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France

After June 14, the fight continues

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For the government and the media controlled by the regime and the big groups, this day was to be a non-event, the symbolic gesture of an exhausted movement. And yet a huge cortege marched in the streets of Paris on June 14, 2016 crossing the southwest neighbourhoods of Paris from the Place d'Italie to Invalides. Four hours after the departure of the first demonstrators, groups were still waiting to start. While the CGT announced 1.2 million demonstrators, the government saw only 120,000 people on the streets, making a point of honour of claiming that this figure is the lowest announced since March 31. But above all the only message from media and government about this event will concern "the violence of the rioters", a dozen broken windows and some walls tagged at a large paediatric hospital in Paris, which was on the route. Concerning the merits of the case, the Prime Minister has the position that the file is closed, the law is sealed, there will be no change and social mobilization must immediately disappear from the media screens. Moreover, he even threatens to ban the next demonstrations planned for the coming week.

And yet mobilization endures. This was the biggest Parisian event since the beginning of the movement, three months ago, two or three times larger than that of March 31. Obviously, it was a national event, but several large cities were also in the streets, like Marseille, Toulouse, Strasbourg, Rennes and others. Similarly, the atmosphere was not that of a last time round the track. Because in this event, as in all the demonstrations undertaken for some weeks, the state of mind is one of determination. A large number of employees came from both large and small enterprises in the private sector, from all regions, most often brought in coaches by the CGT, but also by Force Ouvrière or Solidaires.

The demonstration and its slogans reflected determination in the demand for withdrawal of the El Khomri law and the rejection of the PS government. Despite the daily propaganda conducted for months in TV and radio by the PS and all commentators and so-called economic and social experts, employees are still standing firm against this law: in all surveys, only 30% of those polled support the maintenance of the draft law. 70% - and almost all employees- want its withdrawal pure and simple or at least profound changes.

And yet, the movement has not yet managed to force the government to concede. Because the givens present since the beginning of the movement are still there. On the one hand the government is still as weak. Its credibility is reduced week after week to almost nothing. The leading Valls-Hollande duo display the face of strong leaders, of an increasingly repressive state, to hide their weakness. The Prime Minister plays on this register by repeating incessantly that France is at war in the face of terrorism, that the Republic must be defended and there is now media hysteria, orchestrated by the government, concerning any event that may enter into this reading. Thus, on the morning of June 14, after the murder of a couple of police officers in the Parisian region, the Minister of the Interior acceded to an old claim of the reactionary police unions and of the extreme right: authorization for police to carry weapons off duty. The damage suffered by the facade of the children's hospital on June 14 was turned by the Prime Minister into "a hospital devastated", whereas no demonstrator entered into the hospital. But this media portrayal of an "inhuman act" will serve to justify, perhaps, the prohibition of future demonstrations. Ironically, the leader of Force Ouvrière, Jean Claude Mailly responded to this threat by saying that it should also be necessary to ban the next matches in Euro 2016, the pretext to multiple clashes with already at least one death and some serious injuries. On this police state terrain and against the setting of a country at war, the government is beaten at its own game, the right and the Front national reproaching it now for its weakness before social disorder.

This climate of state, government and police violence is applied to the demonstrations. At least 150 demonstrators were injured on June 14, fifteen had to be directed to emergency services and at least one is in a serious state, his

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vertebral column hit by a tear gas bomb fired at point blank. Flash-balls, body armour, stinger grenades and tear gas are used to seriously injure demonstrators, not to mention charges against the corteges with intensive use of truncheons.

The government is therefore seeking to get out of the situation after June 14 by increasing tension and police violence. The goal is to definitively break the social movement before the second passage of the law in the National Assembly early in July.

On the side of the movement things are still contradictory. The timetable for action given by the national inter-union coordination [the Intersindicale], much too widely spaced apart, especially since mid-May, does not allow the building up of the relationship of forces needed to defeat the government. The determination of combative union teams has allowed the maintenance of the strength of the movement up to now, but many sectors and enterprises have gone on strike in a scattered manner, resuming when another started.

The only time the government has come close to climbing down in recent weeks was at the end of May, when the blockade of fuel depots and the strike by truck drivers closed down 30% of service stations. Defeating the government is only possible by a blockade of the economic life of the country, at least strong enough to create a situation in which the social and political isolation of the executive requires it to give in.

This is something many trade unionists have been aware of since the beginning of the movement. It lay behind the "We block everything" appeal launched on March 22 by 100 trade unionists, essentially CGT and Sud. It was also the state of mind of many trade union teams who, particularly since mid-May have multiplied blockades and strikes, such as those in the collection and processing of household waste in several cities in France. Employees in the oil refineries held out for several weeks, but the impact of their strike was broken by the massive importing of fuel by the major groups. The strikes in the SNCF and by Air France pilots, axised on local demands, have not been able since June 1 to generate a force comparable to the tension of the previous two weeks. This all the more so since at the SNCF, prior to the renewable strike imposed on the CGT from June 1 onwards, there had been, since March, several isolated 24 or 48 hour actions, using up some strength.

However, other sectors, workers in the nuclear power plants, ports, glassware, and the agro-alimentary sector have also entered into action in the past few weeks. The strength of this movement and the composition of the demonstrations shatter the image built up over the years of a trade union movement limited to employees in the public sector. For some months it has been employees in industry, transport, trade and services who have structured the mobilization.

Stuck in a situation in which it is not the master, the CGT leadership is trying to tack, particularly since mid-May. Trapped in a pincer movement between the strength of the movement and the blocking of any margin of negotiation with the government, Philippe Martinez manages but does not want to push more towards confrontation. Thus he has explicitly refused to take advantage of the launch of the Euro 2016 soccer finals, on June 10, to try to put the government on the defensive, condemning the trade unionists who had strengthened the strike on the transport lines serving the football stadiums.

Similarly, the Intersyndicale has no plan to escalate mobilization after June 14. The next action is only for one day on June 23 and the Intersyndicale calls not so much to strengthen the strikes but rather to multiply the signing of petitions. The CGT departmental union for the Bouches du Rhone, for its part, is relying on the strength of June 14, with 300 companies in the private sector in the Marseillaise region striking that day, to launch an appeal for a 48 hour strike, on June 23-24, with the intention of forcing a real showdown. Once again, nothing is yet settled in this mobilization which has lasted four months, having several times renewed its forces.