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France

"Wages and the cost of living: take back control!"

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In France, national mobilizations for wage increases have stalled since 10 November. This day of strikes and demonstrations, called nationally by the CGT (General Confederation of Labour) and in many departments by Solidaires and the FSU (Unitary Trade Union Federation) was clearly a less strong mobilization than that of 18 October (called nationally by CGT, Solidaires, FO-Force Ouvrière and the FSU).

Participation in the demonstrations was on average three times lower: the CGT announced 100,000 people in the streets against 300,000 on 18 October. It was therefore a day reduced most often to teams of activists. The only notable event was the "warning" strike by agents of the RATP (Autonomous Paris Transport Authority); the inter-union appeal (CGT, FO, Solidaires, La Base), launched a long time before, mobilized very broadly and largely blocked public transport in the Paris region (buses, the RER-regional express network, and the Metro). While the general wage increase was only 2.2 per cent in 2022, the CGT and SUD (Solidaires) are demanding 300 euros.

For a month and a half from the end of September to the beginning of November, the movement of strikes in the refineries and oil depots of TotalEnergies and Esso-ExxonMobil marked the life of the country, imposing the question of wages, the high cost of living and the distribution of wealth as a central political issue. Obviously, this had been crystallized by the shortage of fuel and even the complete absence of supply in many service stations in the country. No other sector with as much impact has taken over. The strikers, who demanded a 10 per cent general increase, were finally unable to force management to go beyond a 5 per cent general increase for the 2,500 employees of Esso and the 14,000 of TotalEnergies. This is for the year 2023, with payment beginning this November. The strikes in the nuclear power plants, the SNCF and the electric power sector did not really turn into an ongoing strike.

The weakness of this day of 10 November and the absence of any announcement of a follow-up so far does not however take into account the very large number of local strikes for wages which have taken place since October, nor the real success of many of them, even though the increases obtained are most often lower than the 6.3 per cent inflation rate announced for 2022. They are conducted within the framework of a renegotiation of the NAO [\[1\]](#) 2022 or an anticipation of the NAO for 2023 (this is the case at TotalEnergies for example).

In many companies, workers are all the more motivated to refuse a significant reduction in their real wages since many companies have recorded an increase in their turnover and their profits over the past two years, with big fat envelopes for top executives. This is the case, for example, of the 200 employees of the Geodis logistics platform, in Gennevilliers in the Paris region, who after four weeks on strike have just obtained a 5 per cent general increase for 2022. Employees of company, where wages are low, mobilized all the more strongly in the knowledge that Geodis had a 28 per cent increase in turnover in 2021, with 948 million euros in profits. Good results which allowed several executives of the company to receive a bonus of 300,000 euros to thank them for the efforts made by their employees during the Covid pandemic.

This is also the case for the employees of SANOFI, a large pharmaceutical group, which made 12.3 billion euros in profits in 2020, a net profit which increased further by 11.8 per cent in 2021. This does not prevent the management from proposing only a 3 per cent increase over two years for 2022 and 2023. The workers called a strike on November 22 and 23 and are demanding a 10.2 per cent increase for these two years. At ENEDIS, a company that manages the distribution of the electricity network, after several strikes since September, its employees have just obtained a 9.7 per cent general increase.

Many other examples could be cited, in many companies in the private sector, but the dominant characteristic

remains despite everything the scattered nature of the reactions, making it difficult to build a relationship of forces against the MEDEF (the French employers' association) and the government. The trade-union confederations – fragmented in terms of the desire to build a global confrontation on wages and the cost of living – have not built a policy for an overall confrontation and a centralization of existing struggles, nor a platform addressing the working class as a whole with the aim of obtaining from the government the satisfaction of demands on price freezes, the sliding scale and tax policy. This could make it possible to impose a different distribution of wealth, against a capitalist class that has greatly benefited from the profits of recent years.

It is true that on the divisions among the unions, there also weighs the proximity of the Civil Service elections from December 1-8, involving 5.6 million public sector workers, elections mobilizing a large part of the union apparatuses. There are also elections involving the 150,000 employees of the SNCF from 17 November. At the same time, the union leaders have engaged in recent weeks in a "consultation" with the government on the question of pensions, prior to the presentation of a bill to push back the legal retirement age to 65 (instead of 62 today), which in any case will necessitate significant social mobilization in the coming months. But the building of a relationship of forces for the workers also involves the ability to defend themselves against the fall in their wages, to challenge the rate of profit that the capitalists want to preserve.

The question of wages, of measures taken against the high cost of living and for tax measures, calling into question the class choices made for the benefit of the capitalists, is therefore vital. The challenge was therefore and still is to make the question of wages a political question, since the cost of living concerns the whole working class. Meanwhile, the government (as well as a very discreet MEDEF in recent months) acts permanently to try to contain social discontent without questioning supply policies or preventing capitalist companies from maintaining tooth and nail their rate of profit. Alongside Bruno Lemaire (Minister of Economy, Finance and Industrial Sovereignty), Emmanuel Macron has therefore been for months dead set against any measure which, in substance, would call into question his tax and income policy, pushing the mechanisms of "Macron bonuses", tax-exempted up to 6000 euros, the relaxation of the mechanisms of profit-sharing and participation, the financing of up to 66 billion euros of tariff shields on energy. These measures preserve capitalist profits and avoid any structural measures, while further reducing Social Security receipts (with the system of tax-exempt premiums). Taking up the argument of liberal doctrine, Macron opposes a general increase in wages. He explained on October 26 on the France2 channel that "an indexation of wages to inflation would be tantamount to maintaining the rise in prices, inflation, to creating a loop that never stops". He couldn't have put it more clearly.

On the other hand, following the usual smokescreen tactics of Emmanuel Macron, a conference on "value sharing" was initiated by the government on November 8, a conference in which the Minister of Labour (Olivier Dussopt) is ready to talk about everything ... except wages and, precisely, the sharing of added value, of the wealth produced in production. Again, there is no question of calling into question the profit rate of the capitalists.

The question of wages will remain the main concern of workers, of the working class in general. The price of fuels, energy and food, among others, will weigh even more in the months to come; inflation will continue in 2023.

In addition to the divisions among the unions, there are also the political divisions on the side of the workers' movement.

Whereas the political and social context should enable the political, associative and trade union components of the workers' movement to occupy an important political space and to help organize popular mobilization in cities, neighbourhoods and workplaces, we are instead witnessing separate initiatives that break any possible dynamic. A few days apart, we witnessed on October 16 and 18, the demonstration at the initiative of the NUPES against the high cost of living, with other political forces such as the NPA, then the demonstration of the CGT, Solidaires, FSU and FO on wages. These ought to have been two springboards to organize a common dynamic of struggle when,

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three days apart, the demonstrators were advancing the same demands and the refineries were on strike throughout the country. But the ball was not caught on either side. On the one hand, the leadership of the CGT took umbrage at the "encroachments" on the terrain of the trade union struggle by La France Insoumise (LFI); on the other, La France Insoumise, in the person of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, announced its determination "to avoid wasting time and creating unnecessary tensions. And worse, getting bogged down in meetings that unnecessarily delay the time for action and endanger it." In a word, the search for unity would require "walking separately to strike separately". Jean-Luc Mélenchon claims that LFI or NUPES could itself be the crucible "beyond the apparatuses" of a new Popular Front.

The leaders of La France Insoumise still see social mobilizations as a simple springboard for the promotion of their own party and the increase of their electoral audience in the event of the dissolution of parliament. Obsessed with the parliamentary struggle and the hope of new elections which would restore a central role to La France Insoumise, LFI neglects the construction of a unified movement, a political and social front, bringing together political parties and social movements, nationally and locally, to organize a general mobilization based on the social needs of today. This attitude is a veritable obstacle to the construction of a real political and social relationship of forces.

The concrete result today is that Macron has won a first round: despite the social exasperation and the obvious need to attack the capitalists and their profits to impose the defence of our wages, the forces of the workers' movement have not shown themselves capable of being political actors in the social clashes of recent weeks, and the struggle for wages has returned to the framework of the industrial terrain.

Worse, whereas the struggles of the working class against the bosses are normally the worst political ground for the far-right National Rally (RN), the government and the media have been striving for weeks to make the NUPES inaudible, to engage in "NUPES-bashing". to get Marine Le Pen back in the saddle as representing the main opposition to Emmanuel Macron. Yet the RN is struggling to reconcile its few slogans of support for social demands and the taxation of super-profits. Its defence of small and medium-sized enterprises has led it to vote against any increase in the SMIC (minimum wage) and to propose exemption from social security contributions for wage increases.

Worse, the government and the media are rewriting their favourite scenario and stage-management of the months preceding the presidential and legislative elections: the focus on security issues and support for the police, fantasies about the invasion of France by Islam and migrants and the need to increase the number of OQTFs [2] in the face of the "criminality of foreigners"; just so many themes dear to the Minister of the Interior, Gerald Darmanin, who is already on the launching pad for the next presidential election of 2027, just like the Minister of the Economy, Bruno Lemaire, who gives a clear illustration with the conscientious unfolding of neoliberal capitalist measures. On the boards of this bad theatre, Marine Le Pen tries to reap the fruits of this nauseating hubbub, which seeks to drown out the social demands of the working class.

There is today a real issue at stake of political polarization, of crystallization on class bases of discontent and of social struggles. This obviously requires building in cities, enterprises and neighbourhoods unitary tools to build and crystallize a relationship of forces.

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Translated by **International Viewpoint** from lalencontre.org.

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[1] Mandatory annual negotiations. They must be carried out each year, on the initiative of management and with the representative unions in companies with more than 50 employees , in particular on wages... but without any obligation for there to be a result!

[2] Obligation to leave the territory, an administrative decision taken against a foreigner in an irregular administrative situation.