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France

April 28, another step towards confrontation with the government

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The day of strikes and demonstrations on April 28 produced mixed results: - half as many demonstrators as on March 31 (500,000 demonstrators according to the CGT, compared to more than a million on March 31). - many combative responses and promising link-ups; - an increase in police violence and the development of an aggressive campaign from the right and the government.

It was the fourth day of mobilization against the El Khomri Law (the three preceding ones were on March 9, March 31, and April 9) and it took place at the end of the school holidays: the youth contingents were fairly small and few high schools and universities were on strike.

One of the first differences with March 31 was the low participation of railway workers who were called out on strike... two days before April 28.

On April 26 there was a one day strike at the SNCF, called by all the unions. These same unions had already called a strike on March 31 on the same question, specific to the SNCF: the application of a 2014 agreement to lower the status of railway workers from July 1 2016 by rescinding the decree that defines their working conditions. The goal is to impose a new minimum-level decree, then to have a collective agreement in the railway sector, seeking to align the condition of SNCF employees (130,000) on those of private-sector railway workers (6,000) in order to obtain gains in productivity of 30 per cent, by reducing holidays and rest days and by other attacks on their working conditions.

Although they are united against this new decree, the unions of the sector do not all have same orientation: UNSA and the CFDT refuse to make any connection with the labour law (both unions are not in the national inter-union coordination) and so they refuse to make strike days at the SNCF coincide with mobilizations against the El Khomri law. The CGT is not opposed to this separation and rejects the perspective of an indefinite general strike in the sector. The Sud-Rail union is in favour of the general strike and of linking up with the struggle against the labour law. But this breach in the trade-union front is not for the moment making possible the development of a prolonged mobilization at the SNCF that would act as a catalyst for a general mobilization against the El Khomri law. So the strike on April 26 was massive at the SNCF, but there was no extension on the 27th and there was low participation on the 28th along with other sectors of workers and young people.

The youth co-ordinations in the universities and high schools are looking for a second wind after four weeks of staggered school holidays, each region being off for two weeks. But all the combative nuclei of young people took part in and strengthened actions along with workers, as well as the Nuit Debout movement, in many towns and cities. However, few educational institutions were on strike on the 28th, even taking into account that the Parisian region, Montpellier and Toulouse were still on holiday.

The week before April 28, the CGT, the main union confederation, held its congress in Marseille. The Martinez leadership succeeded in maintaining a broad consensus behind it by surfing on the very combative wave that was expressed by many unions, demanding the clear commitment of the CGT to a renewable strike against the labour law. A motion was even adopted calling, in fact if not in so many words, for an indefinite general strike.

But in practice, the confederal leadership is not taking the necessary measures to really orient the union in this direction, which does not correspond to the orientation of this leadership, which refuses a direct confrontation with the government of the left. However, this call and the atmosphere of the congress show that there is strong pressure

coming from the rank and file.

The days leading up to the 28th also saw negotiations on the method of payment of unemployment benefits to temporary workers in the entertainment industry. This very important battle has been going on for years, and the employers have managed to severely attack the rules governing payment. After a long round of discussions between the employers and the unions of the sector, a draft agreement was reached, negating many of the setbacks that the temporary workers had suffered since 2003. But the project must be ratified by the MEDEF employers' organization and by the union confederations negotiating the UNEDIC agreement. This ratification is particularly problematic since the draft contradicts the positions of MEDEF and the CFDT, which seek to reduce the rights of the unemployed. The draft agreement, obtained under pressure, is positive, but it immediately resulted in the evacuation by the police of the Odeon Theatre in Paris, which had been occupied, like the Comédie Française and other halls and theatres in the country, by the temporary workers.

All these disparate elements had an influence on the demonstrations of April 28. There were many local initiatives to organize blockades in towns and cities, following the example of what had been achieved in 2010: blocking access to the port of Le Havre, blocking the national highway in Angoulême, blocking the Port of Gennevilliers near Saint Denis,.... Whenever these blockades took place, they were the result of local general assemblies involving workers from different sectors and of liaison with militant trade unions and activists of Nuit Debout.

Because the new fact in recent days is the convergence between activists of Nuit Debout and combative trade unionists, those who argue in favour of a general strike.

It is this convergence, which is being expressed in the squares of several cities, that also gave the demonstrations of the 28th their combative character, despite a much lower participation in general than on March 31.

This convergence was symbolized by concerted appeals involving Nuit Debout and trade unionists, and by a very large general assembly in the Place de la République in Paris on the evening of the 28th, at which there were speeches by railway workers, postal workers, supporters of the general strike and spokespersons of the (anarcho-syndicalist) CNT and the Solidaires confederation... and by Philippe Martinez, confederal secretary of the CGT. A quite unprecedented participation that speaks volumes, however, on the balance of power that has been established in recent weeks within the movement. The general secretary, whose intervention was interspersed with cries of "General Strike" taken up by thousands of participants, tried to manoeuvre between the confederal line and the demands of the general assembly.

Faced with this radicalization and this real convergence, the government and the right, who are scared, are playing the card of repression and criminalization of the movement.

We can honestly say that in general, the police forces launched violent attacks on demonstrators on April 28.

Among other examples, participants in the blockade of the Port of Gennevilliers were caught in a trap by the police and gassed and clubbed: there were 140 arrests and two trade unionists were immediately taken before the court in Bobigny. In Marseille, the contingent of Solidaires was attacked with direct volleys of tear gas. In Rennes, a young man lost an eye when he was struck by a flashball.

April 28 resulted in 214 arrests and 250 protesters injured.

Obviously, the government has adopted a simple strategy: crush the movement by playing on fear, intimidation and

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criminalization. It was neither Valls nor El Khomri nor Macron who intervened on behalf of the government, but Cazeneuve, Minister of the Interior and France's top cop. The government is trying to dissociate the movement from the leaderships of the CGT and UNEF, with the aim of making the movement seem a minority.

Similarly, the tenors of the UMP and the National Front have called for banning the gatherings of Nuit Debout, in particular in the Place de la République. This strategy of tension is having no effect for the moment.

But the coming weeks will be difficult to navigate for those who are fighting for a confrontation and for a general strike.

The First of May will be the next stage of the mobilization. May 3 will be a new day of demonstrations, because that will be the start of the parliamentary debate on the El Khomri law. The government will suffer from the internal contradictions in the Socialist Party, feeling once again internal pressure and having to reopen a public debate on the law that it had closed three weeks before.

Then, on May 10 and 17 there will be new strike days at the SNCF, during which the CGT will struggle to circumvent the demand for an ongoing strike.

The month of May will see many traps laid, but also the hope of finally making the different movements of confrontations converge and imposing a broad united movement. Today tens of thousands of activists are trying to overcome the obstacles in order to build a relationship of forces that will be sufficient to force the government to its knees.