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France

Pensions: The trial of strength to make Macron give way

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After the big demonstrations of 19 January, which were already comparable to the great demonstrations of 1995 and 2010 (during the mobilizations against attacks by previous governments on the pension system), the demonstrations of 31 January have just broken all the records: more than two million men and women in the streets according to the inter-union coordination: the CGT announced 2.8 million, including 500,000 in Paris. In the capital, although marching along broad avenues, the demonstration had to be split so that it did not remain blocked at its starting point, Place d'Italie.

Virtually everywhere – 270 rallies were held in large, small and medium-sized towns and cities – the demonstrations were larger than on 19 January. Even the Interior Ministry's figures of 1.27 million are the highest in 30 years for a day of protests. It is a real mass uprising of the working classes, with a greater number of workers from the private sector, most often strikers, clearly present in the demonstrations. The mass character of this day of protest is also reflected all the opinion polls that register a growing rejection of the government's counter-reform project – by more than 80 per cent of workers, majority support for the strike movement, and the broad majority feeling that it will be necessary to go beyond strikes and block the country's economic activity in order to force Macron and Borne to withdraw their proposal.

High school and university students were present: 300 high schools mobilized, including 200 that were blockaded, with the police obviously determined to use violence to break the blockades. If we add the participation of dozens of university institutions, 150,000 young people were mobilized, according to the figures of youth organizations this was three times more than on 19 January.

"We are united and determined to force the withdrawal of this pension reform project": concludes the declaration of the eight union confederations which has just announced two new days of mobilizations, on 7 and 11 February. This joint union declaration is important on two levels. First, maintaining the trade union front between unions that have often been divided in recent years in the face of government projects. Then, and this is a precedent for more than ten years, the union leaderships agree to impose a pure and simple withdrawal of the government project, which is based on two pillars: the raising of the minimum retirement age from 62 to 64 years, and the rapid passage to a minimum of 43 years of paid contributions in order to obtain a full pension.

It is clear that we are therefore heading towards a major political and social confrontation in the coming weeks.

Despite the battalions of "experts" and commentators who, in all the media, seek to support and explain the merits of this reform, despite the Macronist and Republican ministers and deputies who occupy the television studios, the rejection of the reform, far from weakening, has continued to increase in recent weeks. Yet Macron did not hesitate to invite ten editorialists from ten media (*Le Monde*, *Les Echos*, *Le Figaro*, BFM-TV, RTL, among others) to "inculcate" the elements of language capable of distilling effective propaganda on the pension reform. Each additional explanation has only increased hostility.

This is especially the case among women, who have understood that they would suffer even more from this reform. While employed women have in France, on average, a salary 22 per cent lower than that of men, they have a pension 40 per cent lower, mainly because of discontinuous and incomplete careers, since they are most likely to work part-time and have to periodically stop work to take care of children and domestic tasks in the family, and they represent the bulk of single-parent families. The change to retirement at 64 and the requirement of 43 working years would have the mechanical effect of making it even more difficult for them to obtain a full pension and would reduce

to nothing the gain of two annuities (only one in the public sector) allocated per child which made it possible to retire at an earlier age. The precarious and low-skilled workers and those who are too worn out by physically arduous jobs also know that they would be the biggest battalions unable to be still in employment between 62 and 64 years old.

Contrary to what Prime Minister Elizabeth Borne explains, the massive and growing rejection does not come from a lack of pedagogy, but from the population's understanding of the content of the reform. Women, those who have long working lives and the most precarious will suffer more from the harmful effects of this reform. All this makes even more unbearable the haughty arrogance of ministers like Darmanin and Attal, among others, professional politicians since leaving university, daring to castigate those who do not want to work longer and have the nerve to claim to speak, in front of the strikers, for "the France that wants to work".

Moreover, as had been the case in previous broad movements in defence of pensions, the government's fallacious arguments have been largely dismantled and fought by activists in the trade union and social movements, with a broad supply of arguments from anti-neoliberal economists.

Thus, Macron and Borne still claim to want to "save the system endangered by demography". According to them, the growth in the number of pensioners and the decline in the number of actively employed would jeopardize the system. Ironically, it is the official figures detailed by the Pensions Orientation Council (COR) and the interventions of its president Pierre-Louis Bras - former Director of Social Security and General Inspector of Social Affairs - which take apart the official argument. He declared on Thursday 19 January before the Finance Committee of the National Assembly:

Expenditure on pensions is globally stabilized and even in the very long term, it decreases in three out of four hypotheses... so, expenditure on pensions is not getting out of hand... And in the only hypothesis adopted by the government, it will decrease very little, but a little in the long term. Pension expenditure is not getting out of control, but it is not compatible with the government's economic policy and public finance goals,

These goals are well known; they are those of respecting the convergence criteria of the European Union and achieving a public deficit of 2.9 per cent of GDP in 2027. Bruno Le Maire has committed to this in the "budgetary trajectory" transmitted last summer to the European Commission, which is itself committed to applying the reform of the pension system in order to reduce its share of public spending. It should also be noted that the real problem that appears in the report of the COR on the financial evolution of the pension system does not come from expenditure but from revenues, and in particular from employee and employer contributions of the 2.2 million employees of the national, local government and hospital sectors, which represented 22 billion euros in revenue in 2021. In the figures of the public wage bill communicated to the COR by the Ministry of Public Accounts, it is surprising to note that the overall workforce of these two public services remains, roughly, identical until 2027 with a virtual freeze of salaries. So, there are no hiring projections (apart from 15,000 hospital workers) or salary increases for these 2.2 million civil servants. This would mean, if these figures were real, an 11 per cent drop in the real salary of civil servants by 2027. The shortfall for the pension system by these figures would be roughly 3 billion euros per year, an important sum in the system if civil service salaries follow the projections used for all salaries. It is therefore a deliberate underestimation by the government of the resources of the Pension Fund that is expressed by the figures communicated to the COR, with the aim of justifying financial imbalances by 2027. [\[1\]](#)

The government is dramatizing the accounts of the pension system in order to once again make workers pay for the return to the Maastricht criteria of public spending, qualifying as irresponsible those who are ready to let so-called deficits widen in this way. It is therefore necessary to underline the interest of the report of the Lille researchers of the IRES. In 2019, they estimate the total of aid to companies, budgetary expenditure, reduction of social contributions,

tax exemptions and other "niches" at 157 billion euros, which represents 6.4 per cent of GDP, more than 30 per cent of the state budget. The total aid to enterprises accounted for only 2.4 per cent of GDP in 1979. Thus, if we are concerned about the balance of the social security system, which is supposed to be based on employer and employee contributions, it should be noted that in 1995 enterprises accounted for 65.2 per cent of social security financing. The share fell to 46.9 per cent in 2020, "thanks" to reductions in contributions aimed at "lowering the cost of labour". In the 2023 budget, the amount of exemption schemes is 85 billion euros [2].

The government has obviously understood that it is facing the double hostility of the entire trade union movement, 80 per cent of workers and the population in general, and that it will no longer be able to convince. Therefore, it wants to move quickly, with two objectives: to try to discourage workers and exhaust the movement by proclaiming that any mobilization is and will be useless ("the postponement to 64 years old is no longer negotiable" declared Elizabeth Borne last Monday), that the reform will quickly be voted, and without any change in it, so that there will be no adjustment on the fundamental points. However, it does not want to appear isolated in the National Assembly and the Senate.

By including its reform in the draft amending law on the financing of social security (PLFSS), Article 47-1 of the Constitution, through institutional manipulation, will allow it to move quickly, limiting debates in the Assembly to 20 days and all debates to 50 days. The government thus arrogates to itself the right, if the vote does not take place within the allotted time, to legislate by ordinance and decree, passing over Parliament. It also has, if necessary, article 49-3 which allows it to pass in force without a vote by making it a question of confidence in the government. So, go quickly, while seeking to seal the agreement with the leadership of the Republicans, whose deputies and senators can give it a majority in both chambers. But even in this camp of the Macronist right and the Republican right, things are not yet settled. To date, 16 Republican and related deputies out of 62 refuse to vote for the project and Macron's allies in the Assembly (Edouard Philippe's Horizon - 29 seats - and François Bayrou's MODEM - 51 seats) affirm several disagreements, not wanting to leave the role of majority maker to the Republicans alone (Renaissance, the party of Macron and Borne, has only 169 seats out of 577 and must gather 289 votes to obtain majorities). There will therefore be negotiations that will be particularly animated as all these MPs see themselves at odds with a good part of their own electoral base, which is also hostile to the reform.

The challenge for all these parties and their elected representatives is their positioning in the context of the next elections (presidential and legislative) of 2027. In the government, Bruno Lemaire, Minister of Economy and Finance, is putting his credibility on the table against Gérard Darmanin, Minister of the Interior, as a candidate to succeed Macron within the presidential party. There are too many crocodiles in the swamp of capitalist neoliberalism. Each current of the majority is therefore likely to play its own game on this bill, weakening the posture of false serenity of the government, which is already destabilized by the popular mobilization.

Moreover, Macron's camp is playing a dangerous game by constantly trumpeting in recent weeks that its reform was democratically legitimate since the candidate had announced it during the 2022 presidential campaign. This bluster is all the more repulsive, in the trade union movement and among left-wing voters, because Macron only obtained his victory, despite his programme, thanks to the parties of the NUPES and the trade union movement which had called to vote for him to block Marine Le Pen. Macron had won support for his political programme from only 20 per cent of registered voters in the first round. This contempt for those who voted for him in the second round would undoubtedly have the consequence, if ever a disastrous identical configuration were to recur in 2027, that the "republican barrage" behind a candidate of the Macronist right against Marine Le Pen would no longer have the slightest effectiveness.

On another level, the Macronist leaders and their mouthpieces in the media are bluffing themselves by claiming for weeks that the trade union movement is so weakened and divided that it will neither be able to unite nor act effectively over time, thinking that the social forces will quickly fall back into resignation and apathy. At worst, they envisage a renewal of the 2010 scenario. At the time, faced with Sarkozy's pension reform project, raising the retirement age from 60 to 62, the united protest was exhausted with seven months of demonstrations and strikes that

had never paralyzed the economic life of the country or prevented the passage of the reform. And to try to ward off another scenario that would be more perilous for them, they raise the spectre of possible "blockages" in transport or fuel supplies, claiming that this will quickly discredit and paralyze strikes. I

This is an attempt to erase the fact that in 1995, millions of workers blocked by three weeks of strikes gave remarkable support to the strikers of the SNCF (railway workers) and the RATP (public transport in the Parisian region). To erase also the fact that in recent days, a majority of workers have become convinced that it will be necessary to block economic life to obtain the withdrawal of the project. It is the belief that we can be strong and determined enough to win that can be the best element in fostering broad popular support for strikes paralyzing transport or fuel distribution. Moreover, unlike today, in 1995, the strike in transport was mainly a strike "by proxy", railway workers and RATP drivers being the tip a little too solitary of the confrontation; moreover the confederal leadership of the CFDT was opposed to the strike and in support of the plan of Prime Minister Alain Juppé. Nevertheless, although Juppé was "standing fast", he had to back down and withdraw his plan. There are therefore two more favourable factors today: a broad trade-union unity, a rise in the power of several sectors of workers... and also a third one. which is precisely the experience of 2010, shared by many teams of union activists.

Thus it is possible to do as well and even better than in 1995, avoiding the mistakes of 2010. In the standoff that is beginning, there may undoubtedly be a marginal erosion of the right in parliament but, at worst, the government still has the weapon of 49-3 and the passage by decrees and ordinances if, at the end of March, the time for debates is over before the final vote. So, beyond a possible political crisis due to the pressure on the right, the decisive element to win, to force Macron to withdraw his project, will be the economic blockage and the conviction in the ruling class that this reform is not worth the candle of industrial and commercial paralysis. The MEDEF (employers' organization) itself did not think in the autumn that this reform was essential now, being more focused on that of the Unemployment Insurance which results in February in a 25 per cent reduction in the duration of benefits.

The timing imposed by Macron and Borne requires both organizing a massive movement of demonstrations and rapidly creating a favourable relationship of forces for the strikers. The parliamentary process will not be completed by the end of March. Therefore, the debate on the best way to move towards one or more ongoing strikes while maintaining the massiveness and unity of the movement is at the heart of many discussions and the compromise represented by the decisions of the inter-union coordination on the evening of the 31st reflects these contradictions.

The leadership of the CFDT is determined to maintain the trade union front but it conceives the action as a battle of opinion, winning the majority of the population to the refusal of the reform and obtaining its withdrawal through popular mobilization, massive demonstrations... and by persuading MPs not to vote for the text. As a result, having a rhythm of successive mobilizations, a work of conviction, lobbying elected representatives... without embarking on ongoing strikes, particularly in sectors that would block economic life for several days or weeks. However, to have as a guideline only this strategy would lead to the failure experienced in 2010.

This is why a large part of the activists and the most combative teams highlight the need to organize, to prepare the all-out strike. This is what guides the tempo set by the CGT chemical workers' federation with several days of strikes of increasing duration in the first half of February, especially in the oil sector. It is an identical tactic that we find in the CGT Energy, the CGT Ports and Docks, the CGT and Sud Rail at the SNCF. All these unions have planned at least two days of strike between 6 and 8 February.

The decision of the inter-union coordination to hold a one-day strike on 7 February and a one-day demonstration on a Saturday on 11 February is a compromise between these two positions. In addition, despite the massiveness of the last two days of strikes, there is a difficulty in pacing the rise of strikes in the public service, energy and transport, a difficulty evidenced by a small decline in the number of strikers in these sectors. Similarly, including at the SNCF, the general assemblies are not massive, not reflecting a dynamic thrust of the strike.

But in fact, many activists think that a real strengthening of forces in these sectors would require not wearing out the mobilization by repeated staggered strike days but a clear proposal of a calendar, building an intersectoral confrontation for which it is worth conducting strikes of several days. All these parameters are all the more difficult to manage coherently as the different tactics also reflect divisions in the trade union movement, including within the CGT on the eve of its confederal congress. These centrifugal risks reinforce the need to build general assemblies of strikers, as well as inter-sectoral and inter-union coordination structures in cities and industrial zones, to create a unitary and combative local dynamic. This is beginning to be done and sometimes extends to other structures of the social movement such as the Peasant Confederation.

In several sectors, there will be attempts to continue the strike after 7 February, and the demonstrations of 11 February, a Saturday, in all the towns and cities in the country, will surely be massive and popular with, in particular, the presence of those who could not go on strike and/or demonstrate on 19 and 31 January. In any case, the coming days will have to be used to convince ourselves and to convince others that victory is possible and that we must give ourselves all the means to achieve it.

The political stakes of this movement are important for several reasons. Those who demonstrate and strike are motivated by the attack on pensions, but also by the attacks carried out by the government against unemployment benefits, vocational training and obviously the loss of wages represented, after the Covid years, by inflation and low wage increases. So it is the whole capitalist policy of Macron and his government that is called into question. This motivates people all the more to win on pensions and all the reasons for anger appear clearly in the placards, slogans and discussions in the demonstrations. As important as it is to keep a united front centred on the withdrawal of the Macron-Borne project, those who are in the movement understand that the outcome of this showdown will be an improved relationship of forces in case of victory, a deteriorated one in case of failure, in the face of the employers and the government. It is all the more important that this class issue emerges, this relationship of forces to be established for a different distribution of wealth, that there is a major challenge to make credible the anti-capitalist demands for the financing of the commons, Social Security, health, housing, wages. This is taking place also in the context where the month of February will see day after day the publication of the annual results of large French companies which promise, overall, to exceed those of 2021 [\[3\]](#).

There are therefore several issues within this mobilization for the anti-capitalist left. The NPA is trying to take its rightful place in this by pushing for unity of action with all the political forces of the workers' movement opposed to the reform, while seeking to build common initiatives of the entire workers', trade union, associative and political movement, as the LCR took its place in 2005 in the fight against the European Constitutional Treaty.

Another battle is being fought in this movement between anti-capitalists and the far right. The Rassemblement National is again trying to surf in the media on popular discontent in order to appear, complacently helped by these same media, as the real opposition to Macron, and it proclaims its opposition to the pension reform. But the far right knows that it is persona non grata in the union demonstrations (and it moreover denounces the unions that called to vote Macron against it) and, in the Assembly, the RN remains speechless on the battle of amendments to counter the project, leaving this space to the NUPES. It must be said that the RN, on the substance, shares the "need for workers to make efforts to finance pensions". The RN has put in the closet, after being rapped on the knuckles by the liberal economists of its entourage, its programme of 2017: the return to retirement at 60 with 40 years of contributions. Except for working lives started before the age of 20, where its programme maintains the return to the retirement age at 60, the RN is discreetly pronouncing itself in favour of retirement at the full rate between 62 and 67 years with 42 or 43 years of work. Basically, they agree with Macron, even though they loudly denounce the Macron project of raising the retirement age to 64 years. There is no need to look in their programme for the slightest demand for social justice, for the distribution of wealth by attacking the capitalists, for a fiscal and budgetary policy that puts an end to handouts to big business. Their solutions for pensions, apart from a raising of the retirement age for workers, lie in a pro-natalist policy and the end of handouts to ...immigrants! Challenging the place of the RN in this mobilization is therefore done not only in the streets but also by denouncing the duplicity of its posture.

3 February 2023

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[1] Collective report, "Our public services", January 2023

[2] "A capitalism on drip-feed. Macroeconomic measurement, theory and the effects of public aid to French companies", Antoine Abdelsalam et al., IRES 2022 cutt.ly/60Lw4HH

[3] See the dossier in Alternatives Economiques, February 2023