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France

The bright and sombre sides of the mobilization

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From 22 March to 26 May, there have been two months of strikes, demonstrations, blockades in the universities and high schools, clashes and police violence. And everything indicates that the coming weeks will see this situation of political and social tension prolonged, but without a centralized confrontation with the plans of the Macron government taking shape.

The starting point for all the mobilizations comes from frontal attacks by the government on young people and workers. [1] During these two months, the fightback has come mainly from the mobilization of two sectors: railway workers and student and high school youth.

The railway workers of SNCF, and in particular train staff, mechanics and signal operators, are massively mobilized against the transformation of the SNCF into a private company, the accelerated opening up to competition and the end of hiring workers who will enjoy the statute of conditions of the existing personnel. The four main unions of the SNCF (CFDT, CGT, SUD and UNSA), with the support of FO, despite the reluctance of SUD Rail, dictated a 2/5 rhythm of strike day, that is to say, two days on strike out of every five days. Starting on 3 April, 36 strike days have been scheduled, up to 28 June.

Alongside the SNCF, only the Air France unions started a parallel process of strike days during the month of April, to demand wage increases, catching up on the 6 per cent lost since 2012 by management blocking wages.

In Air France, moreover, there was an event that served to reveal the social and political situation of the country. The management of the group had noted that in April, few employees had participated in strike days that followed one another closely, decided on by a very broad inter-union committee (involving ground and airborne staff) and all the unions except the CFDT and the CGC – the executives' union). Management hastily concluded that the inter-union committee did not have the support of the workers and became intoxicated by its own propaganda, decrying an "ultra-minority pilots' strike". After proposing a smokescreen agreement that ignored wage increases and offered only crumbs, the CEO then launched, in mid-April, the adventurous plan of a referendum/plebiscite, asking workers to support his proposals and saying he would resign if they were rejected. The result was not long in coming. Despite the use of all possible means of propaganda, within the company and in the media, the result was absolutely clear: with more than 80 per cent of Air France staff participating, the management proposals were rejected by a majority of more than 55 per cent. Janaillac, CEO of the Air France / KLM Group, therefore found himself sacked by his employees. Two years after the episode of "the torn off shirt" where two directors of Air France had to flee from a crowd of angry workers, this new example of impertinence and lack of submission to the employer's authority was denounced by the government and the media, indignant that workers could be able to show their boss the door.

This example is illustrative of the climate in the country. Although there was no broadening of the strike movement during the months of April and May, the political and social climate is one of rejection of the government's antisocial policy.

The government has changed its tone

This has led Macron and his Prime Minister to change tactics. At first, the government, faced with the strike of the railway workers, played the card of direct confrontation with the unions, with anti-strike agitation by the media exacerbating the anger of passengers stranded in the stations. But even though the strike movement has not

broadened, a good many workers have maintained their sympathy with the strikers and the strike itself has held out, even forcing the CFDT and the UNSA to remain in the inter-union committee.

At the same time, the government's fear that the conflict would extend beyond the railway workers has not materialized in recent weeks. So rather than itself provoking a conflagration by confronting railway workers, the government preferred to play the card of the open door with regard to the SNCF unions, with the Prime Minister, Edouard Philippe, directly taking part in a formal dialogue that he had ruled out a few weeks earlier to show his firmness. Nothing fundamental was conceded regarding the reform liquidating the SNCF as a public enterprise, but he still had to give the union leaders "something to chew on" to facilitate a smooth exit from the strikes at the end of June: a commitment that the state would take on 35 billion euros of the debt of the SNCF, and that the law would declare non-transferable the state's shares in the new companies governed by private law. Neither of these two announcements modifies the frontal attack: they do not even give the guarantee demanded by the unions of the negotiation of an industry-wide agreement fixing a minimum of rights for the employees of the new private companies operating in the sector. Worse, in April, Philippe confirmed the subsidiarity/privatization of rail freight. But all this simulacrum of social dialogue allows the union leaders to move the cursor, from the frontal refusal of the reform to negotiation at the margins of a few points of it.

This tactical change by the government is due on the one hand to the hostility encountered by the reforms, but also unfortunately to a strike tactic that has avoided the opening of a social crisis that could block the government.

The limits of the strike methods in the SNCF

The key argument of the trade union leaderships to get the 2/5 rhythm adopted was to make possible a long strike movement, lasting until the end of the parliamentary vote in June (while in practice the government's decision to make use of the mechanism of ordinances stifled any parliamentary debate).

This rhythm has maintained a high level of participation in the strikes, but it has also allowed management to adapt and has prevented a situation of blockage of train traffic for several days in a row and therefore the triggering of a frontal clash with the government. This tactic of the SNCF strike also left the other sectors to their own rhythm of action, without facilitating a ripple effect that might have been possible, particularly among national state employees.

This sector of 5.6 million workers (hospitals, education, public finances, administrative services...) is also subject to a frontal attack, slightly delayed in relation to the one that is being conducted at the SNCF, but which will result in the loss of 150,000 jobs, an attack on wages that is already underway, and a massive use of fixed-term employees. Strongly mobilized on 22 March, the lack of momentum was marked during the new inter-union strike day on 22 May 22, weaker than the massive day of action two months earlier, when railway workers participated in the demonstrations. The very broad union front of action of state employees is also due to unions like the CFDT and FO which, at the confederal level, have explicitly refused any logic of convergence of struggles, in particular between railway workers and state employees, who are nevertheless subjected to attacks of the same nature. Even though in no sector of the national state employees has there been a combative pressure to go beyond the calendar that has been fixed, the role of these confederations has not helped mobilize.

The rhythm of 2/5 has also deprived the general assemblies of railway workers of control of their movement. In previous movements, the continuation of the strike was voted by the general assemblies of strikers. In this case, with a fixed calendar, they have lost this initiative, making it very difficult since the beginning of April for the combative militants of SUD and the CGT to try to outflank the fixed schedule.

So the government has avoided a situation of an economic blockage of the country through blocking the means of transport, and the social movement has not been able to benefit from a point of fixation that would make it possible for other combative sectors to join in. Nevertheless, in the Paris Region, dozens of railway workers, and even a hundred or so in the last few days, have participated regularly in an inter-station general assembly, emanating from the general assemblies of strikers in the stations, and trying to overturn the trade-union calendar, which they have done again by proposing at the beginning of June actions outside the already fixed strike days.

To sum up, the strike is holding its own, and remains popular among other workers. Another element that bears witness to this climate of mobilization is the result of the referendum organized by the unions among all SNCF employees: 61 per cent participation and 94.97 per cent voting against the government project. Similarly, a strike fund quickly raised more than one million euros; this fund is being managed by the four railway unions.

The student movement

Although the government has avoided any direct confrontation with the railway workers, it has not been the same with the student and high-school youth. Since mid-April, in nearly half of the 75 universities, strikes, occupations and blockades have developed. This has resulted in general assemblies which in some cases have been bigger than during the movement against the CPE (First Job Contract) in 2006. The government had to withdraw this project of a precarious contract for young people in the face of the mobilization: 2,500 in Montpellier, 3,500 in Rennes 2, 2,000 in Toulouse-Mirail...

The present movement has been largely self-organized, but has had to face a lack of initiative from the main student union, UNEF, as well as the difficulty of creating a real national leadership of the movement.

Nevertheless, the movement has been massive up to recent weeks, with a third of the universities blocked or occupied during the months of April and May. This has resulted in the blocking of end-of-term examinations and their cancellation or postponement. This has occurred in a context of police violence, where the government and the Minister of the Interior, Gérard Collomb, have conducted very violent interventions, arrests, attacks on demonstrations with the use of anti-encircling grenades. Here again, the movement has been and is very widely popular among students facing ORE (Student Success Orientation) and Parcoursup, a new system of selection for entry to universities. The government itself recognizes that there are only 600,000 places available for students in September 2018, as against 800,000 applications. The system of sorting applications, implemented in recent weeks, reinforces social selection in regard to high school students in lower-income neighborhoods, and leaves hundreds of thousands of students without any reply to the university applications that they have made.

As the anger of young people continues, the government has made the choice of hitting hard and trying to scare them. After violent interventions in Nanterre and Toulouse, Gerard Collomb's forces went so far as to pursue, on 22 May, 128 students into a Parisian high school where they had organized a general assembly, arresting them and keeping them in custody overnight, without even notifying their families, although almost a third of them were under 18.

The same degree of violence was also employed on the Notre Dame des Landes site, where the government does not want its retreat to be interpreted as a victory and as a springboard for militant movements against useless projects, for social ecology and for the defence of the environment, opposing the projects of major industrial groups. In violently driving hundreds of Zadists out of the occupied areas, with deliberate police violence, the government has also used explosive tear gas canisters, causing serious injuries to a young man who lost a hand as a result of the explosion of one of them. [2].

The political question is always that of the political and social relationship of forces against the government.

The new element: a common social and political front

To try to build this relationship of forces, ATTAC and the Copernic Foundation took the initiative to build a common political and social front which resulted in an important mobilization on 26 May. The "Fête à Macron", a Parisian demonstration on 5 May, was already the result of a convergence of political forces and associations to the left of the Socialist Party, from Alternative Libertaire to the party of Benoît Hamon, including the NPA and France Insoumise. The organizers counted 100,000 demonstrators. On 26 May 200 demonstrations took place all over France, mobilizing 250,000 people, this time with the participation of the CGT, Solidaires, the FSU and a broad common front of associations and political forces.

This was absolutely the first time that such a front had been created, and it received the hate-filled tribute of much of the media, which saw there "a dangerous drift of the CGT", "Martinez (the leader of the CGT) being led astray by Jean-Luc Mélenchon"...

The reality is different, in a change in the political situation compared to last autumn, when Macron seemed to assert himself without any social mobilization, having in front of him only Mélenchon, shouting in a desert.

Today, it is a front of mobilization that is being built, with all the difficulties that come with it: few forces really want to engage a test of strength, by mobilization in the streets and strikes against the government. But in different sectors and across sectors, the climate has changed, there too. Thousands of activists have raised the temperature of the social climate, with many convergences that the government would often like to erase through violence. These convergences also outline alternative responses on many social questions.

On this point, it is very important that the Committee for Truth and Justice for Adama was present in the front ranks of the Paris demonstration on 26 May. Adama Traoré was a young man from Creil who died in July 2016 in the courtyard of the Paris gendarmerie in the Paris suburbs, suffocated while he was immobilized by three gendarmes. Since then his family and a broad committee have been fighting for justice and denouncing the violence of the police and gendarmerie in the neighbourhoods. The abuses of Gérard Collomb's police only reinforce the need for such action.

The popular neighbourhoods are the first target of the ultra-law-and-order policy of recent governments, including that of Philippe today, relying for this on the provisions of the state of emergency now written into law. The repressive forces have acquired a sense of impunity, reinforced by the many acquittals of their members when they are prosecuted by families of young victims of police violence. All the attacks carried out by the present government foresee sharp cuts in the social budgets of the state, of up to 60 billion euros, to comply with the budgetary provisions of the European Union. Linked to the suppression of jobs and reduced means for state employees, these measures directly affect lower-income neighbourhoods. It is therefore vital to create a social front that mobilizes together workers, young people and especially those who experience segregation and social discrimination on a daily basis in their neighbourhoods.

All these social and political elements mingle with the strengths and weaknesses of the social movement and anti-capitalist forces.

The bright and sombre sides of the mobilization

The social crisis is smouldering in a thousand places. In the present phase, the last few weeks have seen both dynamic and blocking forces. The policy of the union leaderships is one aspect that weakens the capabilities to respond, but it is not the only one. In France, the political and social forces that want to fight capitalism, and especially the activists of the NPA, are aware of the urgency of rebuilding, and in particular of building a militant fabric, local and national, carrying forward social demands and a project of emancipation that sweeps away the effluvia spread in recent years by reactionary forces, be they right-wing or social-liberal. Macron is the heir of these two forces. Faced by him, this fabric is being built less quickly than the level of reactionary attacks requires, but the last weeks show the way. The government and most media would like to continue with the picture of a left of resistance reduced to the declamatory monologue of Mélenchon. The last few weeks have drawn a completely different landscape, that of a collective, unitary and radical construction.

Nothing is written in advance for the coming days, but in any case, the battle will be long.

31 May 2018

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[1] See “[A window opens to fight Macron](#)”, “[From April to June, prolonged turbulence all the way](#)” ; “[Against Macron, organize the convergence between struggles](#)”.

[2] In 2008 the French government announced a plan to build a new airport on the territory of the commune of Notre Dame Des Landes near Nantes. Local opposition was reinforced by supporters from all over France, some of whom installed themselves on the territory. To the developers who wanted to build the airport, the territory was a Zone d'aménagement différé (Deferred Development Zone). To its occupants it was a Zone à défendre (Zone to be defended). Hence the term Zadist. The government finally abandoned the project in January 2018, but not its determination to clear out the Zadists.