

# France: from revolt to the alternative

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In less than a year France experienced three major upheavals which have pushed it to the centre of international attention : the 'No' victory in the referendum on the European Constitution, the riots in the suburbs in autumn 2005 and the anti-CPE (contrat première embauche - First Employment Contract) movement in March and April 2006.

Although very different from each other, all three are evidence of the fact that definitely, in this country, 'things cannot go on as before'. If it is certain that an awareness of a profound social and political crisis preceded these events, it is nonetheless true that on each occasion significant boundaries were crossed.

Thus if we simply look at the social movement of this spring, even the least well-informed observer could have picked up at random: youth from the lycées [high schools] and universities on the streets for several months, joint action by these youth and workers, a trade-union united front of the sort not seen since the Liberation, new record sizes of demonstrations and the splits at the very top of the state machine being in full view...

This coming together of a crisis which takes various forms and gets ever deeper

with direct popular involvement, interrupting the 'normal' course of events, has led people to see it as an 'unprecedented situation, with the potential of a historical break', whatever may be the outcome of a situation which, precisely, remains open.

Faced with an unprecedented situation, the first conclusion we must draw is the necessity, an urgent one, of renewing our means of comprehension and analysis, since the first distinctive sign of a new situation lies in its ability to cause problems for our pre-existing schemas of interpretation. This job does not promise to be an easy one, yet we have no choice other than to embark on it immediately, for the only way to obtain these new necessary means is to forge them as we advance, striving to achieve a way of thought which can intervene on the basis of and into a new situation which is evolving rapidly.

## **CRISIS OF THE REGIME OR CRISIS OF THE STATE?**

We shall start from the following hypothesis: the revolt of March-April 2006 indicates the crossing of a boundary in the crisis of French society and its system of power: the social and political crisis is turning into a crisis of the state, which includes aspects of an institutional crisis ('of the regime'), but of which the institutional crisis is not the centre and is not the question which is directly at stake. We shall therefore refer not to a 'crisis of the regime' but to a 'crisis of state' in the sense of a destabilisation of the political capacity of the state apparatus and those who staff its leading positions to guarantee the 'normal' functions of class domination (to put it simply: leadership and repression) [1].

In fact, rather than a paralysis of institutions in the strict sense (after the fashion of a parliamentary system which had become unworkable as in the last years

of the Third or Fourth Republics) we are seeing a long-term disordering of the strategic behaviour of those who hold political power. And even more: it is the 'authority' of the state as such, the legitimacy of its action, which seem to be profoundly affected.

In this direction a previous boundary had been crossed at the time of the riots in the suburbs in autumn 2005. In their most spectacular aspect - the challenging in practice of the legitimacy of state violence (and thereby of the hard core of the action of the state as holder of the monopoly of this legitimate violence) - the very fact of these riots was evidence of the weakening of this state authority that was already in progress, a weakening that the rioters understood much better, in order to accelerate it, than the political elites.

This was all the more true in that the young rebels from the deprived districts did not merely attack the repressive apparatuses but also other symbols of places which indicated the presence of the state in these parts of the territory (schools, transport, equipment), which were perceived as being so many cogs in the same mechanism of social domination and violence.

These proto-political actions, of a 'serial' type (see the analysis of collective action by Jean-Paul Sartre in the Critique of Dialectical Reason), anticipate in practice - and even, in some cases, prepare the ground for - examples of 'direct action', pushing legality to the limit or openly infringing it; such actions, more concerted and organised, marked the final phase of the anti-CPE movement (between the last day of demonstrations on 4 April and the announcement that the measure had been rescinded). [2]

This also explains an infallible sign of situations of profound crisis, the violence which marked the movement. Massive state violence above all, culminating in

the heavy judicial repression which is currently being exercised against thousands of participants brought before the courts. [3]

This violence from above provoked in response a popular counter-violence, relatively limited but significant: not so much that, predictable and repetitive, of small organised groups, which were in fact external to the movement, but rather that which was linked to mass practices, sometimes spontaneous, sometimes organised. [4]

A counter-violence which was directed essentially against the police and the repressive apparatuses, without forgetting its targeted (and concerted) use with the aim of ensuring the continuation of collective action (maintenance of 'blockades', prevention of the activity of 'wreckers' by the demonstration stewards).

Despite the almost total absence of organised political response to the declaration of the state of emergency, it seems in this sense justified to regard the riots of November 2005 as the starting-point of the transformation of the pre-existing political crisis into a crisis of the state, a transformation which will be confirmed in the course of the anti-CPE movement and will subsequently return and become stronger.

At this point we should remove one interpretative obstacle, widely promoted by the media and apparently by common sense throughout the CPE conflict. This is the idea that all this agitation could have easily been avoided but for the 'obstinacy', the 'failure to listen' (or the absence of 'dialogue'), the notorious 'method', in short the particular 'temperament' or 'style' of the Prime Minister, Dominique de Villepin.

The explanation of events by the role of unique individuals, that is, by factors of a psychological and/or personal

nature, has a long history, linked to the previously mentioned difficulties in producing a 'cognitive mapping' of a new situation.

Let us merely recall that virtually identical reasons were adduced with regard to events which in many ways anticipated those we are dealing with here, namely the strikes of November-December 1995, which were blamed on the 'intransigence' or the bad 'method' (the alleged lack of 'communication') of the then Prime Minister, Alain Juppé, said to be 'unbending'.

But the real question posed here is not so much the refutation - quite legitimate of course - of the attempt to explain the mechanism of a political conjuncture by individual factors deriving from the personality of one of the protagonists.

It is rather a question of understanding how the very fact that characters as 'inadequate' or 'dysfunctional' as Juppé or de Villepin can be in positions of command at this precise moment is a contributory factor to a broader crisis that transcends them and that the latter, by a sort of 'ruse of reason' (i.e. by turning the consequences of their actions against their intentions) help to make worse. So what it is important to stress above all, in particular against those who try to deduce the logic of government action directly from the economic requirements of capital, is the determining role in this matter of the constraints imposed by the specifically political conjuncture, by the process of what we are here calling 'crisis of the state'.

In this trajectory of radicalisation and polarisation of positions we shall look more closely at two elements: first, we should stress that the notorious 'intransigence' or "absence of dialogue" which are invoked on each occasion do not refer to an individual inadequacy or a mere accident. They derive from political choices which have been made.

Here method comes together with content: the inability of neo-liberal counter-reform to inspire genuine support is written into the very nature of its project: to restore the power of capital by destroying the gains won from the ruling class during the period of the thirty-year Keynesian boom, and smashing the very possibility of a compromise leaving some space (however limited) for the interests of the dominated classes.

The government's obstinacy, apparently excessive' or even 'counterproductive', is therefore in no way a question of personal whim on the part of the Prime Minister (or of the President of the Republic telling him what to do), but springs from the fact that neo-liberalism leaves no space for 'negotiations' in any way comparable to those which shaped the compromises of the Keynesian period. [5]

Hence the sense of sham created by the 'contractual policy' advocated by the CFDT, which is in fact simply a synonym for the joint management of social regression by docile trade-union machines. [6]

Nonetheless it is a fact that in the case of the CPE even this option was unavailable: by slamming the door in the face of the CFDT, Villepin deprived himself in advance of any trade-union partner. It is also true that, especially after the failure of the movement of spring 2003, the price of sham-negotiation had tended to become prohibitive, including for the CFDT, which paid for its 'abandonment' and the breaking of the tradeunion front with a substantial haemorrhage of members.

This brings us back to the second element at the root of the current crisis of the state: the headlong rush in which the political powers have engaged after the defeat in the referendum on the European Constitution.

It is clear that this headlong rush was

above all a reaction to the shock wave created by the 'No' victory. Destabilised by the popular rejection of a long-term strategic choice of the ruling classes, divided as to the strategy to follow, the Villepin government rapidly embarked on an offensive escalation, aiming to create immediately a social base supporting its policy.

The hypothesis of the 'break', of a muscular and Atlanticist neo-liberalism, was taken up in practice by the whole of the right, emboldened by its victory on the social front in spring 2003. And it was Villepin, supposed heir of 'social Gaullism', who took on the job of putting the agenda of his rival Sarkozy to the test. Actually this had some initial successes (privatisations, the SNCM [Mediterranean ferries] conflict, the absence of any organised reaction to the proclamation of the state of emergency in the suburbs), successes largely attributable to the inertia and passivity of the trade-union leaderships and of the parties of the parliamentary left.

A further step was thus taken towards the crisis of the state potentially contained within the result of the presidential election in 2002.

Nonetheless, contrary to the claims of the media, lawyers and players in the parliamentary game, the vital point does not lie so much in the institutional aspects, which were significant and even unprecedented, although at a very much lower level than in a crisis of the regime like that of 1958, but in the manner in which the social and political crisis challenges the very logic of the Fifth Republic. [7]

The weakness of all the intermediate links (the party in power and, more generally, the party system, parliament ...) concentrates the whole set of contradictions onto a presidency of the republic that itself is without any real political legitimacy (since it results from the transformation of the second round of the

2002 presidential election into an 'anti-Le Pen referendum'.)

The presidentialisation of the regime, intended to stabilise bourgeois hegemony (which it succeeded in doing for a whole period) by protecting the executive from popular pressure, has turned into its opposite: the executive, and more particularly the presidency, has found itself obliged to 'go into the front line' as soon as there is the slightest upheaval, and thus finds itself particularly overexposed in the event of a crisis. Henceforth this tends to become a frontal conflict directly opposing the popular mobilisation to the top of the state machine.

As a result, and more than the strictly institutional aspects (which are part of it), the central fact is that the presidency is succeeding less and less in playing its role as a political centre, encouraging unity and cohesion, for the bloc in power, and tends, on the contrary, to become the weak link in the set-up.

This phenomenon, the origins of which doubtless go back to the successive periods of cohabitation, is aggravated by Chirac's loss of control of the majority party, which was created, we should not forget, after the 2002 elections to play the role of 'presidential party', and which has fallen into the hands of his sworn enemy. [8]

The hegemonic instability of French society, whose epicentre lies in the more or less open and active rejection of neoliberalism by a growing section of the dominated classes, is now continued by an exacerbation of the divisions and contradiction within the dominant bloc.

In a situation of rising popular mobilisation, it then becomes a crisis of the state (rather than a crisis of the regime) a crisis of which the condensed expression is the confrontation between the Chirac-Villepin couple on the one hand and Sarkozy and the majority of the UMP apparatus on the other.



We thus come to a configuration where the conflict between fractions of the ruling blocs encourages a logic of headlong rush into social confrontation, which itself generates an even greater destabilisation - above all in the event of defeat when faced with the popular upsurge. Hence the fact, which at first sight may seem paradoxical, that the immediate consequence of this defeat takes the form of a very deep governmental crisis, which is proof of the fact that the 'duality of power' within the French right is now out of control.

## **A HISTORIC ENCOUNTER**

As the product (in the last analysis) of the persistence of popular opposition, the crisis in its turn creates the 'indirect' conditions for its growing strength, especially after the assault against the state launched by the youth from the deprived districts in November 2005.

In this sense, the referendum, the revolt of the suburbs and the anti-CPE movement form three moments of the same political sequence. To put it another way, despite the setbacks that they have suffered and the harshness of the context, the remobilisation of popular forces is asserting itself as the lasting and essential feature of the period.

Its dynamic has shown itself capable of giving a lead, certainly in an uneven fashion and according to varied rhythms, to a growing number of the sectors of French society. In itself the appearance of a new generation, embarked since 2002 on an accelerated apprenticeship in collective action, would be sufficient to give credence to the idea of a major turningpoint.

But there is more: in the movement of March-April 2006 there was the convergence and even, on a more limited but nonetheless significant scale, the direct encounter between youth from the lycées and the universities and wage-earners,

the trade-union movement and certain sectors of the working class.

Unprecedented since the 1970s, this convergence and encounter mark the transition to an offensive configuration of social struggles, and that despite the defensive character of the demands of the anti-CPE movement.

Nonetheless, and it should also be stressed, the burden of past defeats continues to weigh on the relation of forces, and more particularly on the ability to mobilise of a crucial sector, the working class in the private sector, despite the encouraging signs noted on the occasion of the mass demonstrations of 28 March and 4 April.

The extent of the victory won by the workers and youth is thus all the more decisive. The first major success of the social movement since December 1995, it is certainly not in itself sufficient to cancel out the effects of the long years of liberal counter-reforms.

It nonetheless has the taste of revenge for the miscarried movement of spring 2003, the outcome of which gave a decisive advantage (and an unconcealed sense of confidence) to a government determinedly carrying out the neo-liberal restructuring of French society. Confidence has now passed to the other side, and that alone would be sufficient to be seen as a gain won by the movement. But without overstating the point, we can also see here the confirmation of the beginning of a rising and sustained cycle of mobilisations.

Three sets of indications point in this direction. First of all, this movement is part of a sequence begun by the political victory in the referendum on the European Constitution, a victory made possible by a popular mobilisation which came out of the melting-pot of the campaign for the 'No' vote organised by the antiliberal left.

Secondly, the expansive nature of this wave of mobilisation, with the emergence of the supreme 'sensitive plate' of the deep currents of society, the youth from the schools and universities.

An emergence which had already begun, it should be said, with the anti-Le Pen demonstrations in April 2002, the movement of lycée students in 2005 against the Fillon law and the swing of the majority of the youth into the 'No' camp at the time of the referendum. We should note in passing one of the consequences of the coming together of these first two tendencies: the going over of the leadership of youth organisations traditionally close to the Socialist Party (UNEF, UNL) to the minority left currents of this party which were involved in the left's 'No' campaign.

Finally the participation on an unprecedented scale by workers from the private sector in the demonstrations (especially the last two) shows that it was indeed in the context of the effervescence created by the youth mobilisation that sectors without any strong union organisation and without any recent experience of large-scale struggles were able to feel sufficiently drawn on by the movement to engage in the first forms, albeit limited (no strikes but sometimes mere stoppages in order to join the marches) but with great potential, of collective mass action.

A final point must be clarified with regard to the overall political meaning of the movement: in face of conservative and 'leftist' criticisms, which saw in the unifying demand of the struggle (rejection of the CPE) an absence or limitation of radical character (either so as to deny it any 'subversive' aspect and to devalue it in comparison with the supposedly 'Utopian' dimension of the 1968 movements, or so as to push for the 'broadening' of the basis of demands in order to make it more radical), it should be

stressed that the really radical nature of the movement lay precisely in its obstinate concentration on the question of the CPE. [9]

And this was not merely for reasons of a pragmatic nature ('it is easier to win if we concentrate on a single demand', although in the given context that would have been a perfectly legitimate explanation), but because of the way in which the politicisation of contradictions operates concretely in the course of a movement. In other words the political significance of the struggle consisted in its ability to make its central demand (the CPE) into the point of condensation of neoliberal policies as such. In a sense the demonstrators took literally de Villepin's claim that the presidential election, and, more generally, the whole government policy 'turn on the CPE'.

The movement thus showed that what was really at stake with the CPE was providing a young, docile and entirely 'flexible' supply of labour, and institutionalising the segmentation of the labour force (already operating in the CNE and in the ways in which the 35-hour week is being applied), in short the affirmation of unlimited power by the employers. [10]

Through a particular demand (the CPE as institutionalisation of lack of job security for those under 26), what was at stake therefore was the ability of capital to strengthen its grip in all areas of social life, starting with the workplace. It is in this sense that that the movement of March-April 2006 was a class (struggle) movement, an anti-liberal and anti-capitalist statement 'a in practical state'. This is shown by, among other things, the extraordinary spread of slogans in the student and lycée marches of slogans directly aimed at 'exploitation' (seen as the 'E' in 'CPE') and employers' power ('we are not bosses' fodder').

## **THE 'STUDENT MASS' AS A FRACTION OF THE CLASS**

This focus on the question of the conditions of exploitation was all the more remarkable given that the dynamic of the movement came from among the youth in schools and universities.

It is hard not to see in this a vivid indication of the extent of the transformation of this social category in the new social division of labour imposed by neoliberal capitalist restructuring. The radicalisation of youth now in progress therefore reveals new features, relatively distinct from both challenging of the ideological function of schools and universities (as in the student radicalism of the years around 1968) and criticizing its functioning in the distribution of wealth and social mobility (registration fees, material conditions and access to study) in the context of the movements of the years 1980-1990. [11]

This time the school and university youth has acted as part of the world of labour, of course in 'the process of integration' (hence the almost total absence of those sectors which see themselves as being already integrated into the world of the ruling class: preparatory classes for the grandes écoles [elite universities], a fortiori the grandes écoles themselves), but nonetheless carrying a 'class point of view'. A class point of view that, we must make clear, is not, or is no longer, that of a supposed 'new petty bourgeoisie' or of 'young professionals' aspiring to take on higher functions of command, design or cultural influence.

Reflecting a French society that, since the middle of the 1970s has experienced declining intergenerational social mobility and a more and more polarised social division of labour, the students and lycée pupils of today see themselves much more, and quite rightly, as sharing the fate of middle-level employees. [12]

Typical in this respect was the strongly

asserted concern of the student movement to link the abolition of the CPE to that of the CNE, which only affects firms with less than 20 wage-earners and is of little relevance to those holding university degrees.

Nonetheless, and contrary to what is claimed by a certain sort of sociology (which focuses on academic qualifications and the competition between those who hold them) the transformation in question cannot be reduced to a shift downwards of the terms of reproduction/class mobility via the schools and universities.

It is more generally the very site of this reproduction, to be more precise, the relative (but real) separation between reproduction and production given material form by the very existence (and increased role) of the schools and universities that is at stake here.

This separation tends in fact to become blurred under the impact of the dual basic tendency borne by the neo-liberal restructuring of capitalism: on the one hand, the growing subordination of the schools and universities to the capitalist-commodity logic that transforms those parts which are most massified and least 'competitive' into training centres that are more and more governed by the same logic as that of the positions (scarcely enviable) in the labour market for which they are the providers; on the other hand, the reduction of the gap between youth in schools and universities and young workers due to the increase in wage-earning activity among lycée and above all university students.

Certain branches or sectors of activity (fast food, call centres, supermarket chains, department stores) even specialise in this category of labour. If we add to this the extraordinary proportion of short-term contracts, sham probations, periods of unemployment etc that in France are imposed particularly on those

between 18 and 26, we end up with a range of positions which embody a violent movement of reproletarianisation of this part of the labour force.

Such a shift thrusts into the distant past the old gap between a minority of young people from well-off families with access to the baccalauréat and to university, and a majority who are involved in production.

This 'great transformation' has, of course (in comparison with 1968) not only made easier the link with workers but, above all, has given this an 'organic' character, the character of the building of a common struggle, and not of an alliance or solidarity between separate movements.

It also explains the main form taken by the student movement itself, which brings it closer, including in this perspective, to working-class struggle: the 'blockade' (and not 'occupation', an interesting semantic distinction despite aspects that are often comparable) of lycées and universities that are seen as being a place and tool of labour (and being intended for it) whose production flow (lectures, examinations) is to be interrupted.  
[13]

Hence too the division of the student population between 'pro' and 'anti' blockade, according to a line (and a logic) close to that between strikers and non-strikers (who are not necessarily hostile to the demands of the former, but are not willing to pay the price of taking part in the mobilisation).

The movement of March-April thus marks the appearance of the 'mass student', not in the sense of a convergence 'upwards' with the wage-earning population through the generalised intellectualisation of labour, but rather in the opposite direction: that of a massification which is part of the fundamental drive towards reproletarianisation/ recommodification

of the labour force that characterises neo-liberal capitalism. [14]

That is why the anti-CPE struggle of lycée and university students cannot be reduced to a protest against the 'devaluation of degrees'. Its truly political meaning lies in the assertion of a subjective position that links the specificity of the student struggle to the liberal restructuring of the whole set of capital-labour relationships.

## **THE WORKERS' MOVEMENT: AN UNEXPECTED AND CONTRADICTORY RESUMPTION**

The ability of the workers' movement to respond to the 'signal' sent by the youth had nothing obvious about it: the weight of the defeat in spring 2003, made worse by the partial defeats which followed it (privatisation of electricity, SNCM), was a very heavy burden, above all on the most highly mobilised trade-union sectors (transport, education, public sector), and therefore also on those most affected by the setbacks suffered in the course of recent years.

The situation became even more complicated as a result of the coming together of this retreat and the effects of the current 'recentring' of what remains the central force of French trade unionism, the CGT. [15]

We must therefore make some clarification of the meaning of this profound transformation of the trade-union landscape, especially since it excluded in advance, as the students and their coordination rapidly discovered to their cost, what was still possible in December 1995: the perspective of a renewable strike by the most highly unionised sectors. Put to the test by the movement of Spring 2003 (with the results we know of ... ) the line of 'united trade unionism' advocated by its leadership aims to put the CGT on the track of European reformist trade unionism with its ritualised



social confrontations, carefully set in a framework of long 'negotiation' procedures, during which the trade-union forces, generally divided, find themselves obliged to level down their already 'very reasonable' demands. [16]

We should make no mistake about this: the recentring of the CGT is a longterm project, not just a tactical manoeuvre. It corresponds to basic tendencies in social relations (the overall weakening of the trade-union movement, the decline of the Communist Party, the new strategies of the employers and the state), and its pursuit will lead to a clean break with the class-struggle trade unionism that is deeply embedded in the French workingclass movement.

This is also the reason why convergence with the CFDT is, for the CGT leadership, a permanent objective that has survived and will survive despite episodes of conflict (over pensions, for example) because it is now being carried forward on ground which is largely shared, at least by the confederal machines.

Yet the new orientation is still certainly far from having been stabilised, because of resistance from below, including from a section of the apparatus of the federations (thus the case of the constitutional referendum, which led the confederal leadership to get its own back by diverting the resources of the federations to its own advantage). But also because it is quite doubtful whether the landscape of 'industrial relations' in France - dominated by aggressive employers accustomed to dealing with unions that are weak, divided and, in some cases, manipulable (the CFDT having now taken over this role from FO) - leaves even a limited margin of success for any trade-union negotiator eager to import the customs of Northern Europe. [17]

The tendencies referred to above had a major impact on the ambivalences and hesitations of the trade-union front as it

was formed during the anti-CPE mobilisation.

Certainly it was a trade-union front united as had never been the case since the Liberation, but on a minimum basis, both in terms of demands (withdrawal of the CPE) and above all in terms of the organisation of the mobilisation: scarcely concealed distrust towards student selforganisation (the student coordination was marginalised in favour of the official university and lycée student unions), lack of any initiative encouraging joint action by students, lycéens and wage earners beyond calls for demonstrations, strict channelling of action by wage-earners into the framework of 'days of action' fixed as far as possible apart in time (in particular the refusal to call for a day of action on 23 March, as the student coordination had explicitly requested), in order to avoid any dynamic of renewable strikes.

On the evening when the withdrawal of the CPE was announced, CGT general secretary Bernard Thibault summed up this line of strict separation of spheres (the union confederations deal with wage-earners, the student and lycéen organisations deal with the youth, and everyone paddles their own canoe) by responding with the formulation 'everyone is master in their own home' to the question of what he thought of the calls by the student coordination for the continuation of the blockades. [18]

He also recalled that the CGT as such had never taken a position on the blockades of the lycées and universities, and that, in return, it strongly disapproved of the students directing slogans towards wage-earners.

In short, on the trade-union side, everything possible was done to continue on the same lines as in spring 2003. So it is not surprising that, at the recent CGT congress, two weeks after the end of the movement, Thibault considered that the result obtained confirmed that it was correct.

François Chérèque and the leadership of the CFDT were even more clear: if the movement won, then this was indeed proof that it is possible to win without striking. [19]

However paradoxical it may seem, especially in the eyes of the right-wing press, in France and abroad, which saw in this movement a definitive proof of the 'archaic nature' of French society and of the persistence of 'radicalism' within it, the leaderships of the CFDT and the CGT are striving, not without arguments, to make the movement fit in with the logic of adapting trade unionism to the norms of neo-liberal capitalism.

It therefore becomes necessary to recall that if this struggle ended in victory, it was essentially despite this tradeunion strategy. [20]

And this for two reasons: first of all, unlike spring 2003, the unions were under the constant and even growing pressure of a student and lycéen movement; an external pressure, in some sense, and one that was very effective, that did not let the movement fall back and that enabled it to outwit the manoeuvres of the government, which aimed to involve the inter-union body in a long-term pseudo-negotiation that would push the CPE to one side.

Moreover, it is important to make clear that if the maintenance of the unity of the trade-union front undoubtedly weighed in the relationship of forces facing the government (of course it is here that we find the core of truth of the idea of 'concerted trade unionism'), its most decisive contribution is to be found elsewhere, namely in what it enabled to be accomplished in a sense despite itself: the encounter between the students, lycéens and workers, an encounter which could not have taken place, concretely, at the regional, local and workplace level, without the support of the trade-union

teams.

A support which was conditioned - and this must also be stressed, in opposition to any reductive 'rank and filism' (which at every point juxtaposes initiative from 'below' to that from above) - by the existence of this unifying 'umbrella' formed by the inter-union coordination body, itself opened up to include student and lycéen organisations, thus legitimising de facto the radical forms of action coming from the blockaded universities and lycées. [21]

This was the price the movement had to pay in order to be able to bounce back at every turn and construct the dynamic of a movement that became, despite its limits, genuinely 'multi-sector'. Thus when it became clear that the major union leaderships would do nothing to make the movement part of a perspective of a renewable strike (broadly, that is, after 18 March, and more particularly after the refusal to call for a day of action on 23 March that could have stepped up the tempo of the mobilisation), the tendency to strike declined markedly in the sectors with the highest levels of unionisation (essentially the public sector), which had already had their fingers burnt by the experience of spring 2003.

But this downturn was immediately made up for by a sort of shift in the centre of gravity of the movement towards the demonstrations, and by a no less significant increase in the participation of workers from the private sector, who felt in this climate of general effervescence, powerfully encouraged by the actions on the ground and outside workplaces by students and lycéens, sufficiently strong to overcome a frequently long period of passivity and demoralisation.

The point is important because it gave a glimpse of the possibility of a radicalisation of the movement in the event of the government's refusal rapidly to withdraw

the CPE after 4 April, that is when the dynamic of 'demonstrations without renewable strike' had itself come to an end.

At this moment, in the course of this critical phase, we can see in the examples of so-called 'direct action' by the students and lycéens, not a minority radicalisation (of the type which the student coordination attempted, in vain, to launch after the withdrawal of the CPE) but an original model (in Europe, at least, for the Argentines have been experimenting with it for some time ...) of occupying the ground uninterruptedly, including that of the factories and of economic flows (transport), and a 'bridge' preparing a subsequent stage of the mobilisation.

It is thanks to such actions that the possibility, in the event of the refusal of the authorities to yield, of the launching of a renewable strike, raised by certain sections of the trade unions after 4 April, became a serious threat, obliging the unions to give the government ultimatums at ever shorter intervals (first of all on 17 March, then, de facto, on Monday 10 April), leaving it no choice other than withdrawal. [22]

Decidedly, we are a long way away from the scenario of anodyne negotiations as envisaged by the supporters of reformist trade unionism in the European Trade Union Confederation style. In the end, the signal which the students and lycéens sent to the workingclass and trade-union movement offered the latter an unexpected breath of life, radically outside the forecasts and routines of the union leaderships.

It confirms the idea that the opportunity for renewing the workers' movement is to be found in its immersion in the multi-faceted struggles that are running through our society, and not in a retreat towards its (supposed) strongholds, nor in adaptation to logics of institutions

or employers.

It gives a powerful impulse to the forces opposed to recentring that are to be found in many forms at the centre of gravity of the trade-union movement. But the confrontation will be a long one. In other words: the April 2006 victory demonstrates negatively that the adaptation of French trade unionism to the liberal order (under the aegis of the European Union, whence the importance of integration into the European Trade Union Confederation) can only be another way of describing the joint management of social retreat and the growing autonomisation of apparatuses that are more or less detached from the defence of the interests of the great majority of working people.

In the particular case of the CGT, the pursuit of such an orientation would eventually make it redundant in relation to the CFDT - whence the perspective of a bureaucratic type of trade-union unification, following the European pattern of 'fusions' between large union apparatuses.

It cannot fail, in a prolonged and often diffuse manner, to come up against the resistance of rank and file trade-union teams (and some of the federations) that continue to bring together the most battle-hardened and combative militants in the labour movement. These now know that they can find support and considerable reserves in the most diverse sectors of French society, beginning with the students and lycéens.

## **SYSTEMIC REACTION**

The defeat of the authorities by the prolonged mobilisation of the workers and youth leads on quite logically to a period of increased instability, of which the visible disintegration of the Villepin government and the death agony of the Chirac system

are the most visible consequences.

In general, social and political forces must confront the reinforced action of elements pushing towards the enlargement of lines of fracture which have appeared during the last period. The question of the maintenance and/or recomposition of their cohesion is therefore crucial.

To begin with that of the social-liberal bloc, seriously shaken by the referendum and which has still not succeeded in resolving certain key problems. First of all that of its own leadership, despite the 'synthesis' at the Socialist Party congress at Le Mans last November.

Will the appointment of a presidential candidate be able to resolve its difficulties and renew the voluntary submission of the anti-liberal minorities of the party to its leadership as occurred at the last congress?

It seems the task will be a difficult one, but we shall see that it is not impossible that the Socialist Party leadership will be able to carry it off thanks to the 'objective' assistance of the forces of the radical and anti-liberal left, bogged down in strategies of self-affirmation and of apparatus survival.

It looks as if things will be just as complicated for the parliamentary right.

Made worse by the prolonged nature of the battle and the great determination it showed, the defeat of the Villepin government leaves behind it a devastated landscape, with none of the components of the current majority being untouched.

Certainly the Chirac clique seems to be in an advanced state of decay, but despite a few tactical advantages, Sarkozy emerges strategically weakened. For as we have already noted, the defeat of the CPE is above all the defeat of the 'break' that he has been championing. Now what is certain is that things

cannot remain in their present state - this was in fact the core of truth in the hypothesis of the 'break' (and the strategic advantage it provided for its promoter).

The worsening of the crisis of the state, in a context marked by the increased presence of popular mobilisation, cannot fail to powerfully strengthen authoritarian tendencies, both 'from above' and 'from below'.

From above, in the sense of another turn of the screw for the 'liberal/law-and-order' penal state, which the neoliberal policies are putting in place by successive batterings of the ruins of the welfare state.

That the withdrawal of the CPE should be immediately followed on the parliamentary level by a new repressive law attacking so-called 'immigrant' workers has a symptomatic value in this respect, all the more so inasmuch as the attitude of the Socialist Party deputies illustrates perfectly how far the social-liberal bloc has gone over to the penal state. [23]

But we should make no mistake about it: this movement from above is also a response to a movement 'from below', which in return it helps to legitimise and amplify. This movement expresses a real 'moral panic' fed by the trauma which neo-liberal capitalist restructuring and the accompanying demolition of the Keynesian state are provoking in a growing number of social sectors. [24]

We should stress here the importance, often neglected by sociological and/or economic analyses, of the specifically political dimension of this process, which involves the growing impotence and disorganisation of state action in face of a general environment that becomes more and more unstable and threatening. The crisis of the state gives it a particular acuteness, which makes plausible the hypothesis of a 'rightward radicalisation' within an electorate which has had its fingers



burnt by the withdrawal of government  
and its inability to block  
“disorder”.

This is also shown by the feverish atmosphere  
among the Le Pen far right,  
which has already sucked the blood of  
the main part of the popular electorate  
of the right and a good proportion of its  
‘traditional’ petty bourgeois component  
(small traders, artisans, small employers,  
farmers ...). Closely marked by a Sarkozy  
who is constantly obliged to shift to his  
right (which poses certain problems of coherence  
for someone who in practice supported  
a conciliatory’ line in the CPE  
crisis), the National Front now finds itself  
with a competitor from the extreme right  
(Philippe de Villiers’s Mouvement pour la  
France), which tries to imitate it but above  
all is trying to win over to the classic right  
a part of its reactionary and traditionalist  
‘hard core’ (middle and upper layers of  
Catholics of a ‘rural’ type etc.).

Faced with these tendencies, pregnant  
with polarisation and destabilisation, and  
above all faced with a possible growth in  
strength of the anti-liberal and radical left  
(of which we shall say more below) the  
current configuration of the crisis is producing  
powerful countertendencies  
which aim to create a new point of equilibrium  
between social forces and the political  
system.

This is what we are calling here the  
‘systemic reaction’ and which, rather  
than support for a particular political  
bloc (the social-liberal left or Sarkozy’s  
UMP) must be understood as a ‘change  
of terrain’, a restructuring of the political  
space around a reorganised and displaced  
line of demarcation.

A schema of this sort had already  
made possible a (partial and temporary)  
stabilisation of the system of political representation  
after the shock of the first  
round of the presidential election in  
2002, thanks to the construction of an  
anti-Le Pen ‘sacred union’ stretching

from Chirac to the LCR.

At present it is the staging of the Ségolène Royal/Nicolas Sarkozy confrontation which provides the condensed expression of this. [25]

Its possible success would represent a large-scale shift to the right of the political axis, which would see an opposition between two converging versions ('centre left' and 'hard right') not simply of neo-liberalism (this was already the case since the Socialist Party and then the 'plural left' went over to the loyal management of the affairs of capital) but of a neo-conservative project aiming to remodel French society in depth.

So it is not just a question of the pursuit of liberal counter-reform, but of its qualitative deepening, after the fashion of a Bush or a Blair. This implies confronting and methodically extirpating the resistances which it provokes and which, at least in the French case, have succeeded in putting it in difficulties on several occasions and delaying certain aspects of it.

Hence the determination to finish off, in some sense, the Socialist Party such as it is, as an organised party (with activists, tendencies, congresses etc.) which possesses an autonomy, however limited, which allows the expression, although limited and highly distorted, of class contradictions. Such a reality is no longer tolerable by the system, especially after the 40 percent of internal votes won by the supporters of the 'No' to the European Constitution, which the synthesis of the Le Mans congress is not sufficient to erase.

For such is indeed the aim of the 'Ségolène Royal operation': to assert, on a scale which is unprecedented in France, the capacity of the media and of sections of the ruling class bloc to impose their choices on a party system which is both weakened and unreliable. In this sense, if it achieves its aims, systemic reaction

would put France in the age of 'post-politics', after the fashion of Berlusconi in Italy, who, we may recall, began his entry into the arena of political power under the wing of his friend Bettino Craxi, the then Socialist prime minister.

## **THE RADICAL LEFT AT THE (STRATEGIC) CROSSROADS**

For the radical and anti-liberal left there could be no greater error than to believe that it is sufficient to be carried onwards by the rising tide of mobilisation and that the only discussion worth having is about concrete details, more or less 'self-centred' or 'unitary' according to one's point of view.

In reality, the difficulty is much deeper: since 2002, and much more clearly since the referendum on the European Constitution, the forces advocating, to differing extents, a break with neo-liberalism (including its social-liberal, or centre-left, variant) have been striving politically to structure the antiliberal popular bloc that is developing 'from below' in the course of struggles and of the repoliticisation that has notably been impelled by the referendum campaign.

This difficulty is at least double: the weakness and fragmentation of the organised forces in their current configuration and the concomitant absence of a political project making the conditions clear for a break with the neo-liberal course.

Now only such a political structuring can permit the popular struggles to cross a decisive boundary: that which consists in being able to impose their own solutions and not simply to block those of the enemy. Without that, even the victories won will rapidly come up against their limits, and will prove to be fragile and temporary, as were those won in the past, for example in 1995 against the

Juppé plan.

So if it does not resolve everything automatically, the victory won by the workers and youth creates conditions that are exceptionally favourable for an initiative capable of beating social liberalism within the left, a necessary condition for inflicting a large-scale defeat on neo-liberalism as such and opening up the way for a confrontation with the hard core of the capitalist system.

Such an intervention is therefore destined to develop on two fronts, closely linked to each other. That of the organisational disposition, which does not necessarily mean, at least in the short term, new organisations (in the sense of 'parties') but nonetheless implies the creation of new crystallisations that are flexible but possess their own organisational consistency (that is alliances, fronts etc., with adequate structures at the base).

Whatever may be their limits, the committees created by the left in the course of the campaign for a 'No' in the referendum give a valuable indication in this direction, enabling us to envisage a concrete fashion of going beyond the current divisions and obstacles.

In the situation of crisis that we are experiencing, the presidential and parliamentary elections fixed for 2007 will be decisive and form an inescapable stage of this process.

If it fails, repeating the division we saw in 2002 (and the terms of which will depend this time essentially on the choices that the Communist Party and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire are led to make), then 'systemic reaction' pushing for the neoconservative restructuring of the French political landscape will find its task made greatly easier.

On the second level, of political project, the essential difference comes down to going beyond the logic - deeply embedded in organisations that have

broadly conceived their role as being sound boxes for struggles - that consists of drawing up a 'programme' by lumping together demands made in recent mobilisations.

Such a programme is usually juxtaposed juxtaposed abstract discourses and incantations about the necessity of immediately attacking capitalism or the institutions of bourgeois society. In other words, the question of the political alternative is not today posed in the first instance as the drawing up of a 'programme' which will supposedly guard against the surrenders required to obtain power (or inversely , of sectarian maximalism).

It no longer comes down to a mere drawing up of a set of 'constructive proposals' that are believed to confer on their supporters credibility and a decisive ability to convince. To think the alternative means a collective effort to elucidate political conditions for an effective break with the liberal course adopted by the governmental left since 1983.

It is only inasmuch as they take on fully this demand for a break that these conditions can be articulated as concrete measures and proposals, tracing the plausible contours of a 'new order'.

This is to say that such proposals will never be completely 'positive' because they are precisely aiming at the 'impossible', at pushing back the horizon of the possible, or else at creating a new possibility.

That is why the injunction constantly addressed to us by the supporters of the existing order in the form of the question 'So what do you propose?' should not discourage us. It reminds us in fact that the very condition of a 'proposal' which is any way 'new', capable of going beyond the existing situation, lies in the refusal, the radical negation of the fundamental coordinates of that condition.

That is why, and it can never be said too often, there is no Chinese Wall separating anti-liberalism from anti-capitalism: the decisive advantage in this respect for revolutionaries is to understand that any serious anti-liberal course of action, as dictated by the demands of the present conjuncture, any measure which attacks, even partially, the dominant choices and does not run away from its own consequences, leads by internal necessity to an overall break with capitalism.

In other words, only the concrete experience, begun afresh each time, of the class struggle, will enable us to prove again that nothing in particular can be really changed without changing the whole.

Now today, in a country like France, this course of action cannot be merely 'national'. It directly affects the framework of the EU, and, more broadly, the positions of France within the world order under the domination of the United States.

We can even say that it is these latter elements, laid down in the various European treaties and in the way France is incorporated in the world capitalist and imperialist system (from the presence of French troops in Afghanistan or Haiti to the role of the French state and French capital in international bodies or in countries of the South, especially Latin America), that draw the true line of demarcation between the forces in favour of a break and those oriented towards a mere reform of the neo-liberal and imperialist order.

The task is thus made even heavier by the inclusion of a strategy of coordinating struggles and political forces on the European level as a constitutive component of any 'national' political project (operating on the level of a determinate social formation) aiming to break radically with the existing framework.

The worst is never certain, but it cannot be ruled out in advance. We must therefore consider that, for the forces of the anti-liberal and radical left, the principal risk today is to fail to be up to the demands of the new situation, to miss the possibilities it contains by refusing to take on the (heavy) responsibilities which are theirs.

There are, to put it schematically, two ways of not being up to the challenge: first of all, an impatient and opportunist way, which consists of giving way on the lines of demarcation corresponding to the main contradiction.

Thus, for example, the illusion of certain sectors of the anti-liberal left according to whom it is possible to break with the Maastricht Pact without calling into question the institutional edifice of the EU, of the European Central Bank, the euro etc.

Or again the illusion that consists in wanting 'to shift the entire left in an antiliberal direction', including apparently the Socialist Party leadership or Ségolène Royal, as is sometimes suggested by the PCF leadership.

This 'right-wing' approach is paralleled symmetrically by a 'conservative' approach, which consists in repressing the new demands posed by the situation and seeking refuge in an attitude of withdrawal, organisational self-proclamation and political impotence.

Like Chirac promulgating a law and blocking its implementation, this approach, which seems to be an option for the majority of the LCR, exerts itself to talk about 'rallying together', about the 'unitary' manner of proceeding and even about a 'new anti-capitalist force' while immediately making it clear that it is urgent to do nothing concretely to progress in that direction.

This risk of paralysis must be taken all

the more seriously because the double tendency (opportunist/conservative) referred to above has, throughout the period following the referendum, shown itself to be powerful, running through (certainly in an uneven and differentiated fashion) all the components of the radical anti-liberal left.

It has succeeded in blocking any effective attempt at the political constitution of the popular anti-liberal bloc and in squandering a part of the capital accumulated during the left's 'No' campaign, especially on the level of the unitary committees (whose resilience nonetheless indicates the potential that has been preserved).

To remain obstinately in such passivity, with merely a few rhetorical contortions designed to create the illusion of an initiative, would be a truly historic error, since we are so close to a situation where catastrophe and the possibility of a leap forward exist side by side.

The time is now more than ripe to move to effective action.

## Notes

1 Here I am drawing freely on the analyses of Nicos Poulantzas. Cf. his book *State, Power, Socialism* (London, 1978) and the collection edited by him, *La crise de l'Etat* (Paris, 1976).

2 See for example the dynamic of the distribution of the mobilisation of lycée students in certain areas of Seine-Saint-Denis, which developed through genuine riots on the fringes of the movement of groups of students from one establishment to another, in order to extend the 'blockades' (and hence the spatial control of the movement) to the whole of the local territory.

3 The figures which are available, and which are doubtless incomplete, are nonetheless striking: more than 4000 arrests, nearly 1300 people prosecuted, and already, in mid-April, 68 people imprisoned and 167 with suspended



sentences or fines. (Source: *L'Humanité*, 13 April 2006.)

4 The case of the occupation of the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales by an 'autonomous' gang is an example pushed to the point of caricature.

5 Let us recall the obstinate refusal of Alain Juppé to utter the word 'negotiation', comparable to Villepin's rejection of 'withdrawal' or even 'suspension' of the CPE.

6 Editorial Note: The Confédération française démocratique du travail (Democratic French Confederation of Labour, CFDT) is today the French union federation most consistently willing openly to take side of the employers and the state. As Kouvelakis goes onto mention, its leaders played a critical role in undermining public sector workers' resistance in May-June 2003 to the government pension 'reform'.

7 In the context of the CPE crisis, these institutional aspects included destabilisation of the functioning of the executive, rivalries at the heart of the government, the promulgation and de facto suspension of the law, and transfer of responsibility, by presidential order, from the Prime Minister to the UMP (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire) parliamentarians.

8 Editorial Note: In 1986-8 and 1993-5 rightwing governments 'cohabited' with a Socialist Party president, François Mitterrand. In 1997-2002 the situation was reversed, with Chirac having to coexist with the plural left government headed by Lionel Jospin. Jospin's defeat in the first round of the presidential election in 21 April 2002 gave Chirac an overwhelming victory over Jean-Marie Le Pen in the run-off. Nevertheless the governments Chirac subsequently appointed have been weak and his main rival on the right, Nicolas Sarkozy, controls the UMP.

9 By 'leftism' we mean here not an organised political current but rather a tendency of a 'libertarian' type, widespread among the youth movement (essentially among the students) tending towards minority radicalisation, hostile

towards political organisations and, more generally, towards forms of centralised struggle.

10 Editorial Note: Imposed by decree by Villepin in August 2005, the *Contrat nouvelle embauche* (New Employment Contract, CNE) applies to enterprises with 20 or less employees and allows employers to sack workers without giving any reason during the first two years of employment. The CPE law sought to extend this principle to all workers aged less than 26.

11 The 1960s argument was echoed by (and partly inspired by) the critique of technocratic 'neo-capitalism' by Henri Lefebvre (cf. his important work *The Explosion* (New York, 1969) or by the 'ideological state apparatuses (ISA)' of Louis Althusser (cf. his well-known "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus" published in *Lenin and Philosophy* (London, 1971), not forgetting the role of the Chinese 'cultural revolution'. It was doubtless the Italian far left that was to give them their most developed formulation: cf. the 'theses on education' by Rossana Rossanda, Marcello Cini and Luigi Berlinguer in *Il Manifesto : analyses et thèses de la nouvelle extrême-gauche italienne*, (Paris, 1971), pp. 151-175.

12 Cf. Louis Chauvel, *Le Destin des générations. Structure sociale et cohortes en France au XXe siècle* (Paris, 2002).

13 The convergence may also work in the opposite direction: Michelin workers from Roanne, a town where the movement rose to an exceptional degree of intensity with a remarkable multi-sector dimension, describe their strike with 'filtering' pickets in May 2006 as a 'blockade' of the factory. Such spill-over of forms of struggle between youth and workers already occurred in 1986-1990 with the adoption of the 'coordination' form in the struggles of wage-earners from various sectors (railway workers, nurses, SNECMA [aircraft engine manufacture] workers etc.).

14 The idea of the general intellectualization of labour was put forward by the tendency inspired by Italian workerism in the 1960s and 1970s, joined in this by most of the neo-Marxist analyses of the period, and even (in an economic

and technicist version) by the theory of the 'scientific and technological revolution' in vogue in the Communist Parties of the time.

15 Editorial Note: Confédération générale du travail (General Labour Confederation, CGT), historically the most militant French union federation and the one with strongest base among manual and industrial workers. Once closely linked with the Communist Party, but the connection is now much weaker.

16 Stoppages lasting a few hours, 'warning' or sample strikes on the German model, at the very most a few days of action, carefully separated one from the others by at least a week.

17 Editorial Note: Force Ouvrière (Workers' Force, FO), the product of a Cold War induced right-wing breakaway from the CGT, traditionally the most right-wing of the union federations, but liable to episodic outbursts of militancy.

18 JT (television news) of France 2, 10 April 2006.

19 'We have shown that it is possible to be strong without striking,' interview with François Chérèque in Libération 12 April 2006.

20 Moreover, and even if it largely succeeded in imposing its line in the inter-union body, thanks to the unfailing support of the CGT leadership, the CFDT nonetheless had to accept engaging in a prolonged confrontation with the government with an uncertain outcome. This tends to prove that, despite the disclaimers, the experience of spring 2003, and more generally of the systematic signing of disastrous agreements, was neither conclusive nor repeatable, unless the CFDT leadership was willing to pay an ever higher price after each substantial social movement.

21 The student coordination was able to measure this inversely when it attempted to pursue actions directed towards wage-earners (even issuing strike calls) after the announcement of the withdrawal of the CPE, thus by-passing the support (impossible to obtain) of the interunion body. It was a catastrophic failure.

22 The unions backing this call included certain CGT federations and département unions, as well as those favourable from the outset: SUD, certain FO and FSU unions, etc. Editorial Note: Solidaires unitaires démocratiques (SUD) is the name of a number of unions affiliated to the militant federation Solidaires. Together with the Fédération syndicale unitaire (Unitary Trade Union Federation, FSU), the main teachers' union, Solidaires is a major stronghold of the radical left in the French workers' movement.

23 Inversely, and whatever may be his intentions (quite transparent, to tell the truth), the opposition stance taken up by Laurent Fabius on this question is an interesting indication of the resumption of the process of internal differentiation in the Socialist Party. The same is true of the recent developments of the PRS tendency, led by Jean-Luc Mélançon, which enables us to glimpse the possibility of a break in the framework of participation in a common candidacy of the anti-liberal left. Editorial Note: Fabius and Mélançon were leading figures in the rebellion against the official Socialist Party line of supporting the European Constitution and in the left campaign for a No vote.

24 See the analyses which have now become classic by the team at Birmingham University led by Stuart Hall on the rise of the 'law and order' theme as a point of displacement/condensation of the generalised social and political crisis in the last years of the Labour government in the 1970s: S. Hall et al, Policing the Crisis. Mugging, the State and Law and Order (Basingstoke, 1978).

25 Editorial Note: Ségolène Royal is the current front runner as Socialist Party candidate in the 2007 presidential elections. In confirmation of the analysis in the text, she has recently been staking out strongly right-wing positions, calling for rebellious youths to be made to do military service and attacking the 35-hour week that was the main social achievement of the Jospin government.

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## **P.S.**

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