

Pensions (France): the movement at a watershed

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The March 7 demonstrations in 280 cities in France broke the records of popular mobilization since the beginning of the movement for the defence of pensions: 3.5 million demonstrators according to the CGT, and 1.28 million according to the Ministry of the Interior. In both cases, these figures are higher than those of all days of social demonstrations, at least in the last 30 years, including 1995. And the memories of activists in many cities have confirmed these records of popular participation.

These figures reflect an inescapable reality: day after day, the rejection of the plan to attack pensions and the rejection of Macron and his government are increasing. They are increasingly isolated and a minority in the country, not only on this reform project, but on the confidence that the population can have in them. Ninety per cent of workers reject the pension bill and this figure, far from being proved mistaken, has been consolidated in recent weeks.

The date of March 7 represented a turning point in this social movement: on the one hand, the inter-union coordination had explicitly called to make this date the moment to demonstrate the commitment of the social movement to a showdown with Emmanuel Macron. On the other hand, the government intended to accelerate the pace of adoption of its reform in the Senate to complete its passage as quickly as possible.

On February 11, the national inter-union coordination (CGT, CFDT, CFTC, CGC, FO, FSU, Solidaires, UNSA) had launched as a slogan “bring France to a standstill” from March 7. The coordination also explicitly called to participate in the demonstrations of March 8, on the International Day of Struggle for Women’s Rights, a day of feminist strikes. In the government’s speeded-up parliamentary calendar, March 7 was right in the middle of the parliamentary debate. After ten days of debate in the Assembly, from 6 to 17 February, the Senate was to debate from 2 to 12 March for a closure of the entire discussion that could take place as early as 15 March.

Without calling for an all-out renewable strike, the coordination said it was part of a prolonged movement to obtain the withdrawal of the project. It was an explicit compromise between the position of the CGT and Solidaires on the one hand, supporters of a clearer call for renewable strike movements, and that of the CFDT, UNSA, CFTC and CGC, supporters of a moderate line, centred on days of demonstrations and lobbying of deputies and senators. Similarly, the compromise had the consequence of practising a kind of truce during three weeks in February, so as not to “disrupt the winter school holidays”. Despite this risk of demobilization of the energies mobilized during the previous days of action, many federations and union teams used these twenty days to set up local initiatives and organize the mobilization for March 7.

Similarly, a series of trade union currents wanted to explicitly mark their intention to build a renewable strike from 7 March. Between 10 and 12 February, the CGT railway workers and SUD Rail, the inter-union coordination at the RATP (CGT, UNSA, FO, CGC) and the Union syndicale

Solidaires launched calls for a renewable strike from 7 March. A few days later, on February 20, the confederation Force Ouvrière declared itself “not hostile” to continuing the strike after March 7. Then came the transport federation of Solidaires, calling to block movements of transport from March 7. On February 21, an unprecedented fact in the functioning of the Confederation, five federations of the CGT (Railwayworkers, Chemical industry, Ports and Docks, Glass and Ceramics, and Energy) issued a joint declaration explicitly saying “Let’s change our tone by the renewable strike” from March 7. This position, distinguishing itself from more moderate statements by the confederal leadership, also corresponded to the orientation of these federations, in opposition to the Martinez leadership, considered to be too moderate and too unitary. On February 27, it was the UNSA and CFDT railway workers who, in turn, along with the CGT and SUD, called for a renewable strike at the SNCF. This dynamic continued during the second half of February, when the popularity ratings of Macron and Borne plummeted in the polls and 54 per cent of respondents said they supported renewable strikes after March 7. On March 1, eight Parisian unions of the National Education second degree announced that they were ready to strike “as much as necessary” for the withdrawal of the reform. After that there came the call of the CGT unions of the kerosene tankers of the airports, and those of the sorting of Parisian waste. The CGT Commerce and Wood Construction unions joined the oppositional federations of the CGT which called for a renewable strike and even organized a joint press conference on the premises of the CGT confederation. On 4 March, seven trade union federations of the National Education sector called “to decide in general assemblies on the consequences, including the renewable strike”. In addition, the health workers’ inter-union coordination called for a strike for March 8, as part of the feminist strike day. So, beyond the call for compromise of the national inter-union coordination, in many sectors the dynamic was that of speaking out and mobilizing for a renewable strike, leading FO, UNSA and even CFDT unions to go further than the position of their confederal leadership. This was done without creating controversy or fragmentation in the national inter-union coordination, even on the part of the CFDT leadership, which explicitly said that it would be the government that would bear the responsibility for blocking the country.

The strike of March 7 was therefore also massive, alongside the demonstrations. There were strikes in all the sectors that had called for mobilization, in transport, energy, ports and docks, in particular. But also in the National Education sector and in the Civil Service, where the numbers of strikers were comparable to the first day of strikes on January 19. In many private enterprises, such as ArcelorMittal in Florange, the aeronautical enterprises in Safran and at Renault-Cléon. On March 8, there were the mobilizations for women’s rights, with 200 rallies and a demonstration of 70,000 people in Paris, mostly women, surpassing the latest numbers of demonstrators of recent years. At the heart of the demonstrations was the reminder that women earn 25 per cent less than men and receive pensions worth 40 per cent less, thus underlining the question of wage and career discrimination, as well as the precariousness suffered by women and aggravated by the Macron project. But also the questions of violence and femicide, where three months after the beginning of the year their number has never been so high.

In many cities, rallies have also taken place in recent days on roundabouts, and there have been blockades and filtering blockades, as on the Spanish border in the Eastern Pyrenees, in Abbeville, on the ring road of Caen. These blockades reflected, at the same time, the militant determination to block economic activity, but also, in many sectors, the difficulty of extending the general strike. Similarly, despite the massive character of the demonstrations, the movement is experiencing a weakness in terms of local inter-sectoral structures energizing the movement, and of many general assemblies in the workplace. The consequence of inter-confederal trade union unity, essentially directing the rhythm, has been the weakness of self-organization at the base.

The balance sheet of recent days is therefore contradictory. The rejection of the government and its

reform has continued to grow, fuelled also by anger over energy and food costs and the government's refusal of any measure against the high cost of living. Confidence is growing among workers, who are convinced of the usefulness of acting, of going on strike, of demonstrating. The idea that victory is possible, that we can force the government to withdraw its reform has clearly gained momentum in recent weeks. This gain of confidence clearly comes from the unions' clearer affirmation of the need to block the country, to create a relationship of forces that goes beyond the demonstrations and forces the government to withdraw its project.

Macron and his government have decided to force their project through and ignore the most important popular mobilization of recent decades. For months, they have refused to have the slightest dialogue with the trade union movement, even components, like the CFDT, which are ready to make many compromises. The aim is to announce a rapid release of resources by extending the contribution period and increasing the retirement age from 62 to 64 years. And on this last point, the refusal is clear from all the unions, including the CFDT. But nevertheless, Macron thought it possible to override any social agreement, thinking the trade union movement too weak and divided to really block it.

This reform is essentially political for Macron. He obviously wants to show his ability to carry out a liberal reform corresponding to the demands of the capitalist leaders, the European Commission and the rating agencies that determine the soundness of public policies according to capitalist criteria. The figures have been widely disseminated by the union teams. Between 2019 and 2022, Macron governments granted exemptions from social contributions amounting to 278 billion euros. Of this amount, 52 billion should have been spent on financing pensions. In addition, the first real budget item of public finances is represented by public aid to companies, 157 billion euros in 2019, a third of the state budget, twice as much as the national education budget. This financial windfall, distributed essentially to large companies, obviously requires the government to further slash social budgets, which are the mechanisms of redistribution towards the popular classes. The reform of unemployment insurance implemented this autumn and the pension reform go in this direction, to demonstrate the government's ability to put itself on the level of other neoliberal governments in the European Union. This requires the government to carry out a reform whose aim is quickly to drain billions from the social protection system. In addition, France is an exception, especially in Europe, for the social protection system and particularly for pensions. The share of capitalization in the pension system is totally marginal. While capitalization represents more than 60 per cent of pension shares in the USA and in Canada and is an important part in several European countries such as the Netherlands and Great Britain, it represents less than 5 per cent in France. For several years, the European Commission has been pushing European countries to increase the role of pensions based on capitalization, pension funds, a real financial windfall for the large insurance groups. In France, the annual pension budget represented 346 billion euros in 2021, 13.8 per cent of GDP.

Faced with the growing hostility of the popular classes, of the workers, the government has been seized by feverishness in recent days. On paper, things are simple. In theory, it has an agreement between the Macronists, its allies in Modem and Horizons, and the support for its project of the Republican groups in the Senate and the Assembly. But popular pressure is also exerted on the deputies, so much so that several deputies of Modem and Horizons announce that they will not vote for the project, as well as about twenty deputies of the Republicans. After not being voted on at first reading in the National Assembly due to the obstruction caused by the tabling of thousands of amendments by La France Insoumise, the project is also encountering a deadlock in the Senate and the government is struggling to gather a majority for a vote next week. Faced with its political isolation in the country, the government risks making a new admission of weakness by resorting to article 49-3 of the Constitution so as not to risk being outvoted. These parliamentary adventures nevertheless show that the outcome of this sequence depends on the relationship of social forces in

workplaces and in the street.

The inter-union coordination, instead of calling for a renewable strike now, in all sectors, has decided on two new days of action, Saturday 11 and Wednesday 15 March. At the same time, it has written to Macron, asking to be received by the president. But everyone understands that there is nothing to expect from a possible presidential meeting. The real problem of the coming days will be the ability of the social movement to maintain and expand the strike movement. This Friday, March 10, strikes are still powerful, especially in refineries, rail and waste collectors in several cities, including Paris. The CGT of ports and docks is calling on sailors and dockers to go on strike for three days, from 14 to 16 March. The movement is therefore at a watershed. The government has lost all support from the population and is facing a mobilization of rare power from which it will emerge as a political loser. But it is not overwhelmed by the social movement and the institutions of state can allow it to impose its project. Everything will depend on developments next week.

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P.S.

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