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France

1995, the year of the social movement

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The December 1995 strikes marked a resurgence of popular mobilizations—following the 1980s, those "winter years" of which Félix Guattari spoke [1]—and constituted a moment of debate and realignment, both within trade unionism and social movements, among intellectuals, and within left-wing political parties. Hélène Adam, formerly a leading member of SUD-PTT, reflects on the dynamics that fuelled this series of strikes.

Thirty years ago, the largest mass mobilization since May 68 thwarted the Juppé Plan, the public sector pension plan, and clearly stood in defence of a model of society based on solidarity and public service. [2]

Besides the popular imagery that marked these weeks of strikes and demonstrations (from the abundance of colourful banners to the red smoke flares of the railway workers and the "anti-social" song), new concepts appeared, such as the notion of the autonomy of the social movement, that of the strike by proxy, not forgetting the famous Juppéthon, relayed by the powerful and scathing humour of the *Guignols de l'info*, which were then operating without taboo on the Canal Plus TV channel free of charge.

Revisiting the analysis of such a movement is all the more necessary as dark clouds are now gathering at all levels and the absence of any large-scale social mobilization, despite the accumulation of reactionary measures, weighs heavily in this situation where the far right parades at all levels.

A movement that did not come out of the blue

It is impossible to seriously and thoroughly judge the specificity of December 1995 without taking into account the context in which a movement of this magnitude and originality arose.

1995 is part of a specific sequence of the mass movement which did not come from nothing and whish would also have extensions, particularly in the global justice movement.

Three aspects seem essential to address from this perspective:

– The self-organized sectoral movements of the mid-1980s;

– The restructuring of the trade unions with the creation of new unions, which began in 1988 with the postal and telecommunications sectors and the health and social services sectors;

– The theme of defending public services against privatizations that threaten sectors recently opened to competition under the pretext of European directive requirements.

The common threads are not always easy to reconstruct thirty years later, or even fifty years later, but from Lip 1973 and 1976 to the struggles of unskilled workers at the same time in factories where women or immigrants made up a majority of the workforce, passing through the struggle of the farmers of Larzac, there was a post-68 effervescence

which announced a desire of the social movement to invite itself to all tables: those of forms of struggle, of forms of organization, of not waiting for slogans coming from above from the large federations or confederations for whom they are often the forgotten ones of the negotiations, but also those of demands where the pay slip is not the alpha and omega, the conditions of work being brutally called into question, as well as in some aspects, its purpose and its organization.

Without going into details that would take us too far afield, we must keep in mind the regular resurgence of such situations, especially as the mass of workers became increasingly feminized and was in particular young (therefore dynamic, inventive and demanding). The responses of the main confederations ranged from the organization of large days of action and demonstrations to more or less direct support for the Union of the Left, which everyone hoped would bring about change as early as 1978. As we know, the Union of the Left exploded in mid-flight under the onslaught of the Socialist Party, to which it had given wings with its candidate Mitterrand; hopes were postponed (it would be until the Presidential election of 1981), and already the appeal "Union in the struggles," composed of trade unionists from the CGT, the CFDT and the FEN (the main teachers' union at the time), marked a clearly affirmed break with the decisions of the leadership, while the CGT, at the time the leading organization but also closely dependent on the (still powerful) Communist Party (PCF) was experiencing its first internal challenges with the support of unions for Solidarnosc in Poland.

The student movement, the railway workers, the nurses

And following directly from these various relays, a new generation of activists emerged in the second half of the 1980s, manifesting itself first on a massive and coordinated scale through the movement against the proposed Devaquet reform of higher education (1986), then within the working class through the railway workers' coordinating committees (also 1986) and the nurses' coordinating committees (1988). While the movement against the Devaquet reform adopted exemplary forms of self-organization (general assemblies in the faculties, national decision-making coordinating committees), this was not strictly speaking a new phenomenon in the student milieu, which had already widely practiced such methods ten years earlier. Young people, with low union membership but high political engagement, readily adopted forms of struggle that saw the direct emergence of new political figures, and this movement was no exception.

Much more surprising (and the source of many reactions) was the railway workers' movement that began in December 1986. The railway sector was quite strongly unionized and well-organized by active and often effective federations. As early as 1985, a strike had spontaneously broken out in Chambéry, without prior notice or union directives, stemming from a general assembly of angry railway workers. The same pattern repeated itself in December 1986, when the CFDT (in opposition to the confederal leadership) representing train drivers at Paris Nord station filed notice of a renewable strike on the 18th December to cover the actions of the railway workers, who were organizing massive general assemblies at their workplaces and adopting a completely new form of struggle. This involved coordinating strike committees, the executive bodies of the sovereign general assemblies, tasked with conveying their decisions to the "centre." This centre comprised fifty-five different depots, connected by the company's internal telephone network. Soon, eighty-three depots were on strike. Then the other categories of SNCF employees joined the action: on the eve of the holidays, December 23, the strike became a general strike on the railways. The movement was so impressive that it fuelled numerous debates, especially since it appeared as a guarantee of democracy, of collective responsibility, without conflict with the railway unions, it should be noted, but allowing for a significantly larger and, of course, victorious movement, blocking a flagship project of management: the implementation of a "merit-based" salary scale, an attempt to develop these new forms of management which, through competition between workers prepare the ground for the undermining of public service, something that railway workers perceived very clearly.

Two years later, the nurses' movement exploded, fuelled by a lack of recognition for their profession, expressed through a striking and explicit slogan: "Neither maids, nor nuns, nor stupid," (*ni bonnes, ni nonnes, ni connes*).It hadn't been that long since nurses were considered nuns, and the notion that their profession was "feminine," requiring no special professional recognition because women were supposedly naturally gifted in caregiving, led to unbearable wages and working conditions, a lack of recognition for the skills demanded of them and a miserable working life. On 15 September, the Ile-de-France coordination of unionized and non-unionized nurses (500 delegates, representing 109 institutions) decided to launch a massive strike starting on the 29th: 20,000 nurses marched, with 80 per cent of them participating in the strike that day. Without going into all the details of this highly symbolic movement, it is important to know that the coordinating body strongly demanded direct participation in negotiations and would continue the strike, triggering similar actions among railway workers and in the postal sorting centres. The concept of coordination was gaining traction and was now being fiercely contested by the leaderships of the trade unions, who felt that they could no longer control the movements, the forms of strikes, or the demands that they deemed extreme.

Union repression and restructuring

The contestation grew particularly within the CFDT and gained significant momentum with the formation of the CFDT opposition, which had the majority in key sectors such as the postal service, healthcare, railways, and even entire regional unions (such as the Lower Normandy Regional Union). The opposition unions rejected the "reorientation" of their confederation and defended the maintenance of the key demands of the time: a 35-hour workweek without loss of pay, opposition to opening up the sector to competition and privatization plans for public services, and a general increase in wages, among other things.

But it was the strikes of 1988 that would ignite the powder keg.

– the health workers’ federation suspended the health and social services unions of Ile de France and the corresponding regional structure, on 30 November 1988, accusing them of supporting the nurses’ coordination.

– The CFDT postal workers' federation, for its part, negotiated an agreement with management behind the backs of the unions involved during the strike of the "yellow trucks" (the highly combative mail transshipment services), which the Ile-de-France unions refused, maintaining the continuation of the strike. They were immediately "suspended" in turn.

This led to the creation of the CRC (Regional Coordinating Committee) of health and social services workers on the one hand, and SUD PTT (postal workers) on the other, at the beginning of 1989. Without going into the (real) details of the difficulties encountered by these formations in the first year, when they had to rebuild their legitimacy and regain union rights in a new configuration, while their mobilizations often met with fierce repression from management, particularly at the PTT, it should be noted that very quickly, SUD PTT and the CRC health workers found their audience, a considerable number of young workers attentive to new forms of organization, quickly adhering to the idea of counter-power developed in particular by SUD PTT, which addressed the essential concerns of a new generation. SUD PTT in particular revived many concepts relating to the beginnings of trade unionism and its explicit reference to the Charter of Amiens [3] shook up traditional analyses – and also the opposition between a CGT still totally a transmission belt of the PCF and FO which proclaimed a facade of independence as a pretext to be content with the little that the employers were willing to negotiation around.

The harmful effects of ultraliberalism

And their development would rely heavily on this new generation of workers who were disillusioned with the left and tired of a conservative or sclerotic unionism.

Within the CFDT confederation, opposition was asserting itself and building up, particularly among railway workers, and it can be considered that these events were having repercussions in the CGT and were also affecting a part of a generation younger than jts historical leaders and more attracted to new forms of organization and struggle, at a time when attacks against public services and the entire arsenal of solidarity dating from the Liberation were being very seriously attacked.

This challenge to the established union order was growing and serving as a reference point for an idea that would become increasingly prevalent: the great value of the social movement when it asserts its autonomy. For at the same time, on the institutional and party political front, everything was going "wrong": Mitterrand was re-elected in 1988, but 1986-88 marked the return of the right wing, and the 1995 presidential election saw Chirac elected. The left, represented on the one hand by Lionel Jospin for the Socialist Party (PS), and on the other by Robert Hue for the French Communist Party (PCF), struggled to mobilize against the backdrop of the disastrous record of the two seven-year terms of Mitterrand and a muddled message on the key issues raised by workers (notably the defence of social gains, public services, and social security). The PCF fell below 10 per cent, while the far-left Lutte Ouvrière, with 5 per cent, managed to hold its own but did nothing with it.

But the stakes were becoming clearer: the right wing already imposed on the private sector in 1993 the increase from 37.5 to 40 years for a full pension, the public sector was in the crosshairs for the same measure, the privatization of Air France and France Télécom had been postponed due to huge mobilizations of the workers concerned (strikes of ‘93) but it was being seriously considered, as was the questioning of the specific statuses of railway workers and RATP staff. Finally social security had to be reformed; this was the famous Juppé Plan (Alain Juppé was Prime Minister at the time) which Nicole Notat, CFDT confederal secretary, directly hailed on TV as a welcome progress.

An unprecedented mobilization with considerable visibility

1995 was the result of all this maturation/development which was accompanied by numerous local and/or sectoral struggles which increasingly saw the emergence of a new expression (slogans, banners, placards) and the famous slogan "all together, all together, general strike!" which symbolized the will to build a movement of all sectors, a real milestone to be reached for sectors which until then had mainly mobilized separately.

The CFDT opposition, certain CGT structures and in particular the railway workers' federation, the FSU unions which had just left the FEN and were taking off on this occasion, were coordinating through their leaders at all levels who knew each other ,and converging on the idea of a major mobilization whose pace would be set (roughly) by the railway workers and which would be both a real strike movement in the public sector and a great opportunity to offer enormous visibility around a convergence in defence of public services.

The confederations, on the contrary, were very much in the background: the CFDT confederation was in favour of the Juppé Plan (and on the women's rights demonstration of 25 November, remarkably massive, which gave a strong indication of the possibilities of mobilization, Notat was booed by many activists); the CGT never called for a general strike as such (it held its confederal congress during the movement).

However, most of the time, at the grassroots level and in the most mobilized sectors, trade union unity was a reality; the movement was too significant to be permanently severed from it, even though it was clear to everyone during the

1995 strikes that a kind of alternative leadership was emerging, deciding on the dates, the continuation of the strike (often confirmed in general assemblies), and widely disseminating information from top to bottom. The public service media (and in particular the regional stations of FR3) followed the movement very closely, and from the very first days, for example, a live broadcast was organized from several centres of the strike to showcase the diversity and determination of the movement.

A strike by proxy

The private sector remained aloof (it must be said that it had already absorbed the 40 annual payments without any organized resistance at the time), and there was talk of "strikes by proxy," which, in hindsight, doesn't seem like an appropriate term. The major private sectors were defeated in the late 1970s or during the 1980s and fell victim to major restructurings that considerably weakened them (notably in the bastions of steel, mining, and the automotive industry). There was generally some sympathy for the movement, but its strength lay in its grounding in the defence of public services, a theme that was already undoubtedly in very serious decline among users.

In the public sector, however, the 1995 strikes were far more widespread across all sectors than anything that had come before (except, of course, May-June 1968) and indeed anything that followed. And when we talk about the "high point" of 1995, we are referring to the demonstrations that took place every two days, at a very rapid and sustained pace. The other days were used, in the larger sectors, for general assemblies with discussions and votes, often joint assemblies of several sectors—in short, something unprecedented on this scale.

And because of the transport strikes (SNCF, of course, but also RATP in Paris, which led demonstrators to march together from their local centres to the common meeting point, giving the impression of a nationwide blockade—undoubtedly what led the then right-wing government to give in). It is important to remember the convergences between sectors that facilitated the spread of the movement There were still very strong bastions at the SNCF, but also at the EDF (public energy sector,) the PTT and in healthcare. Railway workers holding general assemblies mingled with postal workers from sorting centres in train stations and attended their assemblies to organize the strike with them, for example. Huge assemblies took place at sites that brought together postal and telecommunications workers and opened their assemblies to local small workplaces. Discussions unfolded, addressing the content and forms of struggle.

Many sectors observed more than ten consecutive days of strike action, an unprecedented occurrence in an inter-sectoral movement, and this was particularly the case in the sectors most threatened by plans for opening up to competition/privatization/questioning of the guarantees of the status/abandonment of the fundamental notions attached to the public service (equalisation, equal access for all).

This was therefore a social movement that marked an important cycle of political and trade union recomposition and saw the emergence of the notion of "social movement," hailed by Pierre Bourdieu at the height of the movement when he spoke at the Gare de Lyon on December 12, beginning with: "I am here to express our support for all those who have been fighting for three weeks against the destruction of a civilization associated with the existence of public service, that of republican equality of rights, rights to education, health, culture, research, art, and, above all, to work. I am here to say that we understand this profound movement, that is to say, both the despair and the hopes that are expressed within it, and which we also feel; to say that we do not understand (or that we understand all too well) those who do not understand it, like this philosopher who, in *Le Journal du Dimanche* of December 10, discovered with astonishment "the gulf between the rational understanding of the world", embodied according to him by Juppé - he says it in black and white - "and the deep desire of people".

It is impossible to discuss 1995 without analysing it in the light of the defence of a model of society - of which public services were one of the key issues - we were still before the massive privatizations and changes of status - based on solidarity (pension system, social security, equalisation of facilities in public services etc.).

This is what set people in motion on this unprecedented scale, like a last gasp before the generalized assault of liberalism in all sectors (energy, transport, telecommunications, postal service, etc.).

We should also remember the movement's immense popularity, particularly through the satirical puppet show "Les Guignols de l'info" and their Juppéthon which counted the demonstrators at each key moment, aiming to get closer to the million mark—the number at which Juppé had declared he would withdraw his plan. The withdrawal of the Juppé Plan was highly symbolic (and a genuine victory, since Juppé was the driving force behind the reform), but we must not forget the withdrawal of the SNCF reforms, the postponement of the privatization of France Télécom, and the withdrawal of the proposal to increase the required number of years of contributions for a full pension in the public and civil service sectors to 40. It would still take until 2003 for a real defeat to jeopardize the gains of the 1995 strikes.

Social movement, political parties

The concept of a social movement, and with it, that of the autonomy of the social movement, is making a comeback. It is indeed a matter of both reaffirming the necessity of a radical class-struggle orientation with a project of social emancipation and reaffirming that only the social movement has, in a sense, the capacity to fulfil this dual task. In 1999, the call for the autonomy of the social movement declared, echoing the issues raised in the Charter of Amiens: "Freed from the concerns of managing the system and institutions, the social movement will be able to enter the debate and impose other choices."

Thirty years later, this is not what dominates the political landscape, and the mass movement is struggling to find its footing and return to victory, while the political realignment has led to a significant rejection of the social-democratic solutions that have followed one another when the Socialists were in power.. It is worth remembering that Jospin's Plural Left in 1997 was quick to privatize France Télécom and Air France, despite its campaign promises. It is not the purpose of this article to revisit the events that followed.

We will simply point to the successive defeats of mass mobilizations on the emblematic issue of pensions (which has the particularity of affecting everyone without exception), in 2003, 2010, and 2023. These are all milestones that have permanently entrenched the idea that one must always contribute more in order to retire later and later. From Mitterrand's 1983 reform, which, while maintaining the 37.5 years of contributions, lowered the retirement age from 65 to 60, not only is there nothing left, but we are now even further behind: 64 years old, but with 42 or 43 years of contributions, which will logically lead to raising the retirement age to 65, 66, or 67.

The 2023 defeat is undoubtedly the most emblematic and significant, as all the ingredients seemed to be in place to prevent this decisive setback: trade union unity at the top, a single rallying cry—the withdrawal of the reform—and high-profile demonstrations. Simply stating these characteristics is enough to demonstrate how far removed we are from 1995: everything depends on those at the top, and nothing will remain after the failure of a movement that, in reality, never took control of its own destiny. And the futile calls for a resurgence from what is rather problematically termed "civil society" by journalists only serve to highlight the considerable overall weakening of unions under the combined blows of changes in work organization, the proliferation of statuses, formal and de facto, and labour law reforms that have led to the disappearance of local working-class representative bodies—those that enabled genuine grassroots mobilization.

Initiatives will be organized to commemorate 1995, which will undoubtedly provide an opportunity to revisit the characteristics of this mass movement, which remains emblematic of modern mobilizations. This modest contribution lays some groundwork for discussion…

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[1] *"Les Années d'hiver 1980-1985"* by Félix Guattari, in which he considered this period a mental counter-revolution.

[2] Alain Juppé was Prime Minister of France from 1995 to 1997.

[3] Excerpt from the charter of identity of SUD PTT: “This is why SUD-PTT situates its action within a dual continuity: That defined in 1906 by the CGT in the Charter of Amiens, which assigns to trade unionism a dual objective and a requirement: defence of immediate and daily demands, and struggle for a comprehensive transformation of society in complete independence from political parties and the state. And that of the project of self-management socialism championed by the CFDT in the 1970s, insofar as it places workers and the necessity of the broadest possible democracy at the heart of both the objective of social transformation and the approach aimed at achieving it.”