

French Trade Unions: Going All the Way or Just Going Along to Get Along?

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One of the key elements of the current new movement against the retirement reform is the unity of trade unions, which has so far survived. This unity of trade union leadership is perceived by a large section of workers, as well as by the population in general, as an asset, a fulcrum of the movement. The calendar of strikes and demonstrations is not seen as “periodically scheduled ritual demos” without prospects, as was the case in recent years, but on the contrary, till now, as mechanisms for full mobilization in diverse sectors. The trade union leadership thus seems, to most people, like an opposition to the government and Sarkozy.

The survival of this unity is explained above all by the fact that the government remains adamant about the heart of its reform (62 as the new minimum legal retirement age and 67 as the age of retirement with full benefits) and moreover gives no sign that it is willing to negotiate with the union leaders who are the most open to social dialogue. But it is also explained by the intensity of mobilizations, the depth of discontent, which makes it difficult for any trade union leader to break away from the movement in the coming months. Moreover it also allows some trade union leaders, particularly of CFDT, to recover their street cred after having given their approval to the retirement reform in 2003.

But despite this unity there are deeper, strategic divergences behind closed doors. At bottom, the trade union leaders are not all demanding the repeal of the retirement reform law — the joint demand is only for new negotiations that can amend the reform. Only FSU and Solidaires are clearly demanding the repeal.

What's more, the trade unions' joint strategy of action is really a weak point of the movement. In fact, even though the action schedule chosen by them allows them to maximize the number of demonstrators, it is not what it takes to build a large-scale mobilization through an indefinite strike, even though this issue has been raised in many sectors. It was especially the case in the aftermath of a great day of action on 23 September.

In the end, deciding, after the success of 7 September, on a new day of action after the National Assembly vote, and doing the same thing again about the Senate vote, means sending a clear message to the government: we won't stop you from passing your law!

Even though the trade union leaders organize, supporting mobilization by planning days of action, they, or a majority of them, refuse to go all the way to a major social confrontation with this government by spreading the movement, and over the last several days, they have made cautious responses while the most combative workers such as refinery workers were being attacked, the very right to strike being challenged.

We see it again in this movement: the trade union leaders clearly have not chosen confrontation to safeguard such an important social gain as retirement. But is that really surprising?

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P.S.

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