

France: An unprecedented movement which is far from over

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Since last May, the situation in France has been marked by the mobilisation against the pension law. Days of mobilisation succeed days of mobilisation, the movement against pension reform continues to develop and put down roots. It is the confirmation of a profound movement massively rejecting not only the pension reform but more broadly Sarkozy's anti-social, racist and authoritarian policies as a whole. But also the injustices accumulated and accentuated by the crisis, whether among the young or among wage earners.

That is why the demonstrations, although repetitive, are not shrinking and are even beating records, in particular those on October 12 and 19 when 3.5 million people were on the streets. The gatherings are increasingly combative and radical. The private sector is highly mobilised and now youth (at this stage essentially high school students) have also entered into mobilisation. Because the youth have understood that their access to a job in the short term and to a pension at full rate in good health were highly compromised by this reform.

Little by little the environment has changed, many of us, very many, think that victory is possible, that we can defeat Sarkozy. Already, at this stage of the mobilisation, the government has lost the battle of public opinion. 70% of the population support the mobilisations and oppose this reform. Today, the majority of the workers, those in precarious jobs, and youth know that the question of pensions is neither a demographic question nor one of financing as the government has tried to have us believe for some months.

The strike has little by little become a feature of the landscape. With each day of strikes and demonstrations, it has appeared increasingly obviously to numerous sectors that staggered days were not enough to defeat the government. In fact, ongoing strike action has never been so much discussed in all sectors of activity as in recent weeks, to the point that 61% of those polled favour prolonged strikes. The problem is precisely the leaderships of the trade union confederations who, even if they are pushed by the rank and file to continue, make sure they avoid calling for a general strike. Since the beginning of the movement, trade union unity has undoubtedly been a gain, a point of support in the success of the days of strikes and demonstrations. But the inter union coordination has not called for a major social confrontation with this government, and no longer demands the withdrawal of the draft legislation, instead proposing new negotiations and amendments.

The key sectors of the economy have however decided to launch or broaden prolonged strikes. This is the case for example with the rail workers, EDF centres and refineries. In the latter sector this has not been seen since May 68. Since October 14, the 13 refineries are taking ongoing strike action with a total halt to the installation and shipping of fuel to service stations and depots. The strike is huge, renewed with virtual unanimity.

This movement is on the move everywhere, with every day new initiatives, blockade actions (toll points, roads, airports, industrial zones and so on), and local demonstrations taking place in a unitary and inter-professional fashion. Mass meetings of the different mobilised sectors are also taking place every day, small at the beginning, they are increasingly significant now. But it should

also be noted that if there are numerous strikes here and there in the public as in the private sector, ongoing action remains still too scattered and a minority phenomenon and the rate of strikes during the national strike days is high but not extraordinary.

For some days and in particular since the day of strikes and demonstrations on October 19, young people have participated fully in the mobilisation, with very significant and dynamic contingents and many high schools blockaded. There is a determination and politicisation here that was not there in previous mobilisations. The more they are said to be manipulated and the more their right to demonstrate is contested, the more their determination grows. The mobilisation in the universities is taking off, little by little. It is the big issue in the coming day, on the eve of the high school holidays.

Faced with this situation, the right, the employers, the government and Sarkozy remain determined to defend this unjust reform. Sarkozy is intent on a test of strength. The use of force is patent as shown by the police intervention against the refinery strikers or against the high school students, strong-arm tactics in parliament and the rejection of any discussion even with the most moderate union leaders. Their determination is understandable since this reform is for them at the heart of their austerity policy to ensure the crisis is paid for by those who are not responsible for it. Success with this reform will boost the financial markets but it is also the opportunity in France to change the relationship of forces and the distribution of wealth in favour of the richest. It is also a chance to get rid of the "social and fiscal burden" which is the legacy of old struggles and to bring the most resistant sectors to their knees. The key element for Sarkozy is also to rally his own camp some months prior to the presidential election. However, he is still far from victory and he has not broken or silenced the resistance.

The breadth of this mobilisation indicates the possibility of defeating the government. That is why the overall unity of the social and political left in this struggle is imperative. That is the meaning of the commitment of the NPA [Nouveau parti anticapitaliste - New Anti-capitalist Party] in all the unitary and political initiatives allowing regroupment of our forces and in particular through the national collective initiated by the Fondation Copernic and Attac. But this unity around the slogan "pensions at 60 and withdrawal of the draft law" does not hide certain disagreements on the basis and on the strategy of 'action in particular with the Socialist Party. The latter defends the pension at 60 but voted with the deputies of the right on increasing the number of annuities to 41.5, which in fact destroys the idea of defending the pension at 60. Also faced with the growing mobilisation, we prepare for the 2012 presidential election. When there are divergences with the left of the left, in particular with the Parti de Gauche of Jean-Luc Melechon, they concern essentially action strategy. The latter defends the immediate perspective of a referendum which would shift the mobilisation from the street to the institutional level at a time when the social test of forces is still before us!

The NPA has appeared since the beginning of the mobilisation as a party organising struggle, seeking unity around political objectives and demands: the withdrawal and undoubtedly now the abrogation of the law and the resignation of those responsible for the social crisis, Sarkozy and Woerth. We also develop anti-capitalist perspectives though an emergency social and political plan to beat the crisis.

The coming days will be decisive. The law will be voted through but that will not silence or halt this mobilisation because for all those who are today on the streets, on strike, this regime is illegitimate. Also, we know that a law which is enacted can be withdrawn in this country - this has already happened with the First Employment Contract [Contrat Première embauche] in 2007.

One to watch, then...

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P.S.

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