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France

As 2027 approaches, where does class struggle trades unionism stand?

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The French trade union movement, and more particularly the trade unionism of social transformation, with which the CGT, the FSU and Solidaires explicitly identify, is today confronted with several important strategic questions. [1]

First, quite simply, in the face of a neoliberal steamroller, the question arises of the effectiveness of trade union action, the ability to defend the living conditions, wages, health and housing of the working classes on a daily basis, the effectiveness also of the national mobilizations of recent years in the face of employer and government attacks: the balance sheet of 2023 is still present. The largest social movement since 1995, with massive popular support, took place for several months without managing to build a general strike movement supported by several professional sectors capable of making the government give in.

In the face of reactionary and capitalist forces, what is the reality in trade union action of the fight for its project of social transformation, which includes a frontal struggle against racist and gender discrimination, the consideration of the environmental struggle in the face of the climate crisis and the capitalist headlong rush? Does the relative weakness of trade unionism require, and in what forms, a rapprochement and a permanent front of the trade union forces for social transformation?

This question is posed even more acutely in the face of the rise of reactionary political powers and the threat, in France, of the arrival of the far right in government. This threat also raises the question of the political role of the wing of the trade union movement that explicitly fights for social transformation and therefore major political changes, diametrically opposed to the far right, but acting in complete independence without being subject to the agendas and orientations of the political parties.

It is partly the political splintering on the left that has prevented the mobilization movement around the NFP [2] in 2024 from being prolonged for two years by concerted and complementary action by the parties of the left and the social movement on essential social and economic issues. What role can the trade union movement play in once again taking on the construction of a front of the workers' movement against the reactionary forces, affirming the rejection of the far right and putting forward the essential social demands of the working classes? How can we impose our own word in the next six months, in complete independence and without being the auxiliaries of this or that political party?

There is also the question of organizing, in the wake of the youth movement, a large-scale social response to growing social inequalities, the fall in purchasing power and the salvo of new social attacks against the working classes provided for in the two budget laws presented by Lecornu's minority government.

Significant progress and convergence

The CGT, FSU and Solidaires generally converge on the analysis of the situation and the importance of the crises suffered on an international scale. It is striking to note that the trade union movement has largely evolved in its understanding of the climate crisis and its consequences, which comes on top of the social and democratic crises, discrimination and the aggressive security approaches of authoritarian regimes. These three unions put these issues, along with those of sexist and sexual violence, at the heart of their concerns.

But this still leaves open in many unions the difficulty of separating themselves from the productivist vision, making the progression of wages and jobs depend, not on social justice and another distribution of the wealth produced, imposed by the balance of forces, but on the growth of capitalist profits, and more precisely on the growth of "one's company".

Many debates remain open on the conversion of production, the fight against useless projects and harmful production, the place of nuclear power in the fight for renewable energies. On this last issue, at the 53rd congress of the CGT in 2023, a majority vote (50.3%), driven by the Mines and Energy Federation, led to the departure of the Confederation from the Ecological and Social Alliance (AES) – *Plus jamais ça*.

Nevertheless, major concrete steps forward have taken place for several years for the integration of these issues and a rapprochement of the CGT with the ecological organizations, around many struggles, such as in Sainte Soline with the Earth and Solidarity Uprisings, and the concrete actions of the employees of the Chapelle-Darblay paper mill or the Total Grandpuits refinery to build responses to social and environmental emergencies by questioning capitalist logics.

It is important to see the place given in Solidaires and the FSU to this work in the AES-PJC with its rupture plan developed in 2021, and to the collaboration with the organizations of the social and trade union movement that founded *Plus jamais ça*. This joint work is obviously very important because it can be the lever for mobilizations and common struggles, a decisive springboard and even an element of strength in the face of capitalist and far-right logics through the ability to link social struggles, defence of common goods, environmental struggles. The rally held around 26 September with the participation of 300 associative, political and trade union organizations is a good omen on this point.

In addition, the CGT and Solidaires, faced with a context of social setbacks and transformation of the wage structure, have been asking themselves for several years the head-on question of their difficulty in developing and being present in the workplace, a difficulty that calls into question its existence as a militant trade unionism. This is even if the CGT welcomes a resumption of unionization in the wake of 2023.

Of course, these questions take different forms in the private sector and in the civil service, and for the CGT, the FSU or Solidaires. The FSU, like the Fédération Sud Education (member of Solidaires), seeks to answer these questions by pushing for the process of rapprochement, of regrouping of the trade unionism of struggle by "the common house". For the moment, the other public service unions of Solidaires do not put forward the same answer and the question of Solidaires' orientation on these questions will be raised again at the congress of the Union syndicale in June 2027.

Overcoming the break-up of work collectives

The logic of the employers and the government is to corset the trade union movement in order to confine it to the structures of "social dialogue" in bodies managed and punctuated by the employers' or ministerial agenda, while cutting back as much as possible on the means of union action in the workshops and offices, in the workplaces, means that can be put at the service of the work of information, mobilization, and the creation of a balance of power. These attacks on cantonment and integration strike at the historical contradiction of the trade union movement in France, and in particular of its combative wing.

In France, trade unionism is strong in its experience and capacity for struggle, but it is weak in terms of members, which affects its financial stability (by limiting dues income). Today, the functioning of the trade union is based on

only 20 to 30% of its members' contributions (25% for example announced at the last congresses of the CGT Metallurgy), most often well below the situation in unions in other European countries. The rest comes from the AGFPN, the Joint Fund for "Social Dialogue" (since 2014), joint bodies (Social Security, Unedic), collective agreements and various subsidies. Needless to say, this funding ensures the base of the unions, but it is dependent on collective agreements and governmental decisions, with all the risks that this represents.

Trade unionism in France has a history that has differentiated it in several areas from that existing in most European countries. On the one hand, by its political strength, capable of exerting influence on several occasions (1936, 1944/45, 1968) to impose social advances for all workers while pushing for major political changes, capable of mobilizing the exploited on many occasions to oppose major attacks such as those undertaken since 1995 against the pay-as-you-go pension system.

But on the other hand, France, since the first decades of the 20th century, has also been one of the countries where the number of union members has been the lowest (30% at the end of the 1940s, it has remained at a rate of 10% since the 1990s (18% in the public sector, 8% in the private sector). This does not prevent a real representativeness of trade unionism, 58.8% of voters for the 2021/2024 CSE elections [\[3\]](#) (i.e. higher than most political, municipal, regional and legislative elections), and the CEVIPOF (centre of political research) political trust barometer of early 2026 recorded a rate of trust among employees in trade unionism of 45 to 48%, 37% among all respondents, when only 22% of the population said they had confidence in political parties... and 18% in the President of the Republic.

Since the 1980s, the trade union movement in France (like in the rest of Europe) has been hit by the attacks of neoliberal capitalism. The latter has gradually sought to undo all the advances in the social protection system achieved in previous decades, starting with the pay-as-you-go pension system. [\[4\]](#) At the same time, in the private sector as well as in the public sector, employers and the government have profoundly reorganized in the structures of production and network and service activities, with the virtual disappearance of large units in the steel industry, mining, textiles, shipbuilding and repair, but also, for example, in the Post and Telecommunications sectors, the disappearance of the large postal sorting offices and postal cheque centres.

In addition, there has been the outsourcing of production or service units in the automotive, aeronautical construction and chemical industries, with the proliferation of subcontracting companies, both on-site and offshored. This phenomenon also applies to sectors such as the Post Office, the SNCF [railways], air transport, the hospital sector and energy. Taking advantage of certain technological developments, entire activities have been outsourced, relocated, by creating production, distribution and maintenance processes, involving multiple players, including call centres or companies that fully manage the accounting of large companies, for example..

This is also true for building maintenance, cleaning, security and collective catering services, whether in the public or private sectors. In addition, there has been the uberization of many service professions (private hire vehicles, delivery workers and so on). leading to super-exploitation outside of employment law.

In the three public services (state [national government ministries, including education], territorial [local and regional government], hospital), precariousness is clearly increasing. Contract workers represent around 20% of the workforce (not counting the outsourcing to private companies of public action missions which represent a cost for the state of 160 billion, the equivalent of a quarter of the budget). The FSU and Sud Education address these issues in similar terms, worrying about the multiplication of contract workers in national education, 128,000 teaching assistants for students with disabilities in 2024 (10.8% of national educational staff), nine times out of 10 women, nine times out of 10 part-time with an average salary of 900 euros, 58,000 teaching assistants. The common demand is the integration of these staff into the statutory framework.

This fragmentation represents a first strategic challenge for a trade unionism of struggle, which normally aims to

organize the greatest number of employees, to establish itself in all professional sectors, and to mobilize the employees of the same sector on common demands. The difficulty, which has been new in recent decades, is that these tasks are made more difficult by the break-up of companies, either geographically or with subcontracting companies, which often weakens a once more important parent company and makes it more difficult to act together in companies that are no longer covered by the same branch agreements.

Despite this, large activity sites with a large number of employees continue to exist, such as the Nantes Saint Nazaire industrial-port complex, which has 28,700 employees, but in 613 different companies around the Chantiers de l'Atlantique (3,800 employees and about 5,800 subcontractors on site), the Roissy airport platform has 95,000 employees in 1,300 establishments; or the "industrial-port cluster" of Marseille-Fos sur Mer, which brings together 42,600 permanent salaried jobs (and around 3,000 temporary workers) in 1,570 establishments; the La Pitié Salpêtrière Paris-13 hospital group, which brings together around 20,000 employees, La Défense [business office complex] 200,000 employees (2/3 of executives) in 2800 companies, 25% teleworking more than two days a week; the Stellantis Sochaux [\[5\]](#) site, with 5,500 permanent employees and 1,000 temporary workers, 2-3,000 jobs at subcontracting equipment manufacturers.

Trade unionism is therefore being hit by a profound change in the organization of economic and social activities, that of the major industrial groups. The still impressive concentration of several sites bringing together tens of thousands of employees no longer makes them "workers' fortresses" similar to those of the 1960s: the break-up of companies, statutes and collective agreements on the same site. The SNCF group now has 284,000 employees spread over 7 public limited companies, but also a growing subcontractor, with, for example, the outsourcing of the maintenance of electrical tracks and systems, two-thirds of which is carried out by the major construction groups such as Vinci, Bouygues or Eiffage, the outsourcing of cleaning by ONET, Nicollin or Challancin.

So, one of the main challenges of trade unionism is to adapt to this reality that has been taking hold for decades. It is no longer just a question of sitting on the bodies of large companies that carry less weight than before, it is necessary to create structures that do not obey the level of negotiations set by the employers, but that can bring together employees from the same site or the same professional activity and to be able to identify common demands that allow them to come together.

Within the CGT and Solidaires, this question of the adaptation of union structures, demands and modes of action to this new reality has been raised for several congresses with more or less conviction and perseverance because the main unions are backed by the parent companies, still benefiting from company agreements or collective agreements that are more favourable than those of the subcontractors but not organising union association structures or unionised structures from external companies.

But experiments in this direction already exist, even if they do not appear in the statutes and the texts of congresses. This is the case, for example, of the *Union syndicale multiprofessionnelle* of Saint Nazaire, created by the CGT in 1999, with the slogan "one site, one status". This approach obviously goes against the trade union support of company management, the adaptation to the structures of "social dialogue" created by the employers, by breaking down the boundaries of status or nationality.

There is also the example of the Roissy inter-union association for the past fifteen years, which brings together structures from the CGT, CFDT, UNSA, Sud Aérien, and sometimes FO. It has led numerous mobilizations aimed at all the employees of the platform against the union repression two years ago targeting CGT and Sud activists, last June against the obstacles put in place by the prefecture to obtain the TCA (airport traffic permit), a badge of authorization to work on the platform.

Here too, the aim is to unify the employees, working as a whole for Aéroport de Paris or Air France, beyond the

various companies, to create a common balance of power around common demands. On several occasions, the demand for a common status, a common collective agreement for all the employees of the platform (ground staff, subcontractors, assistance, security, transport and so on) capable of combating social dumping has been put forward. Sud Rail and the CGT Cheminots put forward in apparently similar terms a single status in the entire railway sector.

Other experiences are underway, such as that of the UL CGT of Lorient with the creation of an inter-company union. Dynamics such as these would make it possible to build on the victories obtained locally limiting the impact of the 2023 reform on pensions: that obtained in April 24 at the SNCF with a CGT, Sud, UNSA, CFDT agreement, for the employees of the SNCF Group on early retirements, or that of the CGT Ports and Docks obtained in 2025 on the five years of anticipation of the legal age in the Ports and Handling Agreement. Also, the government's retreat in recent days allows the 140,000 employees of EDF, Engie and RTE to continue to benefit from the "agent tariff" on energy.

The challenge of attacks on trade union rights

The reforms implemented since the government of Hollande [\[6\]](#) have aggravated this difficulty in adapting trade unionism through two rogue laws: first, the "employment law" put in place by the Minister of Labour Myriam El Khomri in 2015 introduced the "inversion of the hierarchy of standards". Employment contracts in a company were, until then, governed by the Employment Code, the national interprofessional agreements (ANI) and the agreements of the branch to which the company is affiliated. Agreements in a company could not be less favourable than the ANI and the sectoral agreements.

The 2015 Employment Law reverses this hierarchy of standards and a company agreement takes precedence over other agreements, and in particular the sectoral collective agreement, in the areas of working hours, working hours, holidays, etc. and the threshold for the increase in overtime has been reduced from 25% to 10%. So a win-win law for the employers who can then impose less favourable rules in a small company without a strong balance of power, and obtaining the "lowest social bidder" becomes the weapon of blackmail, so that the union delegates of a subcontracting company sign an agreement not aligned with the branch agreement, thus "making possible" obtaining the contract from the contractor (this is what happens every year on the Roissy platform for airport assistance companies).

The second nefarious provision came a few months later with the "Macron Employment Law Ordinances" [\[7\]](#) of 2017 which continued and greatly aggravated the El Khomri law on the prevalence of the company agreement (validating company agreements in all areas and imposed on the employee against the clauses of the employment contract without having to justify economic difficulties). Much worse, these ordinances tore the staff representative institutions to pieces. A single structure, the CSE (social and economic committee) replaced three bodies: the works council, the staff delegates and the CHSCT (Committee for Health, Safety and Working Conditions).

The CHSCTs, which had become a formidable weapon to impose health at work, with the right to commission expert opinions and a legal personality, were eliminated by Macron. The SSCT Commissions of the CSE are present only in companies with more than 300 employees and no longer have this legal personality, nor the possibility of voting on expertise and making the employers pay for it. The elected representatives of the CHSCT had often become very competent specialists in their fields and able to intervene on the working conditions of employees of subcontracting companies. And above all, union action on the ground was undermined by this ordinance by reducing the number of elected staff and the hours of mandate by almost half. Similar attacks took place in the civil service in 2019 with the law on the transformation of the civil service (LTFP).

The concrete result is that the hours and mandates given by election can no longer allow, for example, devoting time to service or workshop rounds, to participate in unionization work. Among the essential victims of this clear cut in union resources are obviously the local unions which make it possible to help, to bring together isolated union members in small companies and to help with groupings for site actions. All this work will be more difficult, while the El Khomri law and the Macron circulars give more means to the employers' managements to put pressure on the employees of small companies.

This orientation of grouping employees beyond their status and their company is therefore of primary importance to fight against the effects of subcontracting and precariousness, against social dumping and the competition between employees. It goes hand in hand with the demands to make subcontractors subject to the conventions and agreements of the ordering company, and that all employees in a branch benefit from the same agreement, aligned with agreements that offer the best social terms.

How to build effective mobilizations?

This work of regroupment and the content of demands partly overlaps with the reflections on the construction of a adequate balance of power during the major mobilizations and the limits experienced in 2023 and, since then, in the construction of a front of struggle for wages, fiscal justice against the succession of austerity budgets. On two occasions, since 2023, the trade union front has cracked, weakened by the support of the Socialist Party (PS) for the government's desperate manoeuvres to continue its policies.

The "Bayrou conclave" [\[8\]](#) in the spring of 2025, then in the autumn of 2025, the "suspension of the pension reform" and the conference on pensions and work, both justified the reprieves given by the PS to Macron's governments and made it possible to disunite the trade union front. Indeed, on two occasions, the CFDT, CFTC, and CGC rushed into this breach, which did not open the door to any government retreat. So, two problems appear. That of the difficulty, for the CGT, Solidaires and the FSU, which put forward the need to build a social confrontation, to reconcile this objective with the unity of an inter-union alignment that does not pursue the same objective and clings to any manoeuvre by the government. Moreover, even on this point, the Secretary of the CFDT, Marylise Léon, at the confederal congress of June 2026, acknowledged a "social dialogue" at half-mast.

In this sense, surely, the structured appearance of a combative trade union front, capable of taking its own initiatives, would be support for imposing a better balance of forces. But the remaining difficulty would be the possibility for this front, even if it existed, to take root in the sectors that weigh in the mobilizations. For the only palpable reality is that the construction of the broadest unitary inter-union front depends on the combative balance of forces built by the mobilization of one sector "setting the tone" for other workers.

The other question, which has been present since 1995, but reaffirmed over the last 10 years with *Nuit Debout* and the *Gilets jaunes*, and obviously during the 2023 movement, is that the fragmentation of employees and the weaker capacity of the unions to structure are reflected in the growing importance of large popular demonstrations, territorial gatherings such as those of *Nuit Debout* or the *Gilets jaunes* (which are also the place and the occasion for the extension of the movement within society to all the fields of struggle), in relation to the strike. To this is added, unfortunately, the greatest difficulties in the development of self-organization in the workplace.

The whole remaining question is therefore that of the structuring of the mobilization movements which, in recent years, have often been dependent on the deadlines put forward by the national inter-union coordination, which has led it, in order to maintain its unity, to align itself with the least offensive positions, in particular those of the CFDT. It should be noted, however, that on several occasions mobilizations have created their own rhythm during the *Gilets*

jaunes or in Sainte Soline [\[9\]](#) in particular. It is obvious that the future of the most powerful mobilizations will depend in part on the capacity to overcome these contradictions.

What action for 2027?

The last question, undoubtedly the most urgent, is that of the ability of the trade union movement, as of the entire social movement, to occupy its full place in a context of reactionary offensive and gradual slide towards a hegemony of the theses and proposals of the far right. This on the eve of a presidential election in which the political left is for the moment “dispersed like a puzzle”, despite electoral successes in 2022 and 2024 on a programme taking up a series of demands of the workers and social movements.

Because the reality is there. For the past two years, the capitalist class, the media and social networks in the hands of reaction and a few billionaires, have not stopped promoting the far right and its theses, and demonizing (*la France Insoumise* in order to discredit and fragment the alliance made within the framework of the NFP in 2024. The social democratic leaders, wanting to isolate LFI and rally towards the remnants of Macronism, have also put all their efforts into breaking up this framework, preventing the perpetuation of an anti-austerity political front. This situation puts the trade union movement and the entire social movement against the wall to deploy a sufficient counter-offensive.

So, what to do? In 2024, the CGT, the day after the dissolution of the assembly, headlined in a press release: “Facing the far right, the Popular Front!”, stating that: “to defeat the far right, the world of work needs hope and perspectives that break with Emmanuel Macron’s policies”. In the wake of this, the CGT, FSU, Solidaires, CFDT and UNSA declared themselves in favour of the rejection of the far right and of the satisfaction of social demands, listing nine social emergency measures. Many associations or collectives of the social movement were mobilizing and demonstrating all over France even before the NFP agreement was built. Obviously, the risk of the RN’s arrival is even greater today and the fragmentation of the left, with the desire now of the PS majority to reject any alliance with LFI (and obviously to emancipate itself from the NFP’s programme) makes it necessary to quickly build unity in the face of the far right.

So, on the one hand, the situation is more serious and makes it more essential that the trade union movement and the entire social movement now act in complete independence to build a balance of power among the employed and in the working classes as a whole that will make it possible to counter and defeat the far right. From this point of view, the CGT, FSU and Solidaires (but also some CFDT, CNT, FO and UNSA unions) have developed, particularly with VISA, over the last two years work to develop training, action against the presence of the far right in the trade union movement, including preparation for the eventuality of Le Pen’s arrival at the Élysée. The anti-fascist organization the Jeune Garde (before it was banned by Retailleau) had also contributed to trade union education and to the protection of demonstrations in the face of threats from the extreme right.

But the trade union movement, like the entire social movement, is facing a major problem. Blocking Le Pen’s arrival in government, by fighting her audience among workers, also implies, beyond denouncing the dangers posed by the RN, working to defend a political alternative that meets the main social demands. The vast majority of workers have always opposed the pension reform and support elementary measures such as the Zucman tax [tax on big fortunes]], attacking the capitalist class, profits and the great fortunes.

It is also the role of the trade union movement to contribute to the defeat of the RN by putting forward, in the coming months, political and social measures that meet the demands of social justice of the working classes, as was done in 2024. The fragmentation of the main parties making up the NFP over the presidential election on the left is now making it difficult to deploy this work in the trade union and social movement. But the trade union movement can play

an important role in helping to build a unitive dynamic in the social and political left. Obviously, the start cannot be support for this or that candidate, present or future. But it is urgent that, now and in complete independence, the trade union movement for social transformation manages, as in 2024, on the basis of its own common orientations, to come together in the coming weeks to organize a united campaign to defeat Le Pen in 2027 and for a break with capitalist austerity policies.

The situation is undeniably difficult, but we can evoke the memory of the years 1980/81 when, faced with a deep division on the left, a popular and united campaign, "Union in the struggles", created a salutary wind of unity, contributing to the defeat of the right in the 1981 elections. [10] Of course, the situation today is very different in many aspects, and Mitterrand and the social-liberal governments led by the PS since 1981 have shattered many of the hopes of several generations. It is moreover the balance sheet of this policy, pursued from 2012 to 2017 by Hollande, that led to the NUPES and the NFP being built on a programme of rupture with social liberalism. It is also this record that explains the preponderant place taken by LFI on the left ahead of social democracy in recent years.

But we must insist on a point of similarity: as at the time, it is urgent that all energies come together to defeat Le Pen in 2027. The unions must intervene, with their specific means, in the political-electoral sequence that has already begun and whose outcome will be decisive for the working class.

8 October 2026

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[1] Image: logos of trade unions in the education sector from a call for the demonstration of 13 October 2026.

[2] New Popular Front, an electoral union built between La France Insoumise, les Verts, le PCF, le PS as the main partners, with the NPA-A and other left groups, for the legislative elections in June 2024. They had a single candidate in each constituency, to be present at the second round and to avoid a majority of MPs for the far right.

[3] Economic and Social Committee, single structure of worker's representatives in companies with more than 10 employees

[4] This is a collective retirement model where the social security contributions and payroll taxes paid by current active workers are used immediately to fund the pensions of current retirees, in French "retraites par répartition".

[5] Historically, the largest car plant in France, for Peugeot. Stellantis today designs, manufactures, and markets vehicles under 14 brands: Abarth, Alfa Romeo, Chrysler, Citroën, Dodge, DS Automobiles, Fiat, Jeep, Lancia, Maserati, Opel, Peugeot, Ram, and Vauxhall.

[6] François Hollande, Socialist Party member, was president of France from 2014-2017.

[7] Macron was at the time the Minister for the Economy in Hollande's government.

[8] Called by the then Prime Minister François Bayrou which brought together the trade unions and the employers' organizations to negotiate on

the question of pensions.

[9] Site of an important struggle against the project to build a gigantic reservoir.

[10] At the end of the 1970s, the Union of the Left brought together the PS, the Communist Party and the left-wing radicals. This front, formed around a Common Programme of the Left, was victorious in the 1977 municipal elections, wresting from the right 3/4 of the municipalities with more than 30,000 inhabitants. But the PS easily outpaced the PCF for the first time since the war. In the months that followed, the PCF broke its alliance, and the Union of the Left was defeated in the legislative elections of 1978, breaking an electoral momentum built up from 1972 onwards. In order not to repeat this defeat in the 1981 presidential election, political and trade union activists built the Appel Union in the struggles in December 1979, to fight division and impose unity to defeat Giscard. Hundreds of collectives were created in the country.