

France between victory and defeat

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It is now possible to begin to draw a tentative balance sheet of the vast movement against the reform (or more exactly, counter-reform) of the pension system in France over the last few months. We need to look at the depth and breadth of the movement, the forms that it took and the positions adopted by its various components. And finally at what might be the repercussions and consequences.

The immediate aim of the reform proposed by President Nicolas Sarkozy and his government seemed quite clear. It was to raise the minimum retirement age from 60 to 62 and the age for retiring with a full pension from 65 to 67, with corresponding increases in the number of years of contribution required. But behind this immediate aim lies the ongoing objective of slowly undermining the public pension system, with the aim of pushing workers towards subscribing to private pension plans, to the greater profit of the pension funds.

Private funds have never been able to develop in France to the extent that they have elsewhere.

This is not the first pension reform: previous ones in 1993 and 2003 lengthened the periods of contribution for the private then the public sector, changed the method of calculating and indexed pensions on the evolution of prices rather than wages. Since 1993 the value of a pension has dropped by around 20 per cent. A million pensioners live below the poverty line and 50 per cent receive less than 1000 euros a month. (The minimum wage in France is currently 1337.70 euros a month.) Nor will this reform be the last. A further review of pensions will take place in 2013, conveniently after the next presidential elections.

Movement grows

The movement against the reform began as soon as it was clear that there was going to be one, even before the exact details were published. The first one-day strike was on March 23, 2010, followed by two others on May 27 and June 24. After the summer break the movement took off again and indeed intensified, with 2.5 million demonstrators in the streets on September 7, reaching its highest point in mid-October, with days of action that put up to 3.5 million people onto the streets. And since they were not all the same people, the newspaper Le Monde has calculated that up to 8 million people were involved in the mobilisations at some point.

The days of action were called by the Intersyndicale, a coordinating committee of the French trade union confederations, all of which were represented on it, from the biggest to the smallest, from the most moderate to the most radical. The Intersyndicale continued to function throughout the eight months of the movement and had the undisputed authority to determine the timing of the big national days of action/one-day strikes.

This was not the first time that such an Intersyndicale had functioned. It was already the case, partially, in the movement over pension reform in 2003 (although the moderate Confédération française démocratique du travail - CFDT — French Democratic Confederation of Labour pulled out early after an agreement with the government and the radical Solidaires federation was excluded) and again in the movement in 2006 that defeated the CPE (an attempt to introduce a cut-rate minimum wage for young workers entering the job market). Very significantly, given the nature of the movement in 2006, the Intersyndicale was broadened out to include the student and school student unions. The Intersyndicale functioned again in the one-day strikes against austerity at the beginning of 2009.

Trade unions' role

The central role played by the trade unions is no accident. In the present period, they have a unique authority. Whatever may be thought of their errors, their failures, their weaknesses and their limits, individually and collectively, they are considered by millions of workers as instruments of defence. No political party has the ability to put millions of people into the streets. Not the Socialist Party, despite its electoral support, nor the forces to the left of the SP. This central role of the unions has something to do with the traditions of the French workers' movement, but not only that. The unions played a central role during the general strikes of 1936 and 1968 and in many other movements, but behind the main union federation, the General Confederation of Labour (Confédération Générale du Travail, CGT), stood the French Communist Party (PCF), which was hegemonic in the working class. No party has such hegemony today.

It was the unity of the trade unions, which was not always the case in the past — far from it — that made possible a movement on this scale. None of them could have done it on their own. The CFDT in particular had a strong reason to stay on board. Its desertion of the movement in 2003 cost it many members, mainly to the benefit of the CGT and Solidaires. But the unity that made the movement possible inevitably imposed some limits on it. The Intersyndicale was never going to call a full-scale, ongoing general strike to defeat the reform. Not only the CFDT and the smaller moderate unions, but also the CGT (as was already shown clearly in 2003) were not ready for that. It would certainly have been the most effective weapon to defeat the government but the trade union leaderships as they are were never going to do it.

Only the Solidaires federation consistently defended such a line but it was very much in a minority. Over and above the question of the general strike, the Intersyndicale as a whole did not take a position of calling for the withdrawal of the reform; Intersyndicale's main components proclaimed their willingness to negotiate, complaining of not being consulted.

Left parties' response

Although the parties of the left could not themselves mobilise millions, they all supported the actions initiated by the Intersyndicale. For the Socialist Party this was done with not a few hesitations, qualifications and false notes. The official position of the SP was to defend the right to retire at 60

but to accept prolonging the years of contribution necessary for that to 41.5 years, which rather emptied it of its content. Dominique Strauss -Kahn, president of the International Monetary Fund and a potential SP presidential candidate in 2012, distanced himself from the party's opposition to raising the retirement age, as did other figures on the right of the party. Even the SP's first secretary, Martine Aubry, had to do a quick about-turn after initially approving of raising the retirement age to 62.

The forces to the left of the SP took a position of outright refusal of the reform, crystallised from the beginning by a petition launched by ATTAC and the Fondation Copernic (a left-wing think tank) on April 7, 2010, and signed by individuals representing a spectrum of parties and associations. These included many representative trade unionists, intellectuals and representatives of all the parties to the left of the Socialist Party (PCF, Greens, New Anti-Capitalist Party, Left Party...). There were also a significant number of SP members, including some leading ones. Collectives established on the basis of this appeal played a role in explaining the reform and winning public support, especially in the early stages, and unitary meetings were held all over the country.

The depth and breadth of the movement were such that, inevitably, comparisons have been made with past movements. From the point of view of the extent of the movement and the numbers of people involved, this was the biggest movement since 1968. In 1995 the strike movement was much more powerful, spearheaded by the rail workers. But the movement was less broad.

Why no ongoing general strike?

But when you make the comparison with 1968, the question arises: why was there no ongoing general strike? Of course as we have seen the union leaderships were not ready to call one, but the two massive general strikes in 1936 and 1968 were not called by the union leaderships. They began in the workplaces and spread, only being taken in charge by the unions at national level later on. Why did that not happen this time?

There is no simple answer to that, but a large part of the reason lies in the changes that have taken place in the working class. Although there are still some large concentrations of workers and some strategic sectors where a strike can have a big impact (as was seen in the recent movement), the situation of the working class bears no comparison with 1968. Many of the big bastions of the working class and of the trade unions in heavy industry have gone, in France as elsewhere. Privatisations have been pushed through. Workers are much more atomised, work units are smaller, there are more non-unionised workplaces, there is more precarious work, there is unemployment and the threat of it, there is growing household indebtedness. This was reflected in the fact that many rank-and-file militants who, unlike the union leaderships, did want a general strike were sceptical about the possibility. Another factor was certainly the absence of a credible perspective of social change, which was there both in 1936 and in 1968. Socialism may not have been an immediate perspective but it was a long-term one for millions.

Rather than comparisons with 1968, it is more interesting to situate the 2010 movement in the chain of resistance to neoliberalism over the last fifteen years, marked on a national scale by the movements in 1995, 2003 and 2006, and last but not least by the European referendum campaign of 2005. If we look at the multiple facets and forms of struggle of the movement we will see that it draws on these experiences while developing them. In the first place, like previous movements, the movement had massive public support, which increased rather than diminished as it progressed, reaching over 70 per cent in the autumn. That was among the general public. Among workers it was higher. In September a CSA poll showed that 89 per cent of public sector workers and 76 per cent of

workers in the private sector were opposed to pension reform.

The backbone of the movement was the series of one-day strikes and demonstrations that built up from 800,000 demonstrators in March to 3.5 million on October. But around that backbone many other things were happening. On each national day of action many workers not only marched but went on strike. Some sectors could be counted on to take strike action every time, rail workers and teachers among others. The decision to have some demonstrations on a Saturday, the first one on October 2, was not well received by many militants. But it made possible the participation of many workers, especially in the private sector, who supported the movement but were not ready to go on strike, in many cases because it would have cost them their job. On top of the national days of action there were many local initiatives in areas that were bastions of the movement, above all but not only, in the area around Marseilles. And at a local level, the militants were often well to the left of the national union leadership, and the call was not to renegotiate the reform but for it to be withdrawn.

High point of radicalisation

The movement reached its high point in the second half of October. Following a day of action on October 12 many sectors remained on strike, either continuously or in a rolling fashion, and this continued after the day of action on October 19. The focus was now on the most militant actions. Key sectors engaged in ongoing strikes. All the oil refineries in France were out, as were port workers and lorry drivers (who in France are largely wage earners rather than being self-employed). Some of these sectors had their own specific motives to strike — plans for the privatisation of ports, danger of closure and delocalisation of refineries. Another key factor was the massive mobilisation in the movement of school students, who struck and blockaded their high schools, and to a lesser extent university students, though the universities were only just starting again after the holidays.

At this stage of the movement the strikes were accompanied by forms of direct action. The oil refineries were not just on strike but blockaded, as were the ports. Dozens of tankers blocked off Marseille. There were blockades of motorways (especially by the lorry drivers), railway lines and industrial zones. These actions were conducted by workers from different sectors and by students. Perhaps the most striking thing is that as the movement radicalised so did public support for it. Financial support for the strikers poured in.

At the height of the movement a poll taken on October 20-21 (Harris-Marianne) showed some remarkable results: 69 per cent approved of the strikes and demonstrations (92 per cent among those on the left); 52 per cent supported public transport strikes (77 per cent on the left); 46 per cent approved of blocking the refineries (70 per cent on the left, 57 per cent of manual workers). The combination of forms of struggle, from mass demonstrations to more militant strikes and direct action, not only gave the movement its breadth and depth. It also made it possible to escape from the “all or nothing” trap – either a general strike or demoralisation and demobilisation. The forms of action that appeared in this movement will be seen again.

“Not victorious, not defeated”

The movement was in the end not victorious. The government camped on its position, the law went through, the police broke the blockades of the refineries and imported oil from other countries. The movement began to lose impetus towards the end of October. But in the first place what happened was not inevitable. Even short of a full-scale general strike, a continuation of the movement at the level it had reached in mid-October could have made the economic and political price too high for

the government to pay. And “not victorious” does not mean crushingly defeated. This was not Britain in 1985. Sarkozy may want to be France’s Thatcher but he certainly is not. This was a tactical defeat, which may turn out to have been a Pyrrhic victory for Sarkozy. It was not by any means the kind of defeat which demoralizes and deters people from fighting again.

The strength of the movement is an indication of profound dissatisfaction with Sarkozy and his government. It crystallised around the issue of pensions, about which people have strong feelings. They think, entirely reasonably, that they have a right to retire on a decent pension at an age when they can still enjoy their retirement. But there are also other factors at work. There is a widespread feeling that this is one neoliberal measure too far, that after this there will be others, and that it has to stop somewhere. There is a questioning of what sort of society this is leading to. This is true even among young people. Probably many of the school students who demonstrated did not understand the fine details of the law on pensions. But they know they will have difficulty finding any kind of decent job, they wonder why people will have to work until they are 67 when there is so much youth unemployment, and in a more diffuse way they wonder what kind of society they are growing up into. There is also a widespread feeling, in France as in other countries, that it is ordinary people, workers, the poor, young people, who are being made to pay for the crisis, while bankers and brokers continue to rake in the money.

There has been resistance to neoliberalism in other countries and at present popular resistance against austerity is spreading across Europe. But it is certainly in France that resistance has been greatest over a long period. There is a long history of popular revolt in France, combined with deep-seated attachment to equality, solidarity, the defence of the “general interest” against particular interests, which flows from the French Revolution. The proclaimed aim of Sarkozy when he came to power in 2007 was to put a stop to this “French exception” and get France up to speed with its European partners. The progress that he has made has been in the face of considerable opposition and remains fragile. To this should be added the perception of Sarkozy himself.

Under neoliberalism, governments have tended increasingly to act not only as guarantors of the capitalist order in general but as direct servants of the rich and in particular of the sphere of finance. But up until now no French president has so blatantly and shamelessly paraded his links with the rich as Sarkozy. Indeed a recent book about him is simply entitled *The President of the Rich*. No further explanation is required. It is symptomatic of the Sarkozy regime that the minister who steered the pension reform through (and was dropped in the subsequent government reshuffle), Eric Woerth, is himself up to his eyes in a scandal centred on France’s richest woman, Liliane de Bettencourt. Another example is the fact that Guillaume Sarkozy, elder brother of the president and a prominent businessperson, planned to cash in on the reform by launching a private pension fund on January 1, in partnership with public financial institutions that are ultimately controlled by his brother. The plan appears to have been stymied for the moment, but its existence, over and above the family connection, illustrates the close links between the Elysee Palace and business circles.

What now?

What is the situation now that the movement is effectively over? One striking feature of it was that in spite of massive rejection of Sarkozy there was no sign of a political alternative. The few calls that were made for a dissolution of parliament and new elections received little echo. That reflects the fact that at the moment the only alternative to Sarkozy and his Union for a Popular Movement (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire, UMP) party is the Socialist Party. People may vote for it as a lesser evil than Sarkozy, but in most cases without great enthusiasm. The fact that the SP candidate in the 2012 presidential elections could well be IMF president Dominique Strauss-Kahn speaks

volumes about the absence of any alternative to neoliberalism from that quarter.

All the political forces in France are now positioning themselves for 2012. The recent government reshuffle, the re-appointment of Francois Fillon as prime minister, the departure of most of the centrist and ex-left ministers and the realignment of the government on the UMP is a sign that Sarkozy is battenning down the hatches and trying to mobilise the core vote of the traditional right.

After being united in the movement over pension reform, how the left, specifically the forces to the left of the Socialist Party, prepares future electoral confrontations will be of great importance. On that level, things will become clearer over the next few months.

But many things can happen between now and 2012. A British prime minister once said that a week is a long time in politics. In the present international social and economic climate, particularly in Europe, the period that separates us from the 2012 elections are an eternity. What is certain is that the combativeness and inventiveness that were demonstrated in the movement will be reflected in many partial, local struggles. Indeed they already are.

Whether we see a new generalised movement depends on many things: what measures the government dares to take, what miscalculations it may make, what is forced on it by, for example, the crisis of the eurozone.

Outside the arena of social struggles, and apart from elections, other political initiatives are possible. During the movement, calls were made for a referendum on pensions, in particular by Left Party leader Jean-Luc Melenchon. The idea did not really take off, perhaps it was not the right moment to raise it in the heat of the struggle. But it seems to be gathering some support now, and it could be one way of keeping the issue of pensions alive. There is a precedent in the success of the unofficial, popular referendum against the privatisation of the Post Office in 2009.

Whatever the precise developments over the coming months, the forces that were brought into action over the last eight months will continue to manifest themselves, and the French working class will continue to be in the vanguard of resistance to neoliberalism and austerity in Europe.

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P.S.

* This is an updated version of Murray Smith's article that first appeared in the Scottish socialist magazine Frontline. This version from Links International Journal of International Renewal.

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