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France

The mobilization is continuing, so is Macron's isolation

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Since 20 January, the movement for the withdrawal of the proposed Macron-Philippe pension counter-reform has entered its second act. Despite the fact that the last few days have seen the end of the SNCF and RATP strikes, the mobilization is far from over and the hundreds of thousands of demonstrators on 24 January made clear their determination to continue fighting for several more weeks.

In fact, the day of mobilization called by the inter-union for January 24 was the expression of an enormous mobilization with a net increase in participation in all cities: one and a half times more than on 16 January. Even if this was less than the two big demonstrations of last December, and despite the end of the all-out transport strikes, the atmosphere was one of joy, combativeness and strong determination everywhere. There was a strong presence in the demonstrations from the railway and education sectors; also from the rest of the civil service, the energy sector, the port and dock workers, culture... And many lawyers.

The government and its media followers would like to act as if the episode of challenge to its counter-reform was over. In the last few days the government and the employers have been cultivating the repression of employers and police against the leaders of the movement, and are raising their voices against the radical expressions of the movement. But neither the political climate nor the new information on the real content of his planned "reform" gives him the slightest serenity.

No minister, let alone Macron himself, has been able to take part in an inauguration or public demonstration without encountering popular hostility. Emmanuel Macron and his wife, themselves, had to flee from the Parisian theatre where they were attending a performance on 18 January: several dozen opponents of his reform had gathered in front of the theatre. Likewise, several offices of En Marche MPs have been tagged in recent weeks, as they were a year ago during the major mobilisations of the Yellow Jackets.

Hostility to the counter-reform is not waning, on the contrary, it is growing in public opinion. Several polls indicate that almost 2/3 of the population wants Macron's project to be withdrawn outright, and concern is growing about the consequences of the reform.

As new elements of the new system are revealed, this rejection grows. To put it plainly, Macron and his government have totally lost this political battle: their plan is now well known and totally unpopular.

This unpopularity, of course, concerns all those who, suffering unrecognized hardship at work, would have to continue for two or three more years to receive a pension of which they do not know the amount. The Minister of Labour Muriel Penicaud has clearly indicated that she is opposed to reinstating the hardship criteria removed by Macron in 2017 at the request of employers. These criteria granted (very selectively, by the way) early departures for handling heavy loads, awkward positions, exposure to mechanical vibrations, and exposure to dangerous chemical agents. This concerns industrial workers and technicians, health care personnel, construction workers, among others. In the last few days, the Minister of the Civil Service has clearly announced that, while granting derogations to law enforcement personnel, customs officers and firefighters, he is purely and simply abolishing the "active categories" present in the public services (allowing early departure up to now), such as sewage workers, who have a very high early mortality rate and a life expectancy 7 years lower than the average for workers (17 years lower than that of managers).

Everyone has something to lose. The disapproval is massive among lawyers, and is reflected in dozens of

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"discarding robes", a symbolic demonstration which the Minister of Justice herself experienced in Caen in early January. These demonstrations of the discarding of tools, garments and work symbols have multiplied on the part of hospital workers, labour inspectors and teachers. In many demonstrations, groups of women dressed as "Rosie the riveter" (the image of the American arms industry worker during the Second World War) organize flash mobs and sing a song taken over by the ATTAC association to denounce the planned cuts in women's pensions.

In a completely different vein, a frontal criticism of the project even comes from a source where one would least expect it, that of the army.

The Supreme Council of the Military Function, a very formal body for consultation with the Ministry, has just issued a categorical letter. While the soldiers and gendarmes seemed to be spared by the "universal" scheme, this Council simply states that it cannot give a favourable opinion on the project, "the introduction of a calculation rule based on the entire career and no longer on the last six months will inexorably lead to a reduction in pensions", up to 20% according to their calculations.

In a new slap in the face for the government, the *Conseil d'Etat*, the highest administrative law body, which must give an advisory opinion on any proposed law, has just issued a very negative opinion on the pensions bill. It criticizes head-on a bill "with dubious financial projections", and a subsequent recourse to dozens of as yet unwritten ordinances. But, on the substance, it indicates that the new system cannot claim "universality" and equality of treatment, since it provides for five different schemes (civil servants, magistrates, military, sailors, agricultural employees and farmers) and many rules of derogations in these five schemes. In addition, it throws two time bombs into the government's garden. The Council recalls that the law cannot provide for provisions to be adopted at a later date, in another law, concerning the increase of teachers' salaries and it also states that the draft cannot provide for subsidizing the Supplementary Pension Fund for Seafarers. These last two points undermine two pillars of the government's shaky scaffolding: those aimed at calming teachers and seagoing personnel.

In addition, the managers of the current collective supplementary pension system (ARRCO-AGIRC) have just calculated that the future scheme, with the cessation of contributions from high salaries (over 120,000 euros per year) will generate an imbalance of 3.7 billion euros per year for 15 years. It will indeed be necessary to continue to pay high pensions for retired executives, while active executives will have eliminated a whole part of their contributions.

So, politically, this government has not caught its breath, while wanting to settle very quickly an issue that was supposed to be a social triumph for it.

Another trap that it has set for itself is also fast approaching: that of the Conference on Financing, a manoeuvre found at the beginning of January to break its isolation and obtain the approval of the CFDT and the UNSA.

We are already facing a paradox: the government is facing a large-scale movement and is putting forward its willingness to negotiate... with the only two unions that are not involved in the mobilization! But the trap is going to close quickly since this conference will only be able to put the "pivotal age at 64" back in the frame, forcing retirement two years later, or lengthening the number of years worked necessary to retire (43 years today). Two Swords of Damocles hanging over employees retiring from 2022.

All in all, we are therefore a long way from the government's propaganda dressing up as a project of social justice and limited to the abolition of the "42 special schemes".

But this political isolation, this majority rejection of Macron's project, this mobilization of hundreds of thousands of

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workers and social movement activists has still not created the balance of forces sufficient to make Macron yield.

The lack of preparation for this battle in September is now being paid for in many professional sectors, contrary to what was the case at the SNCF and RATP.

Until recently, there was no widespread awareness of the disastrous consequences of this reform, including in the civil service or energy sectors, or in the major companies in the automobile, aeronautics or chemical industries, which could have a significant impact on the balance of forces.

Numerous port and energy sectors have entered into movement in recent days, but with a real gap in relation to the mobilization in the national railways and Paris region transport.

The challenge of the coming weeks is to maintain and deepen the political isolation of the government, through numerous spectacular actions, blockades, demonstrations, occupying the maximum political space; and to put forward in the most unitary way possible the indispensable solutions to put an end to lives of precariousness and low wages leading to miserable pensions. This is the work systematically carried out by tens of thousands of activists, the real political vanguard of this movement, present in the locally in the cross-sectoral general assemblies of strikers and union coordinating committees.

But everyone is also aware of the need to develop strikes in sectors, particularly in the public sector, which have not had borne the same burden of many strike days in recent weeks.

Concerning the strengthening of the mobilization and the balance of forces, Olivier Besancenot has made the proposal in recent days that the entire labour movement should agree to organize a national mobilization, a mass demonstration in Paris organized from all the cities of the country to impose the popular will to withdraw this counter-reform. This proposal will perhaps make its way.

25 January 2020

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