

# **Pensions mobilization (France): perspectives in chiaroscuro**

Tuesday 20 June 2023, by [CREMIEUX Léon](#) (Date first published: 18 June 2023).

**The first two weeks of June brought to an end six months of confrontation between French President Emmanuel Macron's government and the popular classes, the trade union movement, social movements and the political left. Pyrrhic victory is surely the term that best corresponds to Macron's situation at the end of this period. He has succeeded in imposing his reactionary reform, while having isolated himself by further reducing his social base and has needed the support of the Gaullist les Républicains (LR) party to get the reform through the National Assembly and the Senate. He can boast of having raised the retirement age to 64 but he has not managed so far to overcome the two crises he is going through: a parliamentary crisis given his weakness in the Assembly and his non-existence in the Senate are all the more evident today with increased dependence on LR and the far right Rassemblement National (RN) to pass his bills; a crisis of legitimacy, of social base since Macron and his supporters are still disavowed in the country, whether on the issue of pensions or on the government's policy as a whole.**

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On the other hand, for the social movement, the results are necessarily a mixed bag. The 14<sup>th</sup> day of mobilization on 6 June, almost two months after the law was promulgated, saw 250 protests. This day, with an average of two-thirds fewer demonstrators than on 1 May, was the lowest in terms of the number of demonstrators - 281,000 according to the police and 900,000 according to the CGT union federation - since the beginning of the movement. But this number, even if reduced, reflects the persistent rejection of this law and the will to fight the government's reforms. Moreover, the latest polls still indicate a rejection of the reform by a large majority and support for the movement, even if a very large majority has always thought that Macron would succeed in passing his law.

The *Intersyndicale* trade union coordination had called for this day of action on 6 June because two days later a bill proposed by the independent parliament group LIOT, seeking to vote for the return of the retirement age to 62 was scheduled for voting in the Assembly. This last institutional battle did not take place, the government made every effort to ensure that the deputies use the strings of the Constitution (in this case Article 40), to ensure that this vote did not take place, invoking inadmissibility. Here again, it was the support of the LR group that meant, unprecedentedly, that a bill proposed by the opposition was buried for "lack of funding of the measure" while the Assembly's Law Commission had already deemed it admissible. The last act therefore did not take place. Obviously, Macron did not want the only real vote of MPs on pensions since January to be a vote to reject his law. Even without impact - because the reactionary majority of the Senate would have blocked this initiative - the display was unbearable for Macron and his government.

The last meeting of the national *Intersyndicale*, on the evening of 15 June, reaffirmed its unity, its

opposition to the pension reform and its commitment to act on other issues, from the autumn, but without formulating a common social demand vis-à-vis the government or the employers or any concrete call to prepare a new mobilization of the hundreds of thousands of workers and activists in the movement since the beginning of January.

Now, the trade union movement, the social movement, the NUPE (Nouvelle Union populaire écologique et sociale, an alliance of left parties) and the radical left are therefore confronted with their responsibility in the coming months. Because the government intends to accelerate its policy of social and democratic attacks and, paradoxically, Marine Le Pen has the wind in her sails in the opinion polls, to the delight of most editorialists who see the left thus marginalized!

## Perspectives

Important questions arise: First, how can a social movement create the balance of power sufficient to block a governmental attack on the popular classes? From this point of view, the balance sheet of the last six months is obviously contradictory. The movement had a very significant strength, uniting the vast majority of employees, with support from the great majority of the entire population. The *Intersyndicale*, operating necessarily on the basis of consensus so as not to break up, followed the orientation of the major days of mobilization (14 from January to June), with the aim of exerting sufficient pressure on the government and the elected deputies in the assembly. So, a battle of opinion counting on the fact that his isolation in the country would force Macron and his prime minister Borne to back down. But the government knew that they had institutional tools that could allow them to override it, despite their minority situation in the Assembly.

If there was any hope that the votes in the Assembly would block Macron, it was necessary to count on the crisis of the Republican right (the LR), torn between its desire to assert its opposition to Macron and its fundamentally neoliberal orientation, in accordance with this reactionary bill. The LR candidate for the 2022 presidential election (Valérie Pécresse) had campaigned herself on raising the starting age to 65. So, on the institutional terrain, the social movement still came up against a majority of reactionary deputies, even if the RN maintained a posture of rejection of the law. The movement could not therefore put most of its hopes in these crises within the right and in parliamentary objectives.

The alternative posed to this orientation of the *Intersyndicale*, in January, by Solidaires and, less clearly, by the CGT was the prospect of the development of strikes, the renewable strike, to “bring the country to a standstill,” counting not only on a battle within public opinion but on direct pressure on the employers by blocking economic life. Many thought that the movement could walk on both legs, with sectors entering renewable action and others participating mainly in the big days of strike. Ambiguity will not have served the movement. It was not easy for a good part of the professional sectors to start together on renewable action. Not so much for financial reasons (many employees without being in a renewable strike movement will have been on strike for many days between January and June). The essential question was that at no time did the *Intersyndicale* give as an objective, as a signal to all employees, a common departure on renewable strike even if only for one or two weeks. It therefore did not give confidence in acting together in this direction, and the days of strikes and weekly demonstrations quickly became contradictory with embarking on renewable strikes.

Many hard-fought strikes in the private sector in recent months, especially for real wage increases, have lasted several weeks, in companies without high unionization and low wages, and most often without a common union front. But determination resided there, coming from the feeling shared by

the strikers of these companies that they could win by blocking the company, by imposing their force, everyone pushing in the same direction. Few sectors alone have the strength to block the economic life of the country, on the other hand the addition of several hundred companies can give a collective strength, create a balance of power and a new political situation of confrontation that could have allowed the bill to be rejected. Everyone felt that we were close to creating such a situation on 7 March with the deliberately ambiguous formula of the *Intersyndicale* to “bring the country to a standstill”, coupled with the call from seven CGT federations to embark upon renewable action, and with the call from Solidaires in the same direction. Targeting renewable strikes at the same time, on the maximum number of enterprises was certainly not an easy task to achieve, and here weigh the consequences of all the attacks decimating the forces of the trade union movement, just as trade union divisions weigh in many enterprises. But this perspective was obviously the most realistic in the face of a government all the more rigid on this law because it is weak politically, even if it would not have been easy to implement. We must discard the naïve idea of millions of employees being ready to fight but gagged and hampered by the union bureaucracies. Moreover, the weakness of general meetings in workplaces contrasted with the massiveness of the demonstrations.

Today the page is turned and there will be many debates on balance sheets, especially in the CGT, Solidaires and the FSU, unions which supported both the demand for the renewable strike and the fight for the maintenance of the inter-union front. The trade union movement can boast of having taken an important social and political place in the country, clearly improving its confidence rating among employees and gaining 100,000 new members since January 2023, especially among private sector employees in small companies.

But it will be necessary to make progress on these issues, because the sole commitment of the *Intersyndicale* to maintain itself and to open other fronts, affirmed in the declaration of 15 June, will obviously not be enough. Since mid-June, the social movement has not died, the forces that focused on the question of the age of retirement are still active and present, but they have lost their common point of convergence.

The question remains that of building an offensive by the popular classes to block reactionary social attacks which, like those on pensions, worsen living conditions; the construction of a front that puts forward urgent social demands, without hesitating to target the distribution of wealth, the questioning of capitalist rules imposed in the workplace and society as a whole. This front will therefore not be possible without as a single reference a national inter-union coordination of all the confederations, several of which espouse and have espoused neoliberal policies. If the leadership of the CFDT, the CFTC and the CGC have clearly fought the pension reform, they often accept the imperatives dictated by the employers or the government, as was the case in February with the national interprofessional agreement “on the sharing of added value” which in a context of major inflation, has completely ruled out the question of wage increases to focus on bonuses, profit-sharing and savings plans. Similarly, several conflicts over wages have been victorious, whereas in the case, for example, of the textile company Vertbaudet, a minimum NAO (compulsory annual negotiations) agreement had been signed in March by the CFTC and the CGC, granting 0 euros of increase and two bonuses for a total of 765 euros net. The strike of more than two months of the workers, supported and mediatized by the CGT, and in particular its new General Secretary Sophie Binet, made it possible to obtain real wage increases, from 90 to 140 euros net, with the hiring of 30 temporary workers on permanent contracts.

So, creating new dynamics of mobilization and building a social confrontation with the government will require building units based as closely as possible on urgent requirements by trying to rally the broadest trade union front through mobilization. It also implies developing links and coordination with associations of the social movement defending and mobilizing around urgent requirements, on environmental damage, women’s rights, housing, discrimination and racist attacks. Maintaining and

expanding the social climate created over the past 6 months by giving it the objective of mobilizing on all urgent social issues. This is important because, if the strength of the popular mobilization for six months was based on social anger, the incessant attacks suffered, often only the activists of the CGT, Solidaires and the FSU regularly made the link, on the ground, with the other urgent social demands, insisting on a different distribution of wealth targeting capitalist profits and their tax exemptions.

Macron and his government therefore continue to move forward and want, to escape their isolation and go beyond the question of pensions, to divert social anger from the government and the employers by targeting immigrants or the most precarious, and by polarizing on issues where the Macronists can make alliances with LR and the RN, without fear of parliamentary paralysis. Thus Macron, Borne and interior minister Darmanin have embarked on a social war against the popular classes on several grounds, including social security and housing, most often with a reactionary front of the deputies of Ensemble (Macronists), LR and the RN. Thus, the pernicious law on housing, the Kasbarian-Bergé law which is a veritable declaration of war against precarious tenants shattering the few protections in case of unpaid rents and allowing multiplying of accelerated evictions. This while the question of social emergency is indeed that of the access of the working classes to social housing.

A formidable mechanism is at work. The permanent rise in credit rates and the decline in the purchasing power of working-class families has, on the one hand, stopped the small current that made it possible, for those who had the means in previous years, to acquire housing or to move from social housing to the more expensive private stock. At the same time, the construction of social housing (HLM) in 2021/2022 was 25% lower than the 250,000 officially planned, and already largely insufficient. Indeed, 2.3 million families are waiting for social housing, and there are at least 300,000 homeless and 4.1 million poorly housed in France. So, faced with a social issue of primary importance, the government is choosing to punish tenants and criminalize the homeless. Not only did this alliance of the right and the extreme right vote through a villainous law that will affect single-parent families and therefore women most, but it also voted for the right of landlords to increase rents by 3.5% in 2023 after the 3.5% voted through in 2022, while the NUPES proposed a rent freeze. Despite its claims of popular opposition, the RN still takes the side of the propertied classes.

Similarly, in recent days, the government has also decreed a decrease in the coverage of dental care by social security from 70 to 60%. They are also criminalizing the popular classes targeted by the hunt for social security fraud: "abuse of sick leave, unjustified benefits" with an obvious background of racism targeting Maghrebians bi-nationals and the "abuses" of state medical aid which benefits irregular migrants and represents 0.5% of public health spending. Both the RN and the government target immigrants, whether legal or not, and working-class "fraudsters" while corporate tax evasion (not to mention legal "optimization") represents 80 to 100 billion per year, the absence of social security declarations by companies 20 to 25 billion, and an amount equivalent to fraud on the VAT statement. Similarly, competing with the RN and the LR to flatter the reactionary electorate, Darmanin wants to introduce in a few months a new law to fight against immigration (the 30<sup>th</sup> since 1980).

This reactionary course goes hand in hand with the development of an authoritarian and repressive state policy that expands its repressive arsenal with new limitations on the rights to demonstrate and assemble, the use of anti-terrorism laws and exceptional police mechanism to attack democratic rights (including algorithmic video surveillance by drone cameras planned for the 2024 Olympics) The latest environmental demonstrations, after those against the megabasins of Sainte Soline, took place against the Lyon-Turin TGV link, on the weekend of 17-18 June. More than 5,000 people gathered in the Maurienne valley in Savoie. The titanic €30 billion project is planned to double the

Fréjus tunnel, artificializing 1,000 hectares of farmland and imposing an annual drainage of 60 to 135 million m<sup>3</sup> annually. While the demonstration was supposed to bring together hundreds of activists from Switzerland and Italy, the government used the arsenal of anti-terrorism laws to block the access of seven buses of Italian environmental activists thanks to the arbitrary IAT (administrative ban on entering French territory) act of the Minister of the Interior that bypasses any judicial intervention and does not even have to be justified. Clearly, today the government would like to cut off the legs of the network of social struggles around the climate movement, whose dynamic, combativeness and impact among youth have increased in the heat of the mobilization against the pension reform. The absurd threat brandished by Darmanin of the dissolution of the *Soulèvements de la Terre* (which includes the *Confédération paysanne*, *ATTAC*, the *Union syndicale Solidaires*, *Alternatiba*) illustrates the government's fear of the political place taken by this movement.

The movement against the pensions reform has been the most powerful social movement, the has mobilized not broadly, since 2010. It was of unparalleled depth, especially in small towns, in rural areas, often left out of previous social mobilizations but already very active during the *gilets jaunes* movement in 2018. It was motivated by the frontal attack against the popular classes represented by the postponement of the retirement age to 64 years which will have the concrete effect of a precariousness of employees close to retirement age and an increased reduction in their pension, the loss of the two best pensions, especially for those who have worked in arduous jobs.

But beyond that, all the social suffering of everyday life has consolidated this mobilization so deeply and so durably: suffering at work, arduous and long transport, deplorable housing conditions and attrition of social housing, low wages and cost of living increased by the pandemic and inflation, impossibility of providing for health care, difficulties of daily life with the clear cuts in local public services, the proliferation of "online services" making it more difficult to carry out the slightest administrative procedures. Also, for families the increasingly expensive care of the elderly, the exorbitant cost of nursing homes often in lamentable conditions, the difficulty of installation and employment of young people. It is therefore a social issue, a global social question, therefore a political question concerning the place and the defence of the interests of the popular classes that has been asked, expressed, often relayed by this movement. The challenge has therefore been and still is to give political visibility, a materialization to this class issue by tracing a political alternative based on the fight against these social attacks and therefore for alternative, anti-capitalist choices, based on the satisfaction of social needs.

One is struck by the ardour with which capitalist ideologues have been firing on all cylinders in recent weeks to fight, even crush, any "deviant" inclination from the official neoliberal doxa. The NUPES is targeted daily as irrational, incompetent, submissive to leftism and Islamism, having no economic credibility. The TINA (There Is No Alternative) dear to Reagan and Thatcher in the 1980s now has a prominent place, especially among the spokespersons of Macronism and the editorialists of generalist media owned overwhelmingly by a few capitalist billionaires. Reactions are sometimes epidermal. This was the case following the words of director Justine Triet, after winning the *Palme d'Or* at this year's Cannes Film Festival. She dared to make a speech denouncing "the shocking way in which the government has denied the protests against the pension reform." In the aftermath, she castigated "the commodification of culture that the neoliberal government defends." While all the professional unions shared and supported this speech, it was spectacular to see the speed and violence of the hostile reactions coming from the government and the neoliberal acolytes. It was all the more important to try to discredit her speech since the prestige of the Cannes Film Festival is one of the cultural vectors in which the "intellectual elite" is supposed to share the discourse of the ruling class. The spectre of the 1968 Cannes Film Festival was obviously still in the memories of some.

More surprising were the reactions to a report written by financial inspector Selma Mahfouz and economist Jean Pisani Ferry, one of the mentors of the young Macron. This report on the financing of the ecological transition, coming from this neoliberal economist, dared to evoke, given the urgency and importance of the necessary financing, the implementation of an “exceptional tax for the wealthiest 10% of French people”, a tax paid once corresponding to the amount of 5% of their financial wealth. This would raise EUR 150 billion immediately. To have dared to target rich households who own half of the total net wealth (real estate and financial) is obviously intolerable. Only the “leftists” of the NUPES could have such proposals. Thus, betrayed by one of their own, Borne and her finance minister Bruno Lemaire immediately and sharply dismissed this hypothesis, judging it contrary to the government’s entire policy of reducing the tax burden.

These two examples are indicative of the desire to assert that there is only one possible response to financial and social questions. This desire requires the effort to discredit not only anti-capitalist discourse but even the anti-neoliberal discourse adopted by those on the streets in recent months and by part of the trade union movement, the NUPES and the radical left. In particular, it is important to discredit the NUPES as not being able to represent an alternative to neoliberal policies, and even being a more dangerous option than the RN. From this point of view, the instruction is widely followed by the editorialists of the major media to indulge in “NUPES bashing” and prevent this political alliance appearing credible for the next elections. In another complementary register, the nostalgics of the social-democratic left play a little music aimed at discrediting the leftists of la France insoumise and Europe Ecologie Les Verts, privileging societal issues (understanding LGBTQ+ movements, climate, feminist and anti-racist movements) to the detriment of “serious” daily concerns supposed to be those of the popular classes. However, within those classes, all the suffering of everyday life is increased when you are a woman, often with the lowest wages and head of single-parent families, often subjected to violence, harassment and discrimination at work; when you are from a postcolonial generation, suffering the discrimination of everyday life, spatial relegation, state racism and police violence. These social issues are not societal concerns outside the popular classes, but integral parts of the daily problems of millions of men and women. The same is true of environmental concerns, which testify to an urgency experienced there also by the popular classes in particular.

### **A political alternative**

But the question of a political expression based on social needs, global, outlining an alternative to neoliberal policies is indeed a point of weakness of the current situation. It is true that the anti-neoliberal left, the NUPES, is discredited daily in the media and has difficulty making a coherent voice heard, beyond the caricature it suffers. It is also true that government circles and their supporters have clearly chosen to de-demonize the RN, treating it as a serious and responsible opposition, opposed to the “dangerous ecoterrorists and Islamo-leftists of la France insoumise.” Despite all its limitations, the NUPES appears alone in the rejection of neoliberal policies. This is obviously not the case with the remnants of social democracy that some would like to resuscitate. But neither is this the case, obviously, with the RN which, like Georgia Meloni, is totally devoted to these neoliberal policies, following Macron on many of his reactionary laws, adding only the poison of more racist discrimination.

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The main danger thus becomes for the defenders of the system, the possible emergence of a force making the junction between social demands and a political alternative. From this point of view, France has a particular situation in Europe, the strength of the recent social movement and the presence of the NUPES placing the country for the moment against the current situation elsewhere, with a left that maintains a significant electoral strength, predominantly anti-neoliberal. Hence, everything has been done to ensure that the RN appears in the media and polls as the only winner of recent months (even if in reality, according to the latest polls, the NUPES would progress and obtain the relative majority in the event of early elections).

Unfortunately, this growth and the difficulties on the left are not the only reflection of media manoeuvres. There is obviously a deficit, which has been present since the autumn. Already analysed widely, it came from the inability to achieve a common, unitary, union, social and political front. The NUPES, rather than worrying about its common responsibilities in such a situation, rejects any common activist organization in the cities and regions, la France insoumise is suspicious of any idea of internal democratic organization and functioning, and no initiative, outside the National Assembly, is taken to promote common rallies of local or national dimension. Rather than looking for a common expression today, each component of the NUPES, apart from LFI, seems mostly concerned with a particular expression in the upcoming European elections. This situation leads to criticism within the LFI, to a common call for unity among the leaders of the youth organizations of the NUPES, in several forums. In any case, the leaders of the NUPES, after this social movement, seem unable to take initiatives for common social and political proposals against Macron, reinforcing the limits of their electoral agreement. Within the radical left, several hundred activists from the NPA (Nouveau parti anticapitaliste) and the feminist, trade union, ecologist, antiracist and associative movement have just called for a process of local and regional meetings for the holding of a social forum for early July “to build in the long term a new democratic and pluralist force.”

All in all, building a unitary, union, social and political common front will have to be the task of the hour, to make credible a political alternative fighting neoliberal policies. The program of this alternative is very much present in the demands made in the combative trade union currents, notably in the CGT, Solidaires and the FSU, in the activist associations of the social movement. La France insoumise and the NUPES had become the spokespersons for many of its demands during the last elections. But the question now is building a common activist melting pot, capable of organizing, debating and being the basis of the mobilizations to be built.

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