

France - Pensions, Social Security... 1995-2003-2010: lessons from three large-scale mobilizations

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The French trade-union movement is currently engaged in the longest strike movement for more than 50 years. For almost a month, since 5 December 2019, the strike has been massive in the transport sector (railways and Paris region public transport). The third most-mobilized sector - teachers - returns to work and strike on Monday 6 January after the two-week end-of-year break and it is expected that their strike action will continue.

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One of the sectors that has caught the public attention – although small in size – is that of the Opéra de Paris whose dancers, musicians and other staff benefit from a special pension plan dating from the time of Louis XIV. [1] The musicians and dancers have given several performances on the steps of Bastille Opera house or the parvis in front of the Palais Garnier as part of their protest.

They recently refused an offer from the government to only introduce the raised retirement age for future generations stating “But we’re just one small link in a 350-year-old chain. This chain must extend far into the future: we cannot be the generation that has sacrificed the following.” [2] This sentiment is widespread, as Olivier Besancenot NPA spokesperson put it, “I never want to be that father who tells his son that I saved my retirement by sacrificing his!” There is still strong sympathy for the strike in public opinion. [3]

We are republishing this article from the magazine *l'Anticapitaliste* No 46 (September 2013) on some previous major strike movements in France and the lessons to be learnt.[IVP]

A look back at three major social movements that have marked the past 25 years, and from which we can draw a number of balance sheets that shed light on the ongoing struggle.

1995: when the CGT and FO really waged war

When, in 1995, President Chirac announced a reform of health insurance, an austerity “plan contract” at SNCF [Société nationale des chemins de fer français, France’s national state-owned railway company] and an alignment of the public pension plan (including “special” plans) with that of private employees, most unions, with the notable exception of the CFDT [Confédération française démocratique du travail, one of the two biggest French confederations of trade unions], decided to engage in a real showdown with the authorities. The right was attacking major institutional positions of the unions, undermining their joint management of Social Security and their union strongholds.

FO [Force ouvrière, a smaller union confederation] and the CGT [Confédération générale du travail, historically the biggest confederation] offered employees a real battle plan, and clearly demanded the withdrawal of the reform. The unions prepared their activist base well in advance for a major struggle. The days of action were presented as stages of a ramp-up, not piecemeal “leapfrog days”.

October 10 was a great success for the first day of strike with a demonstration called by all the federations of civil servants and public enterprises. On October 12 and 25, there was a strike at the SNCF. On October 30, all unions, including still, at this stage, the CFDT, called for a “new high point” on November 14. Which was still a success.

“If two million people take to the streets, my government would not resist it,” said an arrogant and provocative prime minister Juppé the next day, to applause in Parliament. The “Juppéthon” was launched. The majority of unions organized two new strike days, November 24 and 28. The CGT and all the other federations filed a strike notice to the SNCF from November 24 to 28. Including the CFDT rail workers: the federal secretary, Notat, had abandoned the movement but activists, some organized around the opposition current “Tous ensemble”, and federations denounced this betrayal and took their place in the movement. On November 24th, Blondel [Force Ouvrière] called on the radio “for general mobilization, even beyond today and the 28th.” The demonstrations were particularly huge in the provinces: the movement “for the pensions of civil servants” crystallized a general discontent.

Above all, public transport was paralyzed, while the strike also affected electricians, postal workers, teachers and others. Observed 85% on November 24th by the SNCF, it was massively renewed the next day, then reached the Paris buses and the metro. There were no more metros or trains, and only 5% of buses ran. 107 out of 130 postal sorting centres were on strike on December 5. The indefinite strike “until the withdrawal of the reform” ended up tilting opinion in favour of the movement. The strike, however, remained confined to the public sector only (and primarily the railway workers who “blocked” the country) while being “spokesperson” for the dissatisfaction of all the popular classes.

The method of the general strike

This success owed a lot to the voluntarism displayed by the union leaderships, but also to that of the activist rank and file, on the ground. Without the trade union apparatus obstructing it, many strikers met at the SNCF in massive, democratic, and “inter-service” general meetings. The most combative sectors led the others, in the rail stations and outside, by going to visit the post office workers, the bus depots and so on. This enthusiasm swept away all corporatism. The strikers, teachers or postal workers, gathered around the railway pickets, and remade the world together in an extraordinary, radical and fraternal atmosphere.

This was the beauty of the 1995 movement: a true romanticism of the strike, and the impression that we can not only block the country, but also, why not, make another society possible. Two major days of demonstration, on December 5 and 12, punctuated the movement and rallied other employees, the unemployed, students, for “high points” which gave a broader and deeper political character to the movement.

The capitulation of Juppé, the brutality of Thibault

As prime minister of a country paralyzed by strike action, Juppé had to eat humble pie. He withdrew the retirement component of his plan and the reform of the SNCF, while maintaining, however, the social security and health aspects. It was then that the CGT indicated the end of the movement.

Thibault, the secretary of the railway workers federation, called to end the movement on December 14, without the slightest attempt to pretend to consult the general meetings of strikers, before the demonstration on Saturday, December 16. This latter, which might have allowed new categories of the population to participate in the movement and (who knows?) given a new political dimension to it, became a joyous parade of victory.

By this attitude, the union leaderships, in particular the CGT, broke with the spirit of the strike as it had been experienced by a good part of the base, but remained logical in relation to their initial objectives: to show to the government that they were essential. They had allowed local initiatives, including those from far-left activists, to continue, but kept control of the movement, and it was this capacity for control that they confirmed by the brutality of the return to work.

The 1995 victory, however, showed the possibility of making the government bend through the power of the strike, its ability to widely change political minds and mood, the effectiveness of democratic general meetings and initiatives to extend the movement by relying on the most combative sectors. But also, the need, in all circumstances, for genuine democratic structures for the self-organization of the struggle.

2003: the enthusiasm of a minority, the betrayal of the confederations

The context of 2003 resembled that of 1995 in the nature of the attacks (the Fillon law aligned the length of contributions for civil servants with that of the private sector), but not by the union reaction! The confederations, including FO and the CGT, were much more willing to play the game of “social dialogue” and admit the “need for reform”, while not defending clear demands, and especially not the return of all employees, public and private, to 37.5 years of contributions. The same void existed in terms of mobilization. The government could rest easy, unless there was a surprise ...

Surprise: the strike in National Education

A national day of action took place in National Education on March 18, against the decentralization of non-teaching staff. In the following weeks, a minority of staff, fed up with leapfrog days, went on renewable strike, in institutions in Seine-Saint-Denis, Toulouse, Marseille, Le Havre, Rouen, la Réunion, Bordeaux and so on. They established daily general meetings and mobilization committees while initiating the “walking strike” from side to side. The initiative of these centres of self-organization and activist minority strike action, then relayed by some departmental sections of the FSU union federation, came from combative local teams, in which far left activists from various currents (LCR, PT, LO, CNT and so on) played a definite role.

In Toulouse and Nantes, the general meetings attracted up to 800 people. The general meeting in Ile-de-France, on May 6, was attended by more than 500 strikers representing 220 colleges and high schools and dozens of schools; in connection with departmental general meetings from 200 to 600, and general meetings in towns. A national coordination met regularly, with representatives from hundreds of schools and 44 departments (although not all were delegated by departmental general meetings). It was a place of debate, of developing a strike policy, the embryo of a national and democratic leadership of the movement. Admittedly, it would never really compete with the national union leaderships, for lack of recognized legitimacy throughout the country, but it exerted heavy pressure on them, and offered a policy to thousands of strikers.

May 6 was a big day for the strike in National Education. However, the movement, untainted by corporatism (one of the most popular slogans is: “We are fed up with these puppets who are closing factories and breaking schools”), was aware that it would not be possible to win alone. It sought to broaden the movement to all employees against pension reform. These were called upon to strike by the confederations on May 13.

The education strikers therefore used the renewable strike to maintain the excitement in their own environment, but also to address other sectors, by distributing leaflets to companies and by organizing interprofessional general meetings, bringing together tens or hundreds of teachers, railway workers, postal workers, private employees, the unemployed and so on. The hope, at this stage, was to see the rest of the country move into strike action as in 1995, or at least to see a general transport strike. Which never came.

Towards the general strike?

On May 15, the CFDT led by Chérèque signed an agreement with Fillon and announced its withdrawal from the movement. But the 1995 victory did not rest on union unity. Nothing was lost. The CGT, which appeared very radical compared to the open treason of the CFDT, however proposed a demobilizing schedule: a national demonstration on Sunday May 25, strike and demonstrations on June 3. And no notice of renewable strike!

The argument was perverse to say the least. A joint declaration by the CGT, FO, UNSA, FSU confederations thus said: “Only a generalization of the movement, private-public, on a long term basis, can make the government reverse its harmful choices.” Very true! Except that the CGT not only refused to call a general strike (just like FO), but told rail workers that they should not go on a renewable strike if the employees of the private sector did not do so.

On May 13, there were as many strikers at SNCF, RATP and La Poste as in 1995. The next day, the strike was largely renewed in the general meetings of certain stations, in Marseille, Toulouse, Paris

Gare du North, Rouen and so on. But the CGT directly opposed the renewal. Almost everywhere, teams of full-timers arrived to lecture the local CGT teams, officials called on the railway workers to return to work and prepare for the national demonstration on Sunday 25 May (without a strike)! This schedule demobilised the movement, isolating the National Education strike. The strikers resigned themselves to returning to work.

The national demonstration on May 25 was a huge success, with hundreds of thousands of people marching through the streets of Paris. With the joy of being numerous, but also the concern of not seeing the strike solidify. In the evening, the inter-union coordination did not call a general strike and announced a modest estimate (given the scale of the show of force of the day!) of 500,000 demonstrators, far from the habitual exaggeration practiced by union.

The failure of the movement

On June 3, there was a new success, including for the railway workers. But here again, the CGT SNCF was damping down the strike; it quietly agreed to a renewable strike but interrupted at Pentecost and resumed on the 10th. It imposed general meetings by sectors to divide them and prevent ripple effects, warning against the arrival of external elements (teachers mainly) in the meetings. It consciously opposed the methods of 1995 and drowned the strike. On June 11, it called for a return to work. With the SNCF strike over, the strike in National Education came to an end after three months, shortly before the examination period.

On June 12, a CGT-FO meeting was held in Marseille. Blondel called for a general strike, which didn't cost him much. Thibault refused and was whistled by many activists. But the problem was not only that the CGT or FO did not clearly call for a general strike, but that they especially deliberately refused to lead a policy of generalization of strikes, of construction of a real test of force.

2010: a powerful but incomplete movement

Sarkozy announced the postponement of the legal retirement age. The reform, unlike 1995 and 2003, clearly affected all categories of employees at the same time. He relied on resignation and a cynical schedule: first outline of the reform on June 16, summer break, then a rapid vote on the law in the autumn. But this time, all the trade union organizations meet to reject the reform. Without being clear on the objectives and the determination!

On June 24, a day of action was already well attended. Then, after the summer, came the surprise of September 7: more than a million people on the street. All categories were represented on the street, including private employees, sometimes in workplace contingents. The movement promised to be very general and very political, the expression of anger against the crisis and the politics of the right. For two months days of strikes and demonstrations followed one another: September 23, October 12, October 19, October 28 and so on. In October, more than three million people demonstrated three times in less than ten days. More than all the big previous movements! The battle of public opinion was won.

General strike or strike by proxy?

But everyone felt that a series of demonstrations, even massive ones, was not enough. The question of the strike arose. The day after the demonstration of the 12th, a renewable strike, called by certain

federations, started in some sectors: the SNCF, local government personnel, the ports, the refineries. Another surprise of this multifaceted movement was that a section of high school youth was mobilized and took to the streets.

However, the strike only took hold in a few sectors. Hope was spreading: what if the railroad workers blockaded the country as in 1995? The rail workers did effectively go on strike for up to 18 days. The number of strikers (60% in the “rolling” strike, maybe 30% in the enterprise) was close to 1995. But the management of the SNCF, this time, succeeded in keeping half of the passenger trains circulating, and the strike was weak at RATP. And after all, rail workers themselves cannot make a national strike, others must do it.

Hopes of deadlock then spilled over to refineries, which became bastions of the strike and were supported by hundreds of strikers in other sectors. Petrol shortages were everywhere, and the government sent the CRS to unblock fuel depots. The struggle of workers in these sectors is decisive in anchoring the movement, making possible a generalization of the strike. But it cannot be done “by proxy” and cannot last if it remains confined to a few sectors.

The (small) union game

When the movement reached its peak and its critical point, the trade union confederations were in agreement ... to leave it without real prospects. On the evening of October 19, the inter-union coordination offered nothing, then waited for October 21 to propose two, far off, days (October 28 and November 6).

They had in a certain way achieved some of their goals. The reform was not withdrawn, but they had reminded the right and the employers of their strength, and the Thibaults and Chérèques could pride themselves on having been more in tune with their union base (the CFDT had betrayed the movement of 2003, the CGT had scuttled that of 2007 at SNCF).

After the 28th, work gradually resumed at SNCF, in ports, refineries and in the regions, although Paris garbage collectors did not lift their blockade of the Ivry incinerator until November 8. The last demo, on Saturday November 6, still saw hundreds of thousands of workers parading, proud to have stood up to Sarkozy.

Promising attempts

If these union leaderships have not in 2019 seemed to oppose the movement itself head-on, we can definitely not count on them to make victory possible. In contrast, combative minorities, union teams (sometimes linked to currents of opposition to the federal leadership), including activists from the far left, have stepped up initiatives. Even if there was not as significant coordination this time as in 2003 among teachers, or real strike committees at SNCF, here and there we have had experiences of interprofessional coordination.

In Hauts-de-Seine, an interprofessional general meeting, at the initiative of teachers and postal workers, organized blockades and common demonstrations. In Toulouse, up to 600 people from all possible sectors blocked logistical centres or the airport together. In Rouen, an inter-union general meeting coordinated all kinds of actions (blocking access to Rouen, support for comrades in the refinery and so on) and published a mobilization bulletin. And in Marseille, and elsewhere.

It was about building the renewable strike in one's own sector, setting up embryos of democratic

organizations, establishing active militant links between people from all sectors. These embryos were limited by those of the extension of the movement itself, without doubt also the limits of the forces and of the implantation of militants from the far left. But it is such initiatives that will make a general movement possible in the future.

Footnotes

[1] Their legal retirement age obviously differs greatly according to profession: 42 for dancers, 50 for choral artists (gradually raised to 57 in 2029), 55 for technical professionals in the event of exceptional fatigue (raised to 57 in 2024, then 62 in 2029), 60 for orchestral artists, conductors, piano accompanists and 62 for other staff. The legal retirement age for employees in the general system is 62.

[2] *20 Minutes*, 29 December 2019, [“Réforme des retraites : Les danseurs de l’Opéra de Paris envoient valser la proposition du gouvernement”](#).

[3] According to *Le Figaro* 3 January 2020, “61% of French people consider that the mobilization against the reform is ‘justified’.” [“Retraites: malgré un recul, le soutien des Français à la grève reste majoritaire”](#).