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France

From April to June, prolonged turbulence all the way

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Since March 22nd, the country has entered a prolonged phase of strikes, mobilizations and clashes with the government.

The mainstay of this movement is the mobilization of railway workers. The four main SNCF unions (CGT, SUD, CFDT and UNSA) started a series of strike days since April 3rd (following a rhythm of two days on strike every five days).

The heart of the conflict is still Macron's determination to strike a fatal blow against the public rail service, in advance of the attacks organized by the deregulation coming from the European Union. The announced purpose is transforming the status of the enterprise (from an EPIC, a public, state-owned enterprise, to a public limited company), the opening up all the lines to competition and the disengagement of the SNCF from at least 9,000 km of so-called secondary lines, said to be unprofitable (more than a quarter of the network) which would become the full responsibility of the regions.

To justify his reactionary and ultraliberal reform, Macron has for two months been taking as a pretext the large debt of the SNCF, nearly 55 billion euros, and has attributed responsibility for this debt to the railway workers and their status. The mobilization has provided the opportunity to make one thing clear. This debt has nothing to do with the status of railway workers, but is the result of the large-scale investments imposed by the state since the 1980s for the infrastructure of the TGV (High Speed Train) network. Instead of the state taking responsibility for these investments, as is the case with the road network, it was the SNCF that had to do so. Moreover, the government will be obliged in any case to pay off a significant portion of this debt.

Even moderate unions like the CFDT and the UNSA are part of this strong strike movement, proof of the great determination of the railway workers to refuse this reform, of the serious consequences it would have for both SNCF personnel and passengers and of the refusal of negotiation by a government that had until then been sure of being able to strike a blow without encountering a serious reaction. What is at stake is obviously political for Macron, who wants to be able to notch up a total victory, in the style of Thatcher, against the most organized sector of the trade union movement, which has been at the heart of all the main strikes of the last two decades.

There are also important things at stake with regard to the social movement, because, over and above the confrontation with the personnel of the SNCF concerning their status, which protects them from precariousness, the proposed reform is symbolic of the world that Macron and the capitalists, whose political representative he is, want to build. To liquidate the public sector of rail transport is to liquidate one of the main common goods available to the working classes. The French rail network has already been damaged by previous governments, which liquidated thousands of kilometres of lines. The goal with this reform and with privatization is to achieve the same result as in rail freight. Open to competition since 2003, fifteen years later rail freight only represents 10 per cent of freight traffic, with an explosive growth of road freight. Macron's path is obvious, with the closing of thousands of kilometres of lines, a transfer to buses and the use of private cars, as well as an increase in fares. All this to the detriment of the working classes, rural areas and outlying municipalities around major cities. With an automatic growth of air pollution, since 95 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions come from road transport.

Paradoxically, as noted by the very liberal Boston Consulting Group in 2015 in a comparative study of European railways, the French rail system was on the podium, ranked third behind the Swiss and Swedish railways (three public service networks...) according to three criteria: intensity of use, security and quality of services. Also taken into account were punctuality and the quality/price ratio. The very criteria that lead British passengers to demand renationalization of the rail system.

French passengers have also been able to test directly the consequences of changes in the status of public companies, such as Gaz de France and Electricité de France, which have been broken up and partially privatized since 2005: a 30 per cent increase in electricity bills and an 80 per cent increase for gas bills. Similarly for La Poste: out of a total of 14,000 local post offices, 5,000 have been closed down since 2005, once again a radical attack on a public utility of primary use.

Around the SNCF battle, what is at stake is the existence, defence and improvement of basic public services, to be managed not as units of commercial profitability but according to the social needs of the working classes.

What is at stake in the coming weeks remains to bring about a change in the social climate, opening up a crisis that brings the Macron government to its knees

Since March 22nd, alongside the railway workers, other sectors have begun to move: March 22nd and April 3rd were the first dates of convergence: March 22nd, which was a strike day of seven federations of the Civil Service; April 3rd, the first day of the SNCF strike. That day the CGT federations of energy and rubbish collectors also launched a strike call for "a national public service".

These dates of convergence were not organized by the trade union confederations because recent days have not changed the trade union landscape. The most moderate confederal leaderships, the CGC and the CFTC are absent from the movement; the CFDT refuses any globalization of strikes, as does Force Ouvrière.

At the national level only the FSU and Solidaires joined the CGT for another day of cross-sectoral strikes on April 19th. But parallel to this, in many cities, April 14th, for example in Marseille and Rouen, will be the occasion for demonstrations by different sectors with the support of several political organizations, around the railway workers and the defence of public services. Many collectives are being created in towns and cities. Similarly, in a sign of growing popular support, the launching by intellectuals on the internet of a "kitty" of support for railway workers had collected by Wednesday, April 11th more than 700,000 euros; the four railway unions have created an inter-union structure to manage this fund.

So what we are seeing is the building of a social and political mobilization, a mobilization that unifies and broadens from below, not without difficulty.

The union and sectoral divisions make convergences hard to achieve. In the coming days and weeks, the path will be strewn with various dates of union mobilizations: besides May 1st, on May 15th there will be a day of struggle by the "white tide" of hospital workers, on May 22nd a new one-day of strike of the seven Civil Service unions, on June 14th, an inter-union demonstration by pensioners.

Apart from this list, several important phenomena have to be taken into account

Air France personnel have been taking successive strike days since the end of February in parallel with the movement at the SNCF. This is an emblematic strike for wages, with the demand for a six per cent general wage increase. As with many large companies, Air France management has for several years sought to reduce the wage bill, by the suppression of jobs and the blocking of wages: zero per cent increase for six years, while inflation has been six per cent; the loss of 10,000 jobs between 2010 and 2016, and a cut in the wage bill of 600 million euros, which represents a decrease of 11.5 per cent... During this same period, the airline business grew by eight per cent,

and the salaries of the thirteen top managers of the Air France group increased by 29 per cent (507,692 euros on average). These wage demands are part of many other strikes that receive less attention from the media. To prevent the consolidation of a climate of strikes in transport, the government has undoubtedly asked the Air France management to negotiate... But for the moment, it has no serious proposal to put on the table.

The most important phenomenon is the generalization of a strike movement and of blockading in universities. In the week of April 8th-15th, 30 universities (almost one in two) were blockaded or occupied. The question of selection for entry into university with the ORE (Student Success Orientation) project is at the heart of the movement. Once again, faced with the lack of resources and of access to university, the choice is simply to remove this access: 87,000 students did not find a place in 2016 (25 per cent of new entrants). With the project, this elimination will be individualized and the first affected will be young people from working-class areas, excluded from long courses. The movement has developed in recent weeks. It received support from an appeal by 400 university professors against this class-based reform. To avoid, there too, the extension of the social protest to university and school students, the first salvo came from far-right groups who tried unsuccessfully to attack several occupations. Taking as a pretext the violence of these strike-breakers, the Minister of the Interior, the former Socialist Gerard Collomb, launched the CRS riot police against occupations, seeking to extinguish the extension of the movement with very violent interventions, many arrests and students charge with violence against the police... In many cities, the junction took place between students and railway workers and other sectors in struggle.

Finally, the last point of crystallization is that of Notre Dame des Landes. After having preferred to get rid of a useless project to build a new airport, which had led to a very broad mobilization against it, the government did not want to give the image of too many concessions against the zadistes [1]. So, while the administration of the department was negotiating with the protagonists of the ZAD on the future of occupations and farms, Gerard Collomb wanted to conduct a spectacular police operation right in the middle of the social movement. This week, between the 8th and 13th April, 2,500 gendarmes attacked the zadistes very violently. The goal was to "restore order", to show the police face of this government, just as in the universities. Even if the government wanted to prevent the violence from causing the death of a zadiste (as was the case with the death of Rémy Fraisse at the site of the Sivens dam project in 2014), the extreme violence used left many people injured. Instead of isolating the most combative sectors of the zadistes, the police violence welded the movement as a whole, especially after the destruction by the CRS of the "sheepfold of a hundred names", a collective farm that had been operating for five years on the site.

To sum up, Macron is cultivating his right flank. He is seeing his popularity on the left seep away, among an electorate that saw in him just a prolongation of Hollande's social liberalism, and elected him as a barrier against Marine Le Pen. In a sign of the times, what remains of the Socialist Party is now positioned in opposition to Macron, disavowing his principal political decisions. Similarly, former President Hollande is seeking to have a new and virtuous image by taking all possible distance from his former protégé.

Macron is therefore seeking to clearly restabilize himself as a right-wing president, seeking to regain popularity in rural and conservative areas. He made a point this week of flattering the Catholic episcopate, saying that he wants to repair the damaged link between the Church and the State. In the wake of this, he has announced the reduction from 400 to 200 euros of the hunting licence and the extension of hunting periods.

What is at stake in the days to come remains the same. To develop the struggles and for the political climate to change in favour of the railway workers and the strikes. This is the work that tens of thousands of activists do every day. Nothing is won, but nothing is lost and this convergence will come essentially from below, through militant determination, by building bridges between sectors on strike and their supporters, between students, railway workers, Post Office workers, hospital workers... Even the magistrates are mobilizing at present against the reform projects of Macron.

For the movement to develop, all initiatives are good. Thus, after the approach launched on the left by Olivier Besancenot and the resulting unitary appeal, François Ruffin, an MP from France Insoumise, has launched a call for

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a national event, to "hold a party for Macron" on May 5th for the first anniversary of his presidency.

In any case, it is urgent to make emerge an anti-capitalist political pole that puts forward not only the centralization of struggles, the march towards the general strike that is necessary, but also defends a social project that opposes Macron and his world, a project of solidarity, redistribution of wealth, common goods, public goods, managed and conceived in the interest of the working classes.

April 13th, 2018

[1] During the mobilisation against the airport many protestors installed themselves on the terrain in a "zone of development", ZAD. Hence the adjective "zadistes" to describe them.