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France

# Nuit Debout: let the gems sparkle.....

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**The movement of occupation of squares in France is [over] two weeks old. [1]** Its evolution is difficult to predict, because it is open to many unforeseen events, even though its roots are deep.

At this point in time, there is no way of knowing whether the emblematic occupation of the Place de la République in Paris will really be able to continue, nor in what form it might do so.

It is characteristic of movements which contest the dominant order not to have a linear trajectory. On the one hand because even the steps forward that they take confront them with new challenges, new goals, new questions. After two weeks of occupation the movement is thus faced with questions of strategy concerning its attitude to repression, its relationship with movements in struggle, the need for its extension...

On the other hand, because the first effect of surprise has passed, the dominant order is reorganizing. So the government is openly seeking to take back possession of the Place de la République. All the mainstream parties, from the Socialist Party (PS) to the National Front (FN) now demand that the police clear the square.

But the unforeseen is also the result of much deeper reasons, related to the government crisis and the nature of this movement, of which Nuit Debout ("Stay up all night") is one of the forms of expression that are developing widely outside traditional frameworks.

## A movement that does not come from nowhere

Nuit Debout is the result of several dynamics: widespread anger, the more or less subterranean development of different struggles, the emergence of a general struggle against an anti-social law (the El Khomri law, from the name of the Minister of Labour, also called the "labour law ") and the initiative to occupy the Place de la République on the evening of March 31, taken outside traditional frameworks.

To understand this is not to act as an archivist of the movement. It enables us to anticipate the depth of the movement and its capacity to react, and it gives us some idea of how it will develop in the future.

The widespread anger against the system and the government has been expressed for months in different ways: disaffection from the government, disaffection from all the mainstream parties. This anger is not necessarily progressive, when it is expressed by the vote for the far right. But it is not unequivocal. It was also expressed by the popularity of Air France workers molesting the director of human resources (by tearing his shirt) last autumn or by the success of a petition to support the Goodyear trade unionists who were sentenced to jail terms.

And over the past year struggles have increased, local and isolated, in the workplaces, a sign of renewed combativeness after years of retreat since the failure of the last great social movement in September 2010. It is in these experiences that combativeness and confidence are being rebuilt and the need for a broad-based movement is being felt.

And then, the last few months have been marked by specific struggles, a movement of solidarity with migrants and resistance of occupied places against the grand projects of the government, especially against the airport project in

Notre-Dame-des-Landes. It is not irrelevant to note that in the weeks before the start of the movement against the El Khomri law there were two notable events. One in Calais, for the opening of borders, had a national echo, even though it was not massive. The other, in Notre-Dame-des-Landes, brought together tens of thousands of demonstrators in support, significantly, of the occupation of the land by peasants and activists.

To this there must be added, after the stunning effect of the attacks of 13 November, the beginning of a counterattack against the draconian policing measures taken by the government.

It is in this context that the government decided to attack workers even harder, with a law dismantling even further the labour code.

## A fightback launched outside traditional frameworks

The fightback against this law was launched outside traditional frameworks, while the union leaderships were ready, once again, to retreat. At the start of it a petition demanding the total withdrawal of the law was launched on social networks, and gathered more than a million signatures. Youth organizations then called, on the same basis (the withdrawal of the law) to make March 9 a day of general mobilization. The wide support for a fightback forced the unions to join in and to call for a national day of strikes and demonstrations on Thursday, March 31. But it is among youth in high schools and universities that the movement finds its driving force, with regular days of demonstrations and blockades.

On February 23 there was held in Paris a meeting of convergence of struggles around a newspaper, *Fakir*, which was independent but associated with the radical left, economists (including Frédéric Lordon) and casually employed actors and musicians. Around this time the film *Merci Patron* ("Thanks, Boss"), supported by the same people, was playing to full houses. The meeting in Paris took place at the "Labour Exchange" (a building belonging to the trade unions in central Paris, near the Place de la République). It was held in a room that was so packed out that people had to be turned away! Following this success the initiators called a meeting for those who wanted to do practical work. They expected about fifty people, but more than 200 turned up. At that meeting the idea was launched that on March 31, after the event, "we don't go home!" Gradually the idea of occupying a square at the end of the demonstration took root. The result was Nuit Debout and the occupation of the Place de la République.

## Nuit Debout takes off!

More than a million people demonstrated on March 31 throughout France. Despite the rain hundreds of demonstrators came to the Place de la République. An association for defence of the homeless, Droit au logement (DAL, "Right to Housing"), supported the call and decided to stay on the square for several days with its tent, at least until the demonstration that it was organizing the following Saturday. And in the wake of Thursday March 31, the occupation really took off, with more and more people every day. Meetings were held with thousands of people on Saturday and Sunday. Commissions were set up, there were debates where people were free to speak. The Place de la République hit the headlines.

On the Sunday, the initiators decided to call only for a full occupation of the square on the following Tuesday and Saturday, which were days of demonstrations. At night it was really difficult to hold out with only a few dozen diehards, after public transport closed down at 2am. They thought that it would be more difficult during the week when people had to go to work the next day.

But from the afternoon of Monday April 4, hundreds of people gathered again in the square and over a thousand held an assembly that evening. A demonstration, decided on the spot in the afternoon, even started off from the square to protest against a conference being held by Prime Minister Manuel Valls nearby. Delegations arrived at the demonstration, of refugees, casual and precarious workers...

The square held firm. On the Tuesday, at the end of the demonstration, thousands took part in the popular assembly. From then on that would happen every night.

And from that first week a qualitative leap was taken that would intensify in the course of the second week. Many commissions were organized for different purposes (to write a manifesto, to set up logistical support, to "organize" democracy, to set up actions, an infirmary, a kitchen ...). Gradually there followed a radio, a television, a garden (!). Every morning the police evacuated the square. Every afternoon, with incredible ingenuity, a village was reborn, made up of tents, canvas covers and wooden pallets, and thousands of people took part for hours in a popular assembly. In parallel, thematic meetings were held and associations, publishing houses and alternative bookshops set up their stands. Those with impaired hearing held assemblies in sign language, open-air popular universities were organized, there were activities for children, poster workshops, legal training, etc.

But above all, on this square, the movement began to avoid potential dead-ends, to avoid being disconnected from the movement against the labour law. It established links with the movement that serves to fuel it. Contacts were established with places where there were struggles underway, with university and high school students, of course, but also with railway workers, postal workers, etc. Broadcasts were organized from the square to the workplaces to mobilize for the demonstration against the labour law that was scheduled for April 9. On top of that, many actions were organized in the framework of the convergence of struggles, actions which set off from the square, in support of casually employed actors and musicians, in solidarity with the refugees, expeditions to repaint the facade of banks or to occupy branches of the Société générale bank, demonstrations of the homeless, etc...

And to cap it all, there developed the practice of spontaneous demonstrations every evening, especially during the night, marching to police stations to get arrested demonstrators released, actions to dismantle the grids that prevent refugees from settle in certain places or, simply going to have "a drink at Valls's place". Whereas the government wanted to ban protests from having any space for action with the proclamation of a state of emergency, the movement reoccupied this space and used it with jubilation.

And the movement spread, with the organization of Nuit Debout and attempts to occupy squares in several other cities especially after the April 9 demonstration. To varying degrees, sixty cities are involved.

## Relations with the police

These successes, and the growing repression against the movement (and also, sometimes, fatigue) are now confronting Nuit Debout with several immediate questions concerning its future, which are also strategic issues: those of its extension, of its relationship with the movement and that of its relations with the police and its attitude towards violence.

The government is trying in various ways to put an end to the occupation of squares, and in particular that of the Place de la République, which plays an emblematic role. The media attacks multiply on the theme: this is a place of disorder, where violence is being organized.

The police are trying gradually, a little bit more each day, to regain control of the square. The demonstrations, especially those of youth and the spontaneous demonstrations, are attacked by the police in an increasingly violent way.

Two responses have emerged within the movement.

The first says that we must protest on principled bases, calls for an end to violence and proposes, in various forms, to appeal to the police to join us. This response risks disarming the movement against repression. We must not forget that in the recent (regional) elections National Front won over 50 per cent of the vote in the police and the army: its result was as high as 70 per cent among police who are actively engaged. The police and the army are at the heart of state power and their direct violence is the practical expression of the violence of the domination of the ruling class. Without a strategy of confrontation with the police, the movement will have to give up its gains, and in the first place the squares that it occupies.

Moreover, spreading the idea that there could be a possible alliance with the police would become an obstacle to the necessary extension of the movement to popular neighborhoods, to migrants, refugees and undocumented workers, to radical trade unionists, all of whom are directly and very concretely affected by police violence.

The second response is that of direct confrontation with the police. This response, coming from various sectors, often called 'autonomous', advocates systematic and violent confrontation with the police, and even seeks to provoke it. An expression of a general radicalization, especially among youth, it is attracting more and more young people within the demonstrations and gets wider and wider, although passive, support. This strategy makes the heart of the state the essential target and tends to deny all the mediations by which a majority of society is drawn into a general confrontation with the ruling class and its state. To organize a systematic confrontation with the police, everywhere, can lead to marginalizing a minority that becomes much easier to suppress and to intimidating the rest of the movement.

But, and this is characteristic of the movement, the ideas and strategies that are dominant are very fluid. An anecdote illustrates this. On Monday, while the popular assembly was discussing in particular these kinds of questions, riot police tried to stop a logistics van from entering the square. Soon, hundreds came together to repel the police, who had to retreat outside the square under the pressure of numbers and determination. Among those who were screaming "Everyone hates the police" and pushing them back, some had argued, a few hours earlier, that we should say "the police with us"!

## The question of extension

The second question that immediately comes up is not unconnected with the first. Weakening the ability of the police to directly repress the movement involves its extension, spreading out geographically as well as 'socially' and politically.

Geographic extension involves the proliferation of places where Nuit Debout intervenes. Nuit Debout events are being launched in different cities. Unlike the Place de la République, the initiative seems much more to come this time from organized activists, and in particular from members of the (more or less) radical left, in the broad sense of the term. The future of these initiatives will depend on the ability of these activists to let themselves be outnumbered and not to "channel" the expression of anger.

Social expansion means the development of Nuit Debout among working-class layers and neighbourhoods, which involves the themes and demands that are addressed as much as the place where the movement develops. This preoccupation is present in particular in the Place de la République in Paris, and this is very positive. But it can only be achieved by breaking with any form of paternalism. The neighbourhoods are not "mission lands" for activists, places without politics. The connection with Nuit Debout can only be made through the driving force of those who themselves live in these neighbourhoods and through the networks that exist there. The question is posed in similar terms regarding solidarity with undocumented migrants and refugees.

Lastly, political extension implies the refusal of any "institutionalization" of Nuit Debout and of its objectives. The idea of a new "constitution" to be written, initially launched by Frédéric Lordon, was quickly taken up in the assemblies. The attractive aspect of this approach is the radicalism that underlies it. There is nothing more to be gained from existing institutional frameworks, it is a matter of rebuilding a real democratic legitimacy "from below". But the risks are also great of a new formalism, forgetting that the rules of a new world cannot be written by a minority but suppose the insurrection of the majority. Hence the necessity of political extension to the questions raised in the neighbourhoods, of antiracism, internationalism, struggles against sexism and LGBT-phobia, etc. Hence the need for questions around the role of work, vector of alienation, but also potentially collective place of struggle and social power.

## The relationship with the movement

The dynamic of Nuit Debout is closely dependent on the movement of struggle, and very directly on the fight against the labour law. This is its principal and essential fuel. Outside the dynamics of movement, enlargement, collective experiences and radicalization, the Nuit Debout phenomenon is in danger of going round in circles, getting lost in abstract debates and in minority dead-ends and/or falling back, for lack of strength and experience, into forms of institutionalization. The risk is there. More than ever the future of Nuit Debout lies in its ability to link up with the fight against the labour law, to contribute to building a general strike.

Some people are already talking of the movement running out of steam and predicting failure, after the demonstrations of April 9 were between five and two times smaller than those of March 31, while high schools and universities are closed for the school holidays.

But these analyses themselves suffer from the lack of a dialectic between the movement and Nuit Debout. It is significant that it is in Paris, where Nuit Debout is the most rooted, that the demonstration against the labour law on April 9 had not significantly weakened since March 31.

On the one hand because Nuit Debout is beginning potentially to represent an alternative "leadership" to the union leaderships, who recoil at the prospect of a movement that is beginning to escape them and of a total confrontation with the government. After April 9, the union leaders called for a mobilization ... on April 28. The leadership of the CGT rail workers' union, considered to be "left", is now betraying the movement, counterposing to it a different corporate agenda. The student union UNEF, which up to now has played a leading role, no longer calls for intermediate days of mobilization dates and welcomes the concessions won from the government.

On the other hand because the movement against the labour law crystallizes an anger that is much broader than just resistance to the attacks on the Labour Code and any attempt to limit this movement to the sole objective of the withdrawal of the law and to channel it will curb its potential and its fighting spirit. If Nuit Debout is dependent on the movement of struggle against the El Khomri law, this movement is dependent on the expression of a global revolt that Nuit Debout crystallizes.

The movement started outside the usual frameworks. Nuit Debout has considerably expanded the possible scope of this "outside the frameworks". Provided that it can link up even more with the most militant sectors in the unions and among high school and university students, it could contribute to a new step forward in the fight against the labour law, to a strike that would then become a political strike.

## The future is not written

While this movement moves forward and asks itself questions, the dominant trajectories of state power continue to operate in the direction of strengthening the police state, in the sense of racism and nationalism, in the sense of social attacks. The monsters are not lurking in the shadows, they are quite definitely out there. One of their forms is the far right. This is also why the trajectory of the movement necessarily puts it in radical confrontation with the policies of the ruling class and with the state.

Once again, this confrontation will not progress in a linear fashion. The movement will no doubt experience partial setbacks and seem to be ebbing. No doubt it will change its form more than once. It will sometimes have to know how to let itself be engulfed by massive and spontaneous forward rushes, even banging against a wall in order to learn how to demolish it or jump over it. Sometimes it will depend on initiatives taken by a minority, but which make sense for larger numbers.

What is certain is that after years of apparent listlessness and of the progression of all the reactionary tendencies in French society, something has changed that makes hope rise again. Gems buried in the hardened lava of the last movement have returned to the surface with the lava, reddened and brighter still.

The coming times will be no less hard. But now we are no longer condemned to lie back and endure them.

*Tuesday, April 12, 2016*

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[1] The Place de la République was occupied on the evening of the 31st March, after the major demonstration against the new labour law. See [March 31: a new step towards a general mobilization against the labour law](#).