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INTERVIEW

France: Striking Against Macron - “We’re not expecting the 12th to be a tidal wave, we see it more as a starting point”

Wednesday 13 September 2017, by [ENJALRAN Stéphane](#), [STANGLER Cole](#) (Date first published: 12 September 2017).

French unions will strike today against Macron’s anti-labor reforms. It is likely to be the beginning of a long battle.



Demonstrators protest Macron’s anti-social policies, July 2017. Credit: RT

After much anticipation, the French government finally unveiled sweeping labor law reforms on August 31, fulfilling a central campaign promise of newly elected centrist president Emmanuel Macron.

Among other things, the reforms place limits on the damages that can be awarded by judges to workers laid off without “cause,” decrease the number of employee representatives by merging different representation structures (including health and safety committees), authorize small businesses to implement terms without consulting unions, make it easier for bosses to justify economic layoffs, and allow for more use of short-term contracts.

President Macron is pursuing the reforms by executive order, bypassing the standard parliamentary procedure. Under this expedited process, the French cabinet is slated to approve the law on September 22. In order for the reforms to come into force, parliament must then give its final approval in the form of an up-or-down vote.

Nearly six in ten French people oppose the reforms, according to polls, and all of the major unions have criticized the government’s proposal. However, only some labor organizations have called for nationwide protests and strikes to oppose the reforms, slated for today, September 12, and September 21. These include the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) and the National Union of Students of France (UNEF).

Cole Stangler spoke with Stéphane Enjarlan, national secretary and spokesperson for Solidaires, another group of unions that has endorsed the demonstrations. They discuss political strategy, the prospects of a larger social movement, and the image of organized labor in France.

Cole Stangler

Why is the government relying on executive orders if it already has such a large majority in parliament?

Stéphane Enjarlan

I think there are a few reasons. The goal is to go quickly because there are other reforms that are planned — reforms to unemployment insurance, health care, and retirement. There is a very busy social program for the term if the government wants to make good on the promises it made during the election.

The use of 49.3 [a constitutional measure that authorizes governments to pass laws by decree if they can survive a parliamentary vote of confidence] by Macron's predecessor, Hollande, was pretty unpopular but it was effective. I think Macron retained the idea of its efficiency and changed the modalities. In general, it's the same approach. The least amount of debate in parliament possible, the least amount of amendments possible and above all, very little social mobilization.

CS

So it's a way to cut short public debate.

SE

Yes. And doing it over the summer, having the ordinances come out when people return from vacation, was clearly designed to neutralize as much contestation as possible.

CS

I wanted to talk about the upcoming demonstrations that Solidaires supports along with the CGT, on September 12 and 21. Why aren't other unions joining in — notably, Workers' Force (FO) and the Democratic French Confederation of Labor (CFDT) that are both critical of the reforms?

SE

That's a good question and I'm not sure I have all the answers. In the period that preceded the publication of the executive orders, those unions — and the CGT too — played a game of consultation with the government, hoping to shape what the orders would look like at the end. They realize now that this didn't achieve much.

We can say that the difference between the official position of the FO leadership and the reaction of a number of its federations and local unions is significant, to put it lightly. Things are moving inside the union with respect to its leadership's position. It is not impossible — we'll have a clearer idea after the 12th — that the FO or certain FO organizations will join the mobilization on the 21st.

We don't expect much from the CFDT.

CS

What would count as success on September 12th? Is there a number of demonstrators you're hoping for?

SE

We're at the beginning. We hope it will be successful in terms of the number of sectors on strike — notably in transportation, in rail. That's always the test. It's a good benchmark to measure the success of a strike.

We're not expecting the 12th to be a tidal wave, we see it more as a starting point. And we know that this needs to continue in the long-term. We don't have any specific numbers to hit in terms of the

mobilization. If there are sectors with a significant percentage of strikers and demonstrations, we'd see it as a trial run, the starting point, and we prepare to build something from that.

CS

Is it possible to block the reforms in the street when the government has a clear majority?

SE

Of course, we hope so. Otherwise we wouldn't be here. But it will depend on a few factors.

In 2016 [the strikes against Hollande's reforms] we didn't manage to have large numbers on strike and we didn't succeed in an economic blockade, which is the ultimate aim. We were far from it. This is the first thing, if we don't achieve [high strike levels] in the coming weeks, that means [the reforms] will pass.

On the other hand, there's something else. The popularity of the government is dramatically falling and there are other measures that are clearly antisocial that affect everyone. I'm thinking about the cuts in housing aid and in certain state-subsidized jobs, where there weren't good contracts but [the cuts] will nevertheless leave people unemployed. I'm thinking also about the fiscal promises, on taxes, that were made but not followed through. All this feeds a discontent and a social contestation that we're counting on too.

CS

There's also another protest date, set by France Insoumise, on the 23rd, which hasn't been formally endorsed by the unions. What do you think of this? Why isn't there a unified demonstration with unions and political parties?

SE

It's a question we're discussing right now. To remind American readers, the Charter of Amiens is important in France. It separates labor organizations from political organizations. There's always been a clear distinction that trade unionists respect.

At the same time, this doesn't mean there are aren't certain large coalitions and campaigns in which we find ourselves alongside certain political organizations. With respect to the 23rd, it's a decision that was made by France Insoumise without consultation. That's fine. On the 23rd, we have activists who will no doubt be there. But we're not calling to mobilize as a union organization.

CS

This is maybe a tough question but one worth asking. Why are the unions so unpopular right now in France? I saw a poll that came out in July that showed just 36 percent of people had positive opinions of them. By comparison, a recent poll in the US showed that 61 percent approved of unions. And then, to go a step further, I saw another poll showing that moderate unions were more popular than their radical counterparts. How do you explain these figures?

SE

I don't have an all-encompassing response, but I can offer a few elements for reflection. There is an attack at the level of official discourse that has been taken up by a certain amount of the media, it consists in counterposing the "responsible unions" and the "irresponsible ones." Not unlike the way "privileged" workers — state functionaries or those who have an employment status that protects them — are counterposed to other workers who are suffering. There's an entire ideological representation of society that's at work.

People also fear a worsening situation for workers. Concern about unemployment will make some

workers swallow reforms. And maybe the moderate unions have an image of being less aggressive but of preventing things getting worse.

INTERVIEW BY COLE STANGLER

P.S.

* Jacobin. 09.12.201:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/09/macron-labor-reforms-strike-unions>

* Stéphane Enjalran is a national secretary and spokesperson of the left-wing French trade union Solidaires.