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France

A window opens to fight Macron

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Macron's government has, since it won the elections last year, undertaken a forced march, on the one hand implementing step by step a project of fundamental liberal reforms, and on the other reducing taxes for the capitalist class (abolition of the wealth tax, a flat rate of 30 per cent on the revenues of capital).

It is attacking workers in several fundamental domains: on labour legislation, with the laws and decrees put in place last autumn through a system of governmental ordinances (which enable the government to avoid any debate and any process of submitting amendments) concerning many dispositions of the Labour Code that placed constraints on employers (abolition of the priority that was stipulated in the Code for agreements on an industry level rather than workplace by workplace, abolition of the responsibility of the parent company in case of closing down of a company or a plant, reduction of the amount of compensation in case of unjust sackings, possibility of breaking collective bargaining agreements while avoiding the procedures and the financial costs of redundancy plans). To this should be added a frontal attack against the legal rights of trade unions, by a reduction of up to 50 per cent in the number of elected representatives through the merging of the existing bodies (works councils, committees of workers' representatives, health and safety committees) in the process removing the legal right of workers' representatives to have access to information about the company.

The offensive has continued at the beginning of 2018 by a fundamental attack on the social wage, i.e. the employers' and workers' contributions based on wages, which pay for social protection (sickness, retirement pensions, unemployment benefits) and professional training. The aim is progressively to remove from gross wages all payments for workers' rights and for these payments to be financed from taxes.

In practice, this is an attack on the fundamentals of the social wage established at the end of the last war, collectively guaranteeing the continuity of wages in case of sickness, unemployment or professional training. This challenge began, little by little, from the 1990s, with the creation of the Generalized Social Contribution (CSG), a tax based on the totality of revenues that replaced, step by step, sickness benefits. In 2018, this CSG is being increased by 1.7 per cent, to 9.2 per cent of income. On the other hand there is the abolition of deductions from wages for sickness and unemployment, which in 2017 amounted to 3.15 per cent. Consequently, it has been possible to contain demands for wage increases, since there was a net wage increase of 1.8 per cent, but also to impose a cut of 1.7 per cent in pensions, which depend on the CSG. Similarly, in the autumn of 2017, a cut of state funding of Personalized Housing Aid (APL) was imposed, making a saving of 800 million euros. Thus students, receiving an APL of between 60 and 200 euros per month, saw it drop by 5 euros this year.

By reforming the rules governing access to universities and a reorganization of the courses leading up to the baccalauréat, the government has accentuated the selection rules, accentuating social reproduction, while closing down more and more classes in primary schools, under the pretext of giving further resources to schools in priority zones.

After having thus attacked young people, pensioners and private sector workers regulated by the Labour Code, the government now wants to attack the status of civil servants and the funding of public services. The funding of health care services is under attack and 120,000 civil service jobs are programmed to disappear by the end of Macron's five-year term of office: the government intends to privatise many services that are today provided by the public sector. This is one more example of the aim on aligning France with the European countries that have already reduced the number of public sector workers and the scope of public services.

In parallel, a frontal offensive is also being conducted against the status of rail workers and the range of services provided by the state railway company, the SNCF, by suppressing a large number of small lines in the regions and

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opening up the main lines to competition. Rail workers benefit from a public status and a specific retirement pension scheme, which several governments have unsuccessfully attacked, in particular that of Alain Juppé in 1995. So there would be an emblematic aspect to a social defeat of the workers of this sector, a message sent to the whole movement demonstrating that if the rail workers themselves have been beaten, there is no point in hoping to have the strength to resisting the government's reforms.

In all, over several weeks, there has been an increase, in a sporadic fashion, of strikes by school and university students, but also a growing mobilization of pensioners and employees of hospitals for dependent adults (EHPADs), parallel to a movement of co-ordination of hospital workers, organized by a national coordinating committee, with the support of the SUD trade-union federation and many CGT unions. Air France workers, united in a very broad inter-union alliance, will strike on the March 23rd and 30th to demand a 6 per cent increase in wages after six years of a pay freeze.

Seven federations of civil servants (all except the CFDT and UNSA), after having called a strike on October 10th against the freezing of their salary index and against the attacks on their jobs and their status, will be on strike again on March 22nd. The SNCF unions (CGT, SUD and FO) have called rail workers to demonstrate on March 22nd before launching a prolonged strike movement on April 3rd.

Many private enterprises, threatened by plans to lay off workers or close down plants, are also in the process of mobilizing, such as Carrefour and Ford Blanquefort, where Philippe Poutou works.

Overall, around particular specific demands, all of which however concern jobs and wages, and in many cases public services, a social movement of considerable breadth is being built.

There is no guarantee of its success, the more so as the government has several advantages. If it launches a frontal attack without really negotiating, it can count on the support of the CFDT and the hesitant attitude of Force Ouvrière. In the same way, without in any way scaling down its objectives, it will set up a series of meetings with the unions where there will be a pretence of negotiation. The CGT leadership, once again, is pulled this way and that, between on the one hand the pressure of combative sectors who want to build up a real relationship of forces and an effective movement, and on the other hand the fear of finding itself isolated in a confrontation with the government.

Overall, SUD Solidaires is the only trade-union organization that is clearly putting forward a perspective of convergence of struggles and the construction of a broad movement against the policies of the government. The choice made by the SNCF federations of the CGT, UNSA and the CFDT of a disjointed series of strike days starting on April 3rd, is refused by SUD-Rail, which wants to build an ongoing strike movement. The governing is counting on taking advantage of these divisions to get the union leaderships bogged down in a false social dialogue and avoid the convergence of struggles.

To this division among unions and among different sectors is obviously added the weight of the defeat in 2016 against the Labour Law and the defeat without combat against the ordinances of autumn 2017. That weighs on the shoulders of many combative trade-union sectors.

These negative elements can obviously be countered by the dynamics of the mobilization and by the mobilizations of important sectors of health workers, civil servants and of course the rail workers. That is what tens of thousands of combative activists are working towards.

Furthermore the principal contradiction of the situation on the side of the Macron-Philippe government is that it is counting on the absence of solidarity with the civil servants and the rail workers. A sustained media barrage denounces their "privileges" on a daily basis. It would be untrue to say that this campaign is having no effect, but at the same time, it is coming from a government that in the past few months has come across as the government of those who are really privileged, handing out more and more tax breaks for wealthy people and shareholders.

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Furthermore, the credibility of Macron's government comes less from its popularity than from the absence of serious political opposition. En Marche is a weak political force, but the traditional right, the Republicans, like the Socialists, are paralyzed, the National Front is voiceless and Jean-Luc Mélenchon is shutting himself up in an identity-centred posture that is paralyzing the energy of those that he had succeeded in mobilizing. In addition, his political orientations concerning migrants and Syria can only disorientate the activist layers that are close to him.

To sum up, a social window is opening, which can itself change the political climate. March 22nd will mobilize a large number of demonstrators. But it will have to exert all its weight, both to help to bring together the sectors that have mobilized and to support the building of a broad movement, in the localities and nationally, in the coming weeks.

Olivier Besancenot has encountered a broad popular echo in the course of several televised interventions over the last few days in favour of solidarity with the rail workers and for a broad unitary movement against the social attacks. With the engagement of its militants in the preparation of March 22nd and its sequels, the NPA took the initiative of a political appeal that was made public on March 19th, bringing together forces ranging from Libertarian Alternative to Benoît Hamon, via La France Insoumise, in support of March 22nd and of the movement of the rail workers.

All of this does not yet mean that this is the springtime of struggles, but it bears witness to a political climate that can change through building a unitary movement against Macron.

March 20, 2018

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