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France

March 31: a new step towards a general mobilization against the labour law

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The national day of strikes and demonstrations on March 31 was unquestionably a success. The Inter-union Coordination (CGT, FO, FSU, Solidaires, UNEF, UNL et FIDL) announced over a million demonstrators in 260 cities. On March 9, the figure announced was 450,000 in 170 cities.

In most cities, the contingents were much more numerous than on March 9, even in Paris, despite the pouring rain. The police themselves, with their own figures, acknowledged that the number of demonstrators on March 31 was twice as many as on 9 March.

Many new sectors were on strike, in both the public and private sectors. At the SNCF, more than 40 per cent of railway workers were on strike, against the El Khomri law but also against a decree defining the basis for further deregulation of the status of railway workers.

The mobilization of youth had also broadened since March 9. In the intervening period, on March 17 and 24 March, school and university students had organized two mobilizations, with in many demonstrations the presence of workplace contingents.

On March 31 250 high schools were blockaded, compared to 120 on March 9 and 200 on March 17. The student mobilization is taking longer to develop, but mobilization committees are being formed in dozens of universities.

Many young people from working-class neighbourhoods, more than on March 9, were present in the demonstrations.

Police intervened in several cities with multiple provocations and acts of violence against young people, following the violent attack on a young student on March 24 in the nineteenth arrondissement of Paris.

The movement is therefore extending, with in its sights the start of the parliamentary debate on the law, planned for May 9.

This mobilization is already the most massive faced by a government since 2010, when strikes, demonstrations and blockades did not manage to block a new attack against the pension system. But what everyone has in mind now is 2006, with the victorious movement against the CPE, the "first employment contract" of De Villepin, which the government had to withdraw in the face of a massive mobilization of youth, supported by workers.

The context is not the same, in particular as regards one key parameter: the last big social mobilizations in France (1995, 2003, 2006, 2010) have always taken place against a right-wing government.

Thus many activists are sniffing a "smell" of 2003 or 2010. But for now, unlike in 2003, the strike movement in the schools and universities has not reached the level of 2006, neither in its extent nor in the degree of self-organization: and among workers no sector appears poised to play a leading role, as the railway workers, refuse collectors, and lorry drivers did in 2010, or the postal workers and teachers in other movements.

Obviously the El Khomri law has hit hardest workers in the private sector, who are subject to the Labour Code, collective agreements and company agreements. But contingents of public sector workers were as numerous in the

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March 31 demonstration, since they know that the anti-social policies of the government strike indiscriminately at all sectors, even though the contingents of the teachers' union, the FSU, were not as big as in other mobilizations.

Moreover, everyone understands that this movement is taking on a different dimension. Its particular characteristics influence it both positively and negatively.

In the first place this movement is taking place in a strange political situation. Up until March 9, it was marked by the November attacks, the frenzied security policies of the government and the perpetuation of the state of emergency. It was also marked by the political polarization exercised by the National Front, the undisputed winner of the regional elections of December 2015.

Holland and Valls hoped to take advantage of the attacks to asphyxiate the right (the Republicans, whose president is Nicolas Sarkozy) and for both of them to drape themselves in the attire of solid statesmen, as Bush managed to do after September 11, 2001, thereby ensuring his re-election.

This plan succeeded on one point: the crisis of the right is more profound than ever. The Republicans are split, Sarkozy has totally failed in his comeback, Alain Juppé is far more popular than him and candidates for the candidacy for 2017 are multiplying in his party.

The centrists of the UDI have announced that they will not participate in a joint primary with the Republicans. The traditional right is a field of ruins

But on the other side, the credit of Hollande and Valls as war leaders and statesmen has also melted away like snow in the sun.

The El Khomri law is only the second thorn in the government's side that is deeply wounding it. The first is the political boomerang of the constitutional reform, which has just hit them head-on. Hollande and Valla hoped to set a trap for the right by forcing them to vote for the perpetuation of a state of emergency and the deprivation of nationality for acts of terrorism, something which can create stateless persons, trampling underfoot international norms.

The discredit of the executive within the Socialist Party on both security issues and social issues turned the trap against them, and the government became hostage to the right on the constitutional issue. In the end, in the Senate the Republicans refused to make an agreement with the PS, forcing Hollande and Valls to throw in the towel on the eve of 31 March.

Hollande is more discredited than any president of the Fifth Republic has ever been, with 15 per cent of favourable opinions. Valls is going down the same road. They are of course discredited in the eyes of the left outside the PS, so much has the reactionary policy of the government been rejected by a large part of the "people of the left." To the security policy of the state of emergency must obviously be added the social destruction of the Macron and Rebsamen laws but also the ignoble policies against migrants and the obstinacy in sticking to "useless projects", the airport of Notre Dame des Landes being the latest example. All this is also affecting the PS, strengthening the "dissidents", who are reinforced by the former Minister of Employment, Martine Aubry.

Even Benjamin Lucas, president of the youth organization of the Socialist Party, is calling for the withdrawal of the El Khomri law, and the leadership of UNEF, the student union that is close to the PS, is keeping its place in the student mobilization.

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The repression against trade-union activists is also an important element of the situation, like those of Good Year, who have been prosecuted and convicted for having sequestered the management in order to resist the closure of their workplace.

Lastly, the establishment of the state of emergency and the unleashing of a campaign of Islamophobic state racism have led in recent months to thousands of house searches in neighbourhoods. And many young people from these neighbourhoods are present in the mobilization, also in reaction against these attacks.

This whole social context is blurring our references, because at the moment no trade-union, social or political force is able to give meaning and coherence to the exasperation, to the demands for social justice and democracy.

In this situation, moreover, the trade union leaderships appear even more ineffective than usual. The reaction against the El Khomri project was made possible by the mobilization of young people, through the activity of social networks, collecting in twenty days more than a million signatures and setting the date of March 9. To these networks was added, of course, the determined action of teams of union activists, bringing their whole social dynamic to the mobilization. Obviously, even more than in 2010, the union leaders fear a social movement that would pose directly the political question of an alternative to austerity. All the more so, in that for the first time this demand would be put forward faced with a government of the left. So these bureaucracies are brandishing the threat of the National Front lying in ambush as an excuse for not pushing for a global confrontation against the policies of the government.

In this context, there is however a real ferment of social networks, posing all the essential questions of solidarity, social justice, climate justice, democratic control over decisions and over choices of society. This ferment gives a stimulating character to political and social life in France today;

Thus, on the eve of March 31, 400 undocumented workers won a stunning victory. After having occupied the offices of the General Department of Labour, with the support of the Inter-union coordination and the association Droits Devant, they imposed the opening of a negotiating framework that made it possible to change the rules and obtain their regularization.

In many cities, committees are being formed around the Good Year unionists who have been tried and sentenced by the courts.

On the evening of March 31, several thousand young people gathered in the Place de la République in Paris around the networks #leurfairepeur, #nuitdebout and #nuitrouge, to launch a dynamic of the occupation of squares. The association Right to Housing (DAL) joined up with this initiative of the night of March 31.

All these scattered phenomena are proof of an effervescence and of the search for a social dynamic, such as the appeal by several hundred trade unionists from the CGT, Solidaires, and the FSU to build a united mobilization.

The coming weeks will tell us whether all these potential dynamics manage to converge, unite, amplify and build a force powerful enough to make Hollande and Valls retreat.