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France

France rises up in the night

- IV Online magazine - 2016 - IV495 - April 2016 -

Publication date: Tuesday 12 April 2016

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A new round of mass protests is shaking France under the slogan "Nuit Debout" (Rise Up at Night). The nightly demonstrations, similar in some ways to the Indignado protests in Spain in 2011 and the Occupy movement in the U.S., follow several massive mobilizations to protest the government's plan to rewrite the country's labor laws.

This change in the political climate comes after a whole period when momentum was with the right. The left and unions have been on the defensive in recent years as the Socialist Party government, led by President François Hollande, has adopted neoliberal policies that exacerbated economic stagnation. Unemployment has remained above 9 percent since 2009—in January, it stood at 10.2 percent. Following the Charlie Hebdo killings and the November terrorist attacks in Paris, mainstream parties, from the ruling Socialists to the far-right National Front party, have whipped up a wave of anti-immigrant racism and Islamophobia, leading to unprecedented levels of vigilante violence and police sweeps, all under the guise of a virtually permanent state of emergency. Most worrying of all, the National Front won more than 27 percent of the total vote in regional elections in November, taking in 6.8 million votes.

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ON MARCH 31, 1 million people took to the streets to demonstrate their opposition to a new labor reform law proposed by French President François Hollande of the ruling Socialist Party. Previously, on March 9, around 500,000 people protested in more than 250 towns and cities across the country. This represents a national popular mobilization comprised of youth, retirees, workers, high school and university students, truck drivers and more. The most important feature is the emergence of a new generation participating not only in school and campus protests and strikes, but also in workplace and union actions.

Make no mistake, even if the movement expresses itself differently in each country, there is a commonality between the millions of young people who occupied the centers of Spain's biggest cities under the banner of the Indignados, those participating in the new left-wing Podemos party, and the youth who took part in the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States. This new round of youth radicalization was also expressed in the anti-climate change protests [which had to defy governmental bans imposed in the wake of the November terrorist attacks] at the international COP 21 conference in Paris last December.

What unites and brings together all of these struggles is that they constitute the first rejection of the government's labor reform law, which represents a threat on the scale of an "atomic bomb" to a wide range of rights and social gains. The governmental left is daring to carry out what the most reactionary right never had the nerve to try: Namely, the destruction of the Labor Code's laws, decrees, regulations won over the course of dozens of struggles and social conflicts to protect workers from capitalist exploitation.

Until now, the provisions of the Labor Code have taken precedence over corporate agreements, individual employment contracts, waivers and even the new Labor Law—sometimes called El Khomri's Law after the Socialist Party Minister of Labor, Myriam El Khomri. The proposed changes would reverse the hierarchy of social norms, subordinating social rights to the "proper functioning of the company."

Thus, based on the bosses' goodwill and blackmailed by unemployment, local agreements between management

and workers will set the length of the workday, wages and layoffs without reference to some existing regulations. The end of the 35-hour workweek will force employees to work longer for less. And if profits fall, the boss can increase hours while holding wages down over the course of a year. In other words, the new reform means making every aspect of work precarious. Taking all this into account, the powerful reactions of the labor movement and youth are easy to understand.

The government should take heed when polls show that 70 per cent of the French population opposes the bill, and a petition on social media has already gathered more than 1.2 million signatures. Since then, the movement has taken off because people are not only angry about the labor reform, but are also rising up against the long-term impact of the capitalist crisis: the explosion of inequality, social injustice, austerity policies, basing economic life on capitalist profitability and competition, and production's blind destruction of the environment.

These socioeconomic grievances have merged with demands in defense of democracy and against a now-failed constitutional amendment proposed by Hollande that threatened to strip citizenship from those accused of terrorism — a proposal that would only serve to stigmatize a whole section of the immigrant population. More austerity, discrimination and racism — enough is enough. The dam is breaking, and the people are in the streets!

Nuit Debout!

And new forms of struggles are being developed, such as occupations of symbolic locations after big protests. Thousands of youth are taking part in an initiative called "Rise Up at Night" ("Nuit debout" in French) in the Place de la République — the central square in Paris. In response to a call launched by a collective of journalists, intellectuals and activists, thousands of people without any union or political affiliation have joined in, occupying the squares and discussing politics for many hours. Now these thousands of youth have decided to keep going.

All in all, this movement may take on a new dimension as it is embedded in a new conjunction of social and political crisis. This movement of the youth and the labor movement comes at a time when Hollande and the government are as weak as they have ever been. Hollande was forced to retreat and cancel his proposed constitutional amendment regarding citizenship. But suddenly, for thousands of young people and workers, this retreat may lead to demands for more instead of demobilization.

In effect, this is developing into a showdown between the government and the youth, workers and unions who reject the bill. For its part, the government has succeeded in partially dividing labor by securing the support of the CFTD (the French Confederation of Democratic Labor). But a majority of the trade unions — the CGT (General Confederation of Workers), FO (Workers Force), FSU (United Union Federation) and Solidaires (or SUD — United Democratic Solidarity) — continues to demand the withdrawal of the labor reform law, emboldened by widespread support among workers. In the meantime, parliamentary debate on the bill will go on until June, and some sort of legislative "accident" cannot be excluded whereby the government fails to even support its own proposal, thus opening up a national political crisis.

More protests are scheduled for the coming weeks. This movement is going to continue, deepen and harden, raising the potential for a showdown with the government. It poses the question of how to articulate the links between a generalized movement that mobilizes the majority of the population with these new forms of struggle — in particular, the occupation of public places and specific areas, and blockades that disrupt business as usual. How can united trade union action and forms of self-organization of the youth and workers be combined? How can we restore the strength and credibility, not only of the national strike days, but also put forward a perspective for prolonged strikes if the government does not withdraw the draft labor reform? These are the questions we must now face.

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Translated by Todd Chrétien for socialistworker.org. Published in French on the [NPA site](#) on 5 April 2016.