alone in a late-night train. And in February, following the accidental death of a stewardess at Orly airport, airport personnel went on strike when management tried to make one of their colleagues carry the can for an accident whose real cause was lack of personnel.

The government has reacted to these movements by making some very minor concessions. Faced with the school students' movement Fillon was obliged to drop the part of his plan that directly affects the baccalauréat, though the rest of his plan was voted into law on March 24. And after March 10 the government announced the opening of talks in the public sector, which began on March 22 and look like dragging on for some time. As for the private sector, a meeting between unions and employers on March 18 turned out to be a damp squib. Negotiations on wages were put off until June 10th, conveniently after the referendum on the Constitution.

The government is now trying to mollify private sector workers by facilitating their participation in the profits made by their enterprises. The unions have jumped at the slightest sign of a willingness to negotiate on the part of the government. But criticism of any even minimal concessions has come from within the governing majority, and much

more sharply from Ernest-Antoine Seillière, president of the bosses' organisation MEDEF. Seillière and his organisation have consistently behaved like a right opposition to the government, criticising every hesitation and any whisper of even the slightest concession to the working class. As for the government any gestures it makes in the direction of the unions are not out of fear of a general strike. On that level the union leaderships are no more likely to launch an all-out mobilisation than they were two years ago. The explanation lies elsewhere.

The spectre of the referendum on the Constitution

Any modest concessions, gestures or cosmetic changes that the government feels obliged to make, are closely linked to its growing anxiety over the coming referendum, fixed for May 29, on the projected European constitution. Over the last few months, polls have indicated steadily growing support for the "No" vote. Towards the end of March, for the first time, two separate polls actually showed majorities of 51 and 52 per cent respectively for the "No". This went up to 55 per cent in a poll made public on March 25. These indications have to be approached with some caution. In the first place, the polls also indicate that around half the electorate have either not decided to vote or have not yet decided which way they will vote. Secondly the campaign for the "Yes" vote is only just getting under way. And it will be waged by the government, the media, business and financial circles and the Socialist Party with more material resources than the partisans of "No" will have. It is nevertheless possible that a combination of a spreading understanding of what is actually in the Constitution and a desire to deal another blow at the government could undo their plans. And that is what is worrying Chirac, Raffarin...and François Hollande.

Up to now, more clearly than at the time of the referendum on the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, the campaign for the "No" has been clearly marked to the left. But there is also a "No" from the right. It comes from Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front, from a minority of the governing UMP and from the right-wing Catholic "Movement for France" of Philippe de Villiers. For the moment they are not making the running, but the way the debate is being organised means that three out of the four parties who will have airtime to defend the "No" will be from the right and the far right, so they will probably become more vocal as the campaign develops. From the left there will only be the Communist Party. The LCR and Lutte Ouvrière have been excluded as not representative enough. For the "Yes" there will be two parties of the right, the UMP and the UDF, as well as the Socialist Party and the Greens. It is possible that the substantial minorities in these parties who oppose the Constitution will be allowed time to do so.

The campaign on the left is rapidly gathering speed. The Communist Party and the LCR both started campaigning early against the Constitution and are the main political forces in the rapidly proliferating collectives for a "No" from the left - of which there are now about 350 all over France. There are several currents within the Communist Party, and some are more committed to building a united front against the Constitution than others. But the leading group around National Secretary Marie-George Buffet is trying to limit the degree of collaboration with the radical left and in particular the LCR, so as not to prejudice future participation in a Socialist Party-led government. Therein lies a problem for the CP. The campaign against the Constitution has undoubtedly reinvigorated the party and helped it recover after its electoral disaster in 2002.

But the fact that the campaign is being waged not only against Chirac and Raffarin but against the SP leadership will make it harder for the party leadership to justify going back into government with that same leadership. The global justice movement ATTAC and the Fondation Copernic, a kind of anti-neo-liberal think tank, are both actively involved in campaigning against the Constitution. And very significant divisions have appeared in the Socialist Party and the Greens. Last November an internal referendum in the Socialist party resulted in a 60-40 margin in favour of a "Yes" vote. That, François Hollande thought, was that. He was wrong.

From the beginning, some leaders of the SP left, like Jean-Luc Mélenchon, one of the leaders of the Nouveau Monde

current, announced that they would not abide by party discipline and have campaigned actively along with the other forces opposed to the Constitution. They have now been joined by former national secretary Henri Emmanuelli - who has nevertheless announced that he will not collaborate with the radical left. And Laurent Fabius, Socialist Party no 2, presidential hopeful and leader of the "No" campaign within the party, has been edging more and more clearly towards open opposition, taking strength from the growing "No" sentiment on the left. Faced with the scale of the revolt, the Hollande leadership has periodically threatened disciplinary action but so far has backed down from taking any, giving an impression of indecision which is tending to further weaken its authority. On a smaller scale, the Greens, who took a "Yes" position by the narrow margin of 52-48, have the same problems as the Socialist Party.

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/manif050205239a.jpg>]

Perhaps the most spectacular development was the position taken by the CGT. France's main union confederation has over the last decade, under general secretary Bernard Thibault and his predecessor Louis Viannet, been moving away from its traditional links with the Communist Party, towards "responsible", "non-political" unionism. And it has moved closer to the mainstream of the European TUC of which it is now part.

Thibault did not dare to try and get the CGT to adopt the ETUC position of support for the constitution. That would have been a bridge too far. His aim was for the confederation not to take a position. In a spectacular vote at the end of January, he was resoundingly disavowed by the National Confederal Council, the CGT's "parliament" between congresses, made up of representatives of industrial federations and regional unions. Representatives of both the CGT and Solidaires are participating in the "No from the left" collectives. And in spite of the ETUC leadership's intention of keeping the question of the Constitution out of the March 19th ETUC demonstration in Brussels, the strong presence of the CGT, with its "No" badges put it fairly and squarely at centre stage.

So a dynamic for a "No" from the left is clearly building up. On recent demonstrations, notably at Guéret and on March 10th, many if not most demonstrators wore "No" badges. This dynamic is entirely in line with the climate of opinion in France. Over the last ten years not only has social resistance remained at a relatively high level, but the climate of public opinion has increasingly expressed opposition to neo-liberalism. This is reflected in all sorts of opinion polls that regularly show people's attachment to, for example, public services, and in the fact that movements like the one in 2003, and the current mobilisations, have been consistently supported by around two thirds of the population. Thus the more the Constitution is targeted as and identified as embodying neo-liberal values, the more the left "No" campaign gathers strength.

A looming crisis

Conversely, Hollande's attempts to argue for a "Yes from the left" and to keep his distance from Chirac have run into serious trouble. The constitution seeks to embody and set in stone the neo-liberal Europe that the EU is trying to build. It is the central project of the European ruling classes. It is supported by every one of the 25 governments, by the multinationals, by the leaders of industry and finance. The principal political parties, including social democracy, also support it. "Yes" to the constitution means "Yes" to neo-liberalism and militarism. There is in fact no such thing as a "Yes from the left".

But Hollande and the SP leadership have to pretend there is. So they cannot be seen to campaign alongside Chirac. Of course they had to vote with him when the joint meeting of the two houses of parliament approved the constitution at the end of February. But to run a joint campaign would be the kiss of death. So the SP is reduced to envisaging a joint campaign with the Greens in a situation where most of the rest of the Left, as well as minorities in both parties, are supporting the "No".

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All of this adds up to a potential political crisis. That is why, in spite of Seillière's grumbling, Raffarin will not dare to launch any more major attacks until the referendum campaign is over. He may even be obliged to make some further at least token concessions with the aim of lowering the temperature and avoiding the nightmare scenario of a referendum campaign taking place against a background of continuing strikes and demonstrations.

A victory for the "No" in France would have wide-ranging effects. On a European level, it would deal a body blow to the projected Constitution and create an institutional crisis in the EU. It would be a formidable encouragement to all those who are resisting the neo-liberal offensive, not only in France, and indeed not only in Europe. Conscious of the danger of a French "No", EU leaders have agreed, oner reassurance from Chirac, to re-examine the notorious Bolkestein directive on the liberalisation of public services - though not to withdraw it. In France a victory for the "No" would further discredit not only the already punch-drunk Raffarin but also Chirac, who will be increasingly obliged to take centre stage in the campaign. It would unleash a crisis in the Socialist Party. The stakes are therefore high on both the European and the French levels. That is why the ruling class and its parties will pull out all the stops to avoid defeat. And why the partisans of a "No" from the left will be straining every muscle in the next two months to make their worst nightmares come true.

Photos in this article are by Patrice Leclerc, from his site Photothèque du mouvement social.