

# Pension reform in France: the grandmother of all battles

Saturday 18 March 2023, by [PLENEL Edwy](#) (Date first published: 8 March 2023).

**The battle against the French government's pension reform is not simply just another protest movement. Three crucial issues are at stake here: social, democratic and civilisational, as shown by the exceptional unity among trade unions opposed to the changes, argues Mediapart's publishing editor Edwy Plenel in this op-ed article. All the more reason, he writes, to put all our energy into supporting this combat.**

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Everything, or almost everything, has been said about the French government's pension reforms, in particular by Mediapart's editorial team (*see articles in English [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#), plus Mediapart's special programme on it [here](#)*). Much has been said about its injustices, and in particular to women, who underlined that by [demonstrating on International Women's Day](#) on March 8<sup>th</sup>. About its lies, too, its inconsistencies, its irresponsibility, about how out of touch it is, its lack of legitimacy; in summary, its violence. As a result, the government's communications operation did not long withstand the calm but merciless indictment delivered by economist Michael Zemmour (*first [revealed by Mediapart](#)*). Nor did the government's arguments hold up within Parliament itself when confronted with damning discoveries made by [socialist MP Jérôme Giedj](#).

But what has not been sufficiently made clear is the extent to which the demonstrations against this reform are not the same as other protests. The numbers involved and the persistence of the protests, their determination, their duration and above all their exceptional unity prove that this is not just another repeat performance from the past.

*The demonstration against the pension reforms in Paris, March 7<sup>th</sup> 2023. © Photo Laurent Hazgui pour Mediapart*

Those who have for the past two months demonstrated, taken strike action, agreed with or supported it have grasped the stakes that are involved in this battle, stakes which are decisive for our country, its future cohesion and for the generations to come. The three key issues at stake involve: social demands, democratic politics and, to put things simply, civilisation, meaning the idea that binds society, bringing its members together in a common destiny.

## **The first issue is social because pensions are the assets of those who don't have any**

It took the universal catastrophe provoked by the absence of obstacles to profit-making, exploitation and oppression for the birth of the demand for "social security" amid the ruins of fascism and Nazism. The aim was to help build a society based on solidarity, one which tried hard to resolve injustice and inequality. The administrative order of October 4<sup>th</sup> 1945 which established the new system based its thinking on the hope that it would allow people who had no assets, inheritance or private income - in short, those whose only wealth was their work - to be able to look to the future without anxiety.

"Social security is the promise made to each person that no matter the circumstances, they will have the necessary means so that he and his family can live with decency," the order [states](#). "Justified by a fundamental lack of social justice, social security is a response to the concern of eliminating the uncertainty that workers face in relation to their future, the constant uncertainty that creates in them a feeling of inferiority and which is the real and profound basis of class distinction between the wealthy who are sure of themselves and their future, and those workers who are tormented by the threat of poverty at any moment."

On a human level therefore retirement - the age at which you have a right to stop work as well as getting the pension to which you are entitled - is a recent and fragile win. It is the guarantee that work, its hardships, its constraints, its suffering, even work-related illnesses, are not the only things that a woman or man who has no others means of subsistence and survival have to look forward to. It opens the door not just to material security but also to some recompense in the form of time and peace, of leisure and free time, not to mention the invaluable benefit it brings to inter-generational relationships. In fact, protected pensioners are also protective grandparents, helping their grandchildren while the parents are still finding their own way.

These reminders of obvious truths are necessary when the language used by the government - which in order to promote its reforms has set itself up as a zealous defender of work, its values and its necessity - borders on the indecent. How dare they dole out lessons to those for whom pensions, which come from contributions out of their own wages, are the only (and meagre at that) assets they have accumulated, when they know that they are themselves property owners, with private incomes and inheritances, in short, that they are wealthy? The right to be rich does not exclude the duty to be respectful.

In summarising the declarations of interest made by members of the current government under prime minister Élisabeth Borne, [Le Monde](#) notes that it is wealthier than the 2017 administration under Édouard Philippe and contains 19 millionaires. A majority of them are in the ranks of the wealthiest 10% in France, and on average this government's ministers have assets totalling 1.9 million euros each. In other words, none of them knows the anxiety of having to worry about tomorrow. Not to mention those among them who, like labour minister Olivier Dussopt, have never been a salaried worker, have never known the constraints and hardships of that life, as they have had the privilege of simply being career politicians, while losing their youthful ideals along the way.

## **The second issue at stake is democratic because this reform runs roughshod over the political legitimacy of trade unions**

The ballot box is not the last word in democracy: unless it is allowed to wither and decline, it is a complex and living ecosystem which cannot simply be dismissed as a delegation of power at election

time. The sovereign people, the only ones in charge – in theory – do not just express their views by choosing their representatives.

They also have the right to challenge these representatives by opposing, protesting and demonstrating. Such counter-balances to power are not just necessary but wholly legitimate when faced with the risk of abuse of power by elected representatives who want to appropriate the collective desire for their own individual profit. This democratic principle matters even more when executive power is monopolised by a single figure, when the choices made by all are pushed aside in favour of the wishes of a single individual.

The French Republic has, from a constitutional point of view, been “democratic and social” since the end of World War 2, and the legitimacy and representative nature of labour organisations have been enshrined in law. Still in force, and updated since, the law of February 11<sup>th</sup> 1950 came after initial recognition in 1936 during the [Front Populaire](#), recognition which was then challenged by the [Vichy state](#) during the war.

The trade unions are thus full participants in democratic life, and have just as much legitimacy as Parliamentarians. This legitimacy is increased by the fact that the unions express the wishes, hopes and demands of a world of work that is scarcely represented at the National Assembly, not to mention the Senate, which is dominated by managers and members of the [knowledge industries](#). From the introduction of Social Security (in 1945) to the arrival of unemployment benefit (in 1958), the unions were the architects of the French social protection system, forcing governments to act to help the largest number of people.

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Hiding behind the government's stubbornness in imposing its pension reforms, despite unanimous union opposition, there is therefore a political issue: that of ending recognition for the “unions' essential contribution to democracy”, as [three academics recently reminded](#) us. These imposed reforms, they note, will “only damage the rights of employees and the unemployed. They attack the very legitimacy of labour organisations to take part in the management of social protection”.

The victory that Emmanuel Macron is seeking fits squarely on this political terrain: through the imposition of a regressive, impoverished, confiscatory and authoritarian idea of democracy, one which excludes society's counter-balances – the unions in particular. It is a victory that would benefit the legitimacy that came solely from the presidential election. Yet that legitimacy is very weak and fragile, based as it is on a largely negative vote against the threat of the far right.

However, once installed as president it did not stop Macron imposing his “[permanent coup d'état](#)” on Parliamentarians who, rather than proposing or creating new laws, are most often called on to tamely bow to the executive's wishes, as shown by the current brutalisation being inflicted on Parliament.

Despite employing his customary moderation, the sociologist [Pierre Rosanvallon](#), who is close historically to the CFDT trade union, has nonetheless disputed the institutional legitimacy that the president claims for himself.

“To describe the pension reform project as legitimate, as Macron does, seems all the riskier to me since procedural legality itself is based on arithmetical data that, in societies that are as divided as ours, is becoming more and more fragile,” he explained.

“Majorities have indeed become increasingly narrow and it is often the negative majorities of the second round that push the first-round manifestos onto the back-burner .... In this context, procedural legality certainly remains, but it needs moral and social legitimacy to assert itself and to function.”

This is a polite way of stating that, contrary to what he says, Emmanuel Macron has not received an explicit mandate for his pension reform and that he cannot impose it when all the trades unions are opposed to it, in an unprecedented united front. Not witnessed for a long time, this unity is the most precious part of the current movement. Especially as it is being driven by leaders, Laurent Berger of the CFDT trade union and Philippe Martinez of the CGT, who have no personal stake involved, as both are at the end of their terms of office at the head of their respective organisations.

Seen in this light, the espousal by Jean-Luc Mélenchon - founder of the radical left La France Insoumise - of his own political ambitions by raising the stakes in relation to the unions or by criticism of their leaders does not serve the social movement's cause. Indeed, it weakens and divides it. Yet the tragic history of the workers' movement, particularly when faced with the rise of fascism at the start of the 1930s, should remind him just how vital these united movements - which have overcome divergent views and quarrels - are. And just how fatal divisions are.

*The protest against the pension reforms in Paris, March 7<sup>th</sup> 2023. © Photo Laurent Hazgui pour Mediapart*

One must not lose sight of the fact that after the bitter failure of the 2018 '[yellow vest](#)' movement against the cost of living, which became a source of resentment and confusion, the current movement is the only means of building a popular alternative to the political force that is not just lying in ambush but is now already at the gates to power. This is the Rassemblement National (RN) party and the far-right groups it unites.

### **The third issue at stake is civilisational because the government's stubbornness is paving the way for the far right**

It is significant that Laurent Berger and Philippe Martinez began showing their unity in a joint press article back in April 2022 in which they warned of the “peril represented by Marine Le Pen and her party”. That article is worth rereading, as it exhibits fundamental agreement on political principles and democratic values.

“The Rassemblement National has not changed,” the two union leaders stated. “Like [*editor's note, the RN's predecessor*] the Front National in its time, it is deeply anchored in the history of the racist, anti-Semitic, homophobic and sexist French far right. Its entire manifesto is based on rejecting others and on a silo mentality. National preference, renamed national priority, is at the core of each of its proposals. By enshrining this in the Constitution as she promises, [*RN boss*] Marine Le Pen wants to undermine one of the cornerstones of our Republic, equality between all citizens. We don't want such a society. Every day, our teams fight to combat discrimination, in

whatever form. Marine Le Pen plans to do away with this counter-balance to power. By favouring the emergence of a myriad of small 'in house' corporatist unions she wants to weaken the representative union organisations and reduce worker protection.

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*Rassemblement National is a danger to the fundamental rights of citizens and workers.  
Let's not risk losing them by handing it the keys to our democracy.*

Laurent Berger (CFDT) and Philippe Martinez (CGT)

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"We have no doubt that she will do the same with any part of organised civic society that stands in her way. Her project rows back on fundamental rights for women that were won by associations and unions, and contains no measures to fight effectively against the climate change that threatens the future of our planet. However, it shows indulgence, even solidarity, towards many of the autocrats of yesterday and today who restrict individual freedoms ([Viktor] Orbán, [Jair] Bolsonaro, [Donald] Trump ...) or who show no hesitation in going to war to extend their territory ([Vladimir] Putin).

"We are two committed figures who, despite our differences, believe in the power of dialogue and constructive action to build a fairer society. We are two leaders of organisations who won't sit back and see the far right in government. Rassemblement National is a danger to the fundamental rights of citizens and workers. It can't be viewed like the Republican parties, who respect and guarantee our national motto, freedom, equality and fraternity. Let's not risk losing them by handing it the keys to our democracy."

Emmanuel Macron, who from an electoral point of view benefited from this stance and was elected for the second time in order to keep out the far right, would do well to reread that article, along with who those who accompany him on his pyromaniac firefighter-style headlong rush. Far from putting out the fire that is being kindled – that of the far right winning presidency of the Republic in 2027 – his political power grab is fuelling it and keeping it going. First of all, because his approach demotivates, demoralises and causes despair among those who feel deceived over voting for him; the president is behaving as if he had obtained an electoral blank cheque and has not taken account of the political diversity of the votes he attracted. But more fundamentally he is fuelling this fire because the ideology that drives him – that of competition and rivalry, of force and domination – carries with it a political mindset that, far from opposing the mindset of the far right, in fact prepares the ground for it.

The ideology of 'Macronism' is indeed a form of '[social Darwinism](#)'. Distorting the views of Charles Darwin – by making selection the driving force of human societies, when even the British naturalist himself had shown the extent to which mutual support was part of nature – this is a vision of the world that emphasises winners and conquerors, the strong and the ambitious, champions and the powerful, to the detriment of those who lose and the weak, the hesitant and the modest. More anecdotally, we find this ideology in the president's often shocking [public utterances](#), for example when he spoke about people "who are nothing" and about how people simply had to [cross the street](#) to find a job.

Recent works by two French historians have now shown the relationship between this ideology, which emphasises combat and fighting to overcome and succeed, and the hierarchical mindset that is part of the far right. While Grégoire Chamayou, in his book *La Société ingouvernable* ('[The Ungovernable Society](#)'), compiles a genealogy of authoritarian liberalism encouraged by the business world in the United States in the 1970s, in his work *Libres d'obéir* ('[Free to Obey](#)'), Johann Chapoutot traces the deep links between National Socialism in Germany and the principles of modern corporate management.

Treating Nazism not like some monstrous political reality that is firmly in the past and, moreover, one which is far-removed from modern-day society, Chapoutot sees in it "the deformed and revealing image of a modernity that became mad". He writes: "Nazism was neither a UFO that fell from the sky nor a lightning bolt that inadvertently struck Europe. It's the product of a cultural ripening peculiar to the liberal capitalist West, of which it is one of the expressions."

So to fight the far right means countering it with a radically-different mindset, one which does not accept its identity-based ideology of inequality in which some human groups, some civilisations, certain origins, some beliefs, some appearances, some genders and so on are by nature superior to others. It certainly won't be the kind of politics symbolised by the current pension reform power grab that will ward off the risk of a regime based on the survival of the fittest coming to power.

On the contrary, it is through opposition to this reform that the only worthwhile alternative will be constructed: that of a united society. And that is why we have to throw all our efforts behind it.

**EDWY PLENEL**

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**P.S.**

- MEDIAPART. MARCH 10, 2023:  
<https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/politique/100323/pension-reform-france-grandmother-all-battles>
- English version by Michael Streeter.

The original French version of this op-ed can be found [here](#).

*Edwy Plenel's articles on Mediapart:*  
<https://www.mediapart.fr/biographie/edwy-plenel>

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