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France

# Valls doesn't see the end of the tunnel

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**The Valls government will not manage to stifle the rejection of the labour law before July 5, the date when it returns to the National Assembly for a final vote. Most likely he will not be able to avoid having recourse to article 49.3 [1], unless he really retreats on the content of the projected law.**

That is the conclusion that must be drawn by Socialist leaders on the evening of June 29, after the meeting of the government with trade union leaders from the CGT and FO.

However, over the last two weeks, everything has been done to reduce the movement to silence.

After the huge demonstration on June 14 in Paris, the government mounted a very strong campaign of propaganda in all the media to create the impression that the country was ablaze, that every demonstration was becoming a battlefield of civil war. In particular, the dozen broken windows of a children's hospital in Paris were used to support a media frenzy whose aim was to put pressure on union leaders to end the protests, and in particular the one planned for June 23. What was at stake was to break the movement by negating its main expression, the Paris demonstration. To this end, the government was trying to turn public opinion against the demonstrations by highlighting the state of exhaustion of the police, portrayed as heroes of the nation since the attacks in November 2015 and permanently placed on a war footing with the state of emergency, Euro 2016 and the social movement. Needless to say, according to Valls the only way to change the situation lay in the demonstrations, which by being stopped, would have relieved the CRS and the gendarmes.

In this logic, Valls wanted to force the trade unions to accept cancellation of the demonstration on June 23 and its replacement by a simple rally. Faced with the refusal of the Inter-union coordinating body, the Prime Minister thought he had the necessary relationship of forces to take a gamble and simply ban the Paris demonstration. The ban was announced on the morning of June 22, the day before the demonstration. In a top-level consultation, he imposed his views on Hollande against the advice of Cazeneuve, the Minister of the Interior.

The banning of a trade union demonstration is a rare occurrence in France. You have to go back to February 8, 1962 to find such a decision, when, during the Algerian War, the Prefect of Police of Paris, Maurice Papon, banned a demonstration of the left parties and trade unions for peace in Algeria. The attacks of the police against the protesters caused, that day, the death of eight people at the Charonne underground station in Paris.

The decision by Valls sparked a general outcry, from the trade unions and on the political level, going well beyond the radical left and ecologists. Even the CFDT protested against this decision, as did many leaders of the Socialist Party.

Olivier Besancenot was the first to announce in the media that he did not respect the ban, followed in less than an hour by representatives of the Left Party, the Communist Party, the representatives of the Inter-union coordination... and even several "dissidents" of the Socialist Party. Once again, since February, Manuel Valls had underestimated the strength of the movement, the strength of the rejection of the labour law, and he had greatly overestimated the relationship of forces that he had at his disposal. Very quickly, Hollande and Cazeneuve retreated, disavowed Valls and offered the Inter-union coordination a symbolic victory by lifting the ban and accepting a demonstration, even though it was only authorized to follow a route that was reduced to a minimum.

This episode reflects the contradictory aspects of the present situation: the movement has not the strength to block the government. There has not been, and there will not be in the coming days, a general strike capable of blocking the economy and imposing, through a direct relationship of forces, the withdrawal of the law. The activists mobilized in workplaces and localities and the activists of Nuit Debout were strong enough for that. But to succeed, it was necessary not to disperse the mobilization and that a leadership of the movement could build up a real confrontation over time. The union leaderships of the CGT and FO did not want this prolonged and offensive confrontation. Since March they have constantly accompanied the movement, without providing it with a leadership on the offensive. Workers in many sectors came out on strike over several days in March. But the movement has now exhausted its real forces mobilizing major professional sectors. If, despite this, we have reached the end of June maintaining a high level of confrontation, it is because tens of thousands of activists are still mobilized, imposing their radicalism on the trade union leaders and basing themselves on the profound discredit of Hollande, Valls, the Socialist Party and on a rejection of the labour law. The level of popularity of Holland is constantly falling (88 per cent of negative opinions in the latest poll released on June 30; Valls is on 80 per cent). Similarly, the possible use of article 49.3 is disavowed by 73 per cent of the public in another survey. That is why we have reached the end of June with continued protests and strikes in many private sector enterprises, in particular on the days of inter-union demonstrations. New strikes and demonstrations will take place on July 5 and many people are promising not to stop there, despite the summer holidays and the possible passage of the law.

These contradictions are still alive and, so to speak, the government only succeeds in wearing down the movement by wearing itself out.

The obstacle that Valls is faced with is the return of his draft law before the National Assembly on July 5. Drawing lessons from the discredit caused by the use of article 49.3 in April, the Socialist Party is trying to deactivate the internal opposition which may cause the same scenario next week, causing a deepening of the discredit of the government.

That is the explanation for the political game that led Valls to receive the CGT and FO leaders on June 29 and to give the image of a government willing to engage in dialogue. It was simply a posture, since Valls does not want to negotiate about any fundamental aspect of his law. The sole purpose was to show that he had an attitude of openness, wishing to improve the haughty and arrogant image that he has shown for several months. It is likely that the operation will have fallen flat. Although Mailly and Martinez were willing to go quite far, by not putting forward the demand for the withdrawal of the law, which is however the position of the Inter-union coordination, it will turn out to have been to no avail... Valls wants to give the image of flexibility while not wanting to give any ground. However, the leadership of the CGT had even given a sign of appeasement to the government by refusing to exercise its right of opposition to the agreements signed by the CFDT and UNSA at the SNCF. If the CGT rail workers' federation CGT had added its voice to that of SUD Rail, those agreements would have been void, restoring momentum to the mobilization. So far this little game has failed to persuade the rebellious Socialist members of parliament to make a present of their votes to Valls and all parliamentary scenarios are still possible.

Meanwhile, despite this blockage and its growing discredit, as the days go by the government is sinking deeper into a policy of police violence, violating democratic rights. While not banned, the last two Parisian demonstrations have taken place in corridors closed by the police, each demonstrator being obliged to pass through several barriers, with body searches, and able to reach the starting point of the demonstration only by a prescribed route. Again, this is an attack that is without precedent for decades; even during the 1970s, demonstrations involved less violence and a lower level of confrontation with the police. The pressure and the provocations are ubiquitous. On June 28, more than a hundred activists were banned from demonstrating. In Paris, 2,500 police surrounded a route of 2.8 kilometers for the demonstration, weapons (teargas grenade launchers, flash balls, etc....) at the ready. Worse, the police went even further that day by searching the homes of five activists in Paris, confiscating their computers and taking them into custody. The same day, 200 activists (casually employed workers from the theatrical world, postal workers....) who had assembled in a trade-union centre before the demonstration, were blocked for several hours and de facto

banned from demonstrating by CRS riot police and gendarmes. After the demonstration and the lifting of the blockade of the trade-union centre, more than 800 activists gathered there as a protest. Other cases of police brutality were seen in cities across the country, particularly in Lille, where several activists were arrested.

Such escalation by the police in the violation of basic democratic rights is easily made possible by the state of emergency and the arsenal of draconian measures that the government has implemented since the attacks of 2015.

A few days after the homophobic attack in Orlando, the government even tried unsuccessfully to cancel the Gay Pride march held in Paris on July 2. The march had already been postponed... so as not to hinder the Euro 2016 matches.

Since the beginning of the movement there have been many articles, surveys and records of police violence, signaling the use of offensive arms, the beating up of demonstrators who were already on the ground, etc... A recently released report by an independent commission of inquiry centred on journalists of the ecologist newspaper *Reporterre* is unfortunately eloquent. Here is a short quote from the introduction: "The report that you will read below confirms that law enforcement action in France has taken a very dangerous turn, which threatens the physical integrity of many peaceful citizens, sometimes minors and even children. The use of launchers of defensive projectiles has become a regular occurrence, whereas it should be exceptional, or indeed prohibited. Grenades being fired into crowds has become unacceptably frequent. The use of unidentifiable plainclothes police to arrest people or carry out acts of repression has become systematic. Failure to respect the right of journalists to cover demonstrations without fear has become customary ... [Among police who have been interviewed], some say that they are being manipulated and used by the government, not to restore order, but to produce images that impress our citizens, as if France was threatened by "wreckers" as violent as they are anonymous, and foreign to the body of society". [2]

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Goin.jpg>]

An artist, Goin, recently gave a good illustration of Valls and Hollande's policy in a mural ("The state clubbing freedom") on display as part of the "Street Art Fest" in Grenoble, featuring Marianne, the symbol of France, bludgeoned to the ground by two CRS, one having a shield marked "49.3". The mural caused a wave of outrage from leaders of the Right and the Socialist Party, first of all Cazeneuve. The anti-republican blasphemy was intolerable to those who were proud to support the insolence and the freedom to express themselves of the *Charlie Hebdo* journalists.

30 June 2016

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[1] This article allows governments to pass laws without a vote in Parliament.

[2] See *Reporterre* "[Violences policières : le rapport qui dit les faits](#)".