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France

Against Macron, here come the "slackers"

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Confrontation with Emmanuel Macron and his government has been inevitable since the French presidential and parliamentary elections of May and June 2017. Everyone knew his programme would include a rapid and profound challenge to employment law and social protection, combined with a policy of repression of the social movement and attacks on democratic rights. [1]

Since early April, a month before the election, he had clearly stated the attacks he intended to lead and his intention to govern by decree, bypassing parliamentary debate. Drawing the lessons of the discredit of the main institutional parties, he had also understood that this discredit would not be wiped clean like a slate after the elections and that he also would rapidly suffer its effects. All this led him to introduce decision-making mechanism which are as rapid as they are anti-democratic.

Also, beyond a media profile stressing the theme of novelty, change and youth, he linked libertarian theses to the exacerbated use of the weaponry of the strong state contained in the mechanisms of the Fifth Republic. This programme to overcome France's "backwardness" in relation to the other European countries will generate huge social confrontations and September 12, 21 and 23 have been first cannon shots which will be followed by many others.

The response has, despite everything, taken some time to be put in place. While Macron had clearly announced his intentions, the trade union movement and even the social movement as a whole, has been slow to react. During the electoral campaign, and above all in the period between the two rounds of the presidential election, a part of these movements was attracted by Macron's media image as a young and democratic candidate who could advance French society through a break with the old leadership, and above all as a representative of democracy against Marine Le Pen. Independently of the voting recommendations adopted for the second round, this goodwill towards an ultra-neoliberal candidate left the radical wing of the social and trade union movement very much on its own for some weeks; they mobilised around 2,000 activists from April 22, on the eve of the 1st round, behind the call for a "social 1st round" then the "Front Social" bringing together combative CGT and Sud Solidaires sections, the CNT, several collectives opposed to police violence, Droit Devant, Droit au logement and the NPA.

Then on May 8, with the call for the Front social around the same teams, and above all on June 19, structures of unitary rallying of the social and trade union movement were set up locally to call for demonstrations in around 30 towns, with national support from the Solidaires union. On June 27, nearly two months after Macron's election, as the holiday period approached, the CGT finally brought out a press release calling for a national day of strikes and demonstrations against the decrees on September 12.

This tardy appeal by the Confederation, when numerous CGT structures had been beginning to mobilise against the government for several weeks should also be understood in a context, where, Solidaires excepted, the trade union organisations have accepted a framework of "social dialogue" with the government over the summer. This was a dialogue of a new kind, limited to a series of bilateral meetings, without the union delegations having access to the complete drafts, a method worthy of the Human Resources departments of big companies.

There were no negotiations, Macron and his government have no more intention of negotiating with the union leaderships than debating with the deputies. But it was in the name of this social dialogue that FO, which a year ago was part of the trade union front against the El Khomri law, refused to support the CGT call, which has immediately been accepted by Solidaires. Also, the CGC, while very critical of the decrees, refused to join the mobilisation, as did

the CFDT and the CFTC. The FSU waited until September before, under pressure, it issued a press release supporting the CGT call.

We can see then that this very important mobilisation has been embarked upon in conditions much more catastrophic than those against the El Khomri law 18 months ago. It was then essentially pulled forward and structured by the work carried out by the local inter-union coordinations and Front social collectives. This unitary action would have allowed in numerous towns and departments to rally the FO and indeed CFDT unions. Also, more than half the UD Force ouvrière and seven federations had called for participation on September 12.

For this timorousness on the part of the leaderships is really out of synch with a very broad consciousness among employees of the toxic character of the decrees and all the social attacks which will follow them. All the recent polls witness to a rejection by the majority of the method of decrees and the content of the attacks against trade unions and workers' rights.

It is obviously not by chance that the first wave of attacks is principally (but not exclusively!) focused on two areas:

- the rules of negotiations, the staff representation bodies, in short, the means of action of the trade unions;
- the provisions of the Employment Code protecting employees in the private sector who are the victims of layoffs.

The goal is obviously to disassociate the trade union activists from the bulk of employees and not to take on the public sector frontally. Nonetheless the coming attacks will affect everyone, and most specifically government employees [2] with 10 billion euros cut from the state budget, the suppression of 100,000 jobs and the freezing of the index point (used in the calculation of their pay, already blocked for many years) and the attacks on their status. Also to come are general attacks on pensions and on special schemes such as those of the rail workers.

Also, even if the UNEF student union federation supported 12 and 21 September, students had not yet gone back to university on these dates, even if they have already been affected by the lowering of the APL (*Aide personnalisée au logement* – housing benefit) and Macron's statements of his intention to strengthen university entry selection.

Week after week, there is more news on the disastrous consequences of the decrees, as in relation to maternity leave, which is often longer in branch agreements than in the Labour Code. The decrees would allow its reduction in a great number of enterprises, in the banks for example.

The day of 12 September was also subject to a well-orchestrated campaign of denigration by the national media at the orders of the MEDEF (bosses' federation). The strike day was presented as the deed of an extremist and totally isolated CGT confederal leadership. It was moreover presented as an essentially political day, without legitimacy and representing a minority in the trade union movement. The media stressed that Macron's plans had been voted on during the presidential election, forgetting the fact that at best 18.2% of electors had voted for him in the 1st round on 23 April, 30% of them having declared support for his programme.

The media have also sought to discredit the result of the mobilisation (demonstrations in 180 towns, 4,000 strike appeals, 220,000 demonstrators according to the government, nearly 500,000 according to the CGT and Solidaires) with respect to the mobilisation in 2016 against the El Khomri law. Yet the figures announced by the police and by the government were virtually the same as in 2016, with more flattering press reports.

To put the finishing touches to this battle of communication, Macron had chosen, surely not by chance, the precise

date of 12 September to go to the island of Saint Martin, devastated by a violent cyclone on 6 September. This trip received heavy media coverage, contrasting the president concerned about the people on the ground with those who rejected progress by clinging to the rigidities of the Labour Code. The same thing happened on 21 September, where he attempted to upstage events by going to Marseilles for the announcement that the 2024 Olympics would be held in Paris and Marseilles.

This media battle can appear futile, but Macron has for several months been losing popular credibility. Despite an audio-visual assault, Macron's poll ratings are the lowest registered at this stage of a presidential term, even worse than those of François Hollande. This is not helped by the insulting little phrases aimed at employees, the poor, which are sprinkled through his speeches like so many pearls ("those who are nothing and have done nothing", "slackers" and so on).

The question posed after 12 September is whether the labour movement is able to build a mobilisation that can defeat Macron's policies. The decrees attacking the Labour Code, obviously, but also the attacks on the social wage, the system of social protection and the jobs and remunerations of the public sector.

This obviously means that the trade union movement has to consciously take on this necessary public/private convergence. The schedule for this convergence is not the most favourable. While Macron and Philippe had the text of decrees adopted by the Council of Ministers on 22 September a new day of mobilisations and strikes was organised on 21 September by the unions who had called the actions on 12 September. Although it attracted a little less support in terms of strikers and demonstrators, everywhere the same will to fight and rejection of Macron's attacks was affirmed. On 23 September, tens of thousands opposed to the employment law took to the streets of Paris in response to the call of France Insoumise.

From the 25 September, the CGT and FO transport federations called truck drivers out on renewable strike with blockades, notably of oil depots. Several dozen actions took place on 25-26 September, with depot blockades leading to police interventions. On 26 September, several hundred students demonstrated in front of the Sorbonne university where Macron was presenting his proposals for reform of the European Union. In the street, the youth blocked by the police shouted "A, Anti, Anti-capitalistes", "Everyone hates the President", and "Macron, get out, the faculty isn't yours."

So, the situation is complex. On the one hand tens of thousands of activists are building mobilisations locally, with unitary fronts bringing together trade unions, parties and associations of the social movement. Meanwhile, the front of action against the Macron's policies has broadened. On the evening of 21 September, Philippe Martinez called for the unions to meet to plan a new and broader day of mobilisation. The CFE-CGC, the management union federation, has just come out against the decrees and has agreed to participate in a unitary action. These are good signs for the construction of a real relationship of forces. But for now, at the trade union level, only Solidaires, drawing the balance sheet of the movement of 2016, says explicitly that it is necessary to build a direct relationship of forces by blockades, demonstrations and strikes in significant sectors hitting the country's economy.

The relative weakness of 21 September is explained in particular by the fact that the nine federations of civil servants (CGT, FO, FSU, Solidaires, CFDT, UNSA, CFTC, CGC and Autonomes) have called for action on October 10 around their specific demands. While this united front has not been seen for ten years, it wanted to be completely independent of the inter-professional schedule. But it can now appear as the next date of a unitary inter-professional movement, for example the CFDT-Route has called truckers out on renewable strike starting from that date.

Once again, the possibility of a strike movement in several key sectors at the national level, linked to mobilisations and demonstrations will depend essentially on the combative wing of the trade union movement, notably in the key sectors of the economy and the local inter-union coordinations.

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Also, there must imperatively be a convergence with the struggles against attacks on democratic freedoms and impunity for police violence, and the struggles of youth against the lowering of housing benefits for students and changes to the university selection process. All those who are fighting government attacks must find the means to come together in a common movement. This convergence also concerns the political organisations and movements which declare themselves in opposition to the government.

Jean Luc Mélenchon's "France Insoumise" claims to represent the sole political opposition to Macron. This method, essentially aimed at preparing for the European elections of 2019 and the municipal elections of 2020, is not helpful to the construction of a social and political relationship of forces in the street, the neighbourhoods and the enterprises. Thus, in the preparation for FI's national demonstration on 23 September in Paris, Mélenchon and his movement had no unitary proposals to make.

The popular success of the demonstration on 23 September has strengthened the unitary dynamic, however. The presence of the delegations from the NPA, the PCF, Solidaires and the Front Social, all with the same stress on the need for the construction of a unitary front, show that Mélenchon's posture is not going down well, even among the supporters of France Insoumise. All the more reason to construct an approach of unity of action of the political forces opposed to the government's policies, both locally and nationally. That has been the message of the spokespersons of the NPA for some weeks.

[1] "Slackers" is taken from Macron's speech in Athens that he wouldn't give in to "slackers, cynics or extremes". He later clarified that by "fainéants" (literally "do nothings") he meant who those think nothing should change in France or Europe. This term was widely used on the placards for the demonstrations "Slackers of all countries unite", "I am slacker", "Too much of a slacker to find a slogan".

[2] The French *fonction publique* is particularly broad including not only national government employees but teachers, hospital workers and local authority employees.