

INTERVIEW

The revolt shaking France

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Strikes and protests have spread to every corner of France as President Nicolas Sarkozy pushes for a final vote in parliament on his proposal to “reform” the country’s national pension system.

Every day this week has seen strikes, blockades and demonstrations. Police attempted to break up blockades at oil refineries and supply facilities after weeks of oil workers and their supporters stopping fuel deliveries, but the actions frequently resumed after police left. Almost all of the country’s ports are still struck—according to reports, 52 oil tankers are at anchor off the coast of Marseilles, still waiting to unload.

The biggest actions have come when the unions have called nationwide strikes, but rolling walkouts and protests continue every day. This week, police have lashed back at youth demonstrators, fighting running battles in cities around the country—with the media parroting Sarkozy’s denunciations of “lawbreakers.”

Sarkozy’s proposal would raise the minimum age for retirement from 60 to 62 and the age when retirees can get full benefits from 65 to 67. The measure was passed by the country’s Assembly and is being considered in the Senate—a vote was scheduled for October 20, but was delayed, though the Sarkozy government insists one will take place soon. Even if the measure passes, however, more protests are already planned, including at least two nationwide strikes and days of action at the end of October and early November.

This revolt is the latest in a wave of struggles that have rocked France over more than a decade, dating back to a wave of public-sector strikes in 1995 that stopped a conservative government from imposing changes in the pension system.

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WHAT DO the strikes and protests against Sarkozy’s pension “reform” mean? Have they gained majority support in the country?

CHARLES-ANDRÉ UDRY - THE MOST important aspect of the current situation is the widespread popular support for the strikes, and the fact that this support is getting larger and more determined.

I’ll give you an example: On Monday, *Le Parisien*, a mass circulation newspaper which is distributed throughout France under the name *Aujourd’hui en France* (Today in France), featured another public opinion poll about support for the strikes, the struggles and the demonstrations in all their

forms. The poll found that 71 percent of the French population was favorably disposed to the struggle against the attempts to change the pension system—in effect, to raise the age of retirement and lower the benefits available to those who retire.

This is fascinating. This study was conducted by the CSA, a polling organization controlled by Vincent Bolloré, one of the biggest capitalists in France and a close friend of President Sarkozy. If you look at the figures from a poll on September 7, the numbers showed only showed 62 percent support. On September 23, this had risen to 68 percent, and we are now at 71 percent.

In other words, despite the daily inconveniences to public transportation and other things caused by the strikes and demonstrations, and in spite of a campaign by the government and the mass media against them, there has been a rise in support for the struggle.

In these opinion polls, when they ask people if they want a more determined strike, 61 percent say yes. This is terribly important because what people are saying is that there should be no retreat.

So this is not only the 3 million or 3.5 million people who participated in demonstrations who are in favor of the struggle, but the overwhelming majority of people who are in favor of defeating this reform—or rather counter-reform. I think this is extremely important—that we are witnessing the birth of a new social opposition to the politics of the Sarkozy government.

The polling figures have surprised everyone. So much so that *Le Parisien*, which is by no means a newspaper of the left, said that all France still supports the mobilizations—they used the word “still” because they were surprised this is the case.

I think this is the first point to make—to understand the breadth and depth of the support for this struggle.

The second important point—and this isn’t well understood, even in some European countries—is that the idea of being able to retire and leave the workforce at 60 years of age is deeply engrained in minds of workers.

That’s both public- and private-sector workers. The poll I was referring to found that 89 percent of wage workers in the public sector are against pension “reform,” and that 76 percent of private-sector workers—an enormous majority—are against the counter-reform.

So the opposition is among wage workers generally—including private-sector workers, where the presence of unions is much weaker and the conditions of fear and anxiety about their jobs are much stronger due to the high level of unemployment, which in many regions is more than 15 percent. There is a real convergence among the different sectors. It’s not that you have public-sector workers with all their “privileges” on the one side, against private-sector workers.

So there is homogeneity of support for the movement against pension reforms, which is partly a product of the third important point: There has been an enormous increase in productivity in France—similar to the U.S.—so there is a big increase in stress and exhaustion at work.

We’ve seen at some of the great enterprises—such as the research center for the carmaker Renault, or in France Télécom—a rise in the number of suicides among workers over the last two years. At France Télécom, there have been 12 suicides. So there is a general understanding that when you get to 60, you’re used up.

And in any event, one thing that’s typical of the general economic situation is the growing number of workers who, for reasons of ill health or because of layoffs, are forced to leave work at 55 or 58 or

60 years of age, and go on unemployment. As a result, they aren't able to contribute sufficiently to assure themselves of a full pension at 60—and it's not certain that they'll have a full pension at 65 or 67, which is the final proposal of the Sarkozy government.

This is an important part of the question. In order to get full pension benefits in France, you usually have to work until you are 65 years old. The early retirement age is 60, but to get full benefits at that time, you have to have been employed pretty much non-stop in your adult years before that.

If, for example, you started work late because you were unemployed as a youth, or because there were periods in your life where you were unpaid because you were unemployed and didn't pay the "cotisations"—a special tax paid by bosses and workers to the social security system—or if you were laid off at 58, the pension you're entitled to at 60 is miserable.

Now, a lot of people try to work until 62 in order to have a full pension. And with Sarkozy's pension reforms, for most workers, this age of retirement with a full pension would increase to 67. It's not even that there's so much opposition to pushing back the minimum age of retirement to 62, but rather that most people know that in order to get a full pension you can live on, you would be forced to work until you're 67.

So there's a combination here of both the pressure of work and whether people will be able to retire and enjoy the "best years" of their life, as people say. Pensions in France aren't tied to a particular company or a particular benefits plan. They are guaranteed, even if the company you worked for went bankrupt. You may get a lower pension if you didn't contribute steadily through cotisations before retirement—for example, if you were unemployed for a period of years. But everyone has a right to a pension.

France is still a country where there's the idea that after a life of work, you have a right to a pension, and you can enjoy some things from life—you can do things that you couldn't previously devote any time to, or even work at a job that gives you pleasure.

This idea is still profoundly held among the French population. The employers have not yet been able to win the idea that workers should work until they croak—which is unfortunately now accepted in the U.S. and many other countries.

HOW DID the movement develop to the point it's at today?

THIS MOVEMENT effectively began in June. There was a demonstration against the pension reform on June 24, but most people thought that trade union organizations would negotiate with Raymond Soubie, who's been the key figure for conservatives on welfare and social policy since the days of President Jacques Chirac—he's the main adviser to Sarkozy on this issue.

Most people thought that since July and August are vacation months—and in France, there's still such a thing as vacation time—the movement might take off again in October, when the Assembly and the Senate convened and the law was discussed again. (The Assembly and Senate in France are similar to the U.S. Senate and House, although the Senate has less power in France than the Assembly; it isn't really a bicameral system.)

In reality, masses of people have taken to the streets since September 7. The interruption between end of June and the first demonstrations was much shorter than people expected. Plus, many local groups, unionists, associations and radical left organizations—if not the central apparatuses of the unions—continued a broad propaganda and educational effort during the summer. There was no silence over the summer, as was the case in Spain—people prepared.

The first mobilization after the holidays on September 7 was especially important because the movement was able to continue growing toward the demonstrations on October 12, when the legislation was taken up again by French lawmakers.

Since then, we've only seen bigger and bigger mobilizations—and not only bigger, but with new sectors and forces joining the struggle. The mainstays of the movement are, of course, still involved—teachers, nurses, public transport workers, railway workers, bus workers, subway workers. But three key groups have been added to these.

One is dockworkers, who are opposing privatization in the country's ports. Strikes began in the ports near the beginning of October—there are 17 port strikes as of the start of this week, meaning almost all of France's ports.

The second group is refinery workers, where blockades of oil refineries and storage facilities have blocked shipments of gas and diesel fuel. Allegedly, Air France is running out of fuel for its flights. Maybe this is true and maybe it's not—on these kinds of questions, the right has been known to invent facts for propaganda purposes.

But whatever the case, the blocking of the refineries wasn't just done by workers at the facilities, but with local and regional unions supporting them. When you read reports and interviews from these blockades, you discover that the people in front of the gates stopping the fuel trucks from leaving were nurses, teachers and others, not just refinery workers. So this is another example of a kind of social convergence.

So the first group is the dockers, and the second is the refinery workers. The third group is truck drivers. In France, unlike Spain, truck drivers aren't owner-operators. The majority are wage workers, not proprietors of their own business. For them, since the work is very hard, the retirement age is very important, so they have joined the fight.

The truck drivers are using two strategies to fight back—when they travel on the highways, they travel at a snail's pace, going very, very slowly. And then at key intersections, drivers get 20 to 25 trucks, which blocks everything.

So there's a convergence of actions by public-sector workers and strikes in the private sector by the dockers and refinery workers. And in the past two weeks, high school students have started to mobilize themselves. University students have, as well, though only this week and in a few places. But this is because universities have only just begun, and students have only just arrived at colleges.

So you have a kind of cumulative ferment going through the population, with all these different social sectors being added to the mix. That means that people aren't on strike permanently, of course, but there is a kind of rollover from sector to sector. One day, it's the teachers, then they go back to work, and then it's another group of workers.

But the combination of strikes, the blockades by truckers, the mass demonstrations like last Saturday and the student mobilizations are giving this movement a greater visibility and social impact even than the period of 1995 and the massive strikes against pension reform then.

Bernard Thibault, the current head of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT by its initials in French), the largest of France's union federations, was the head of the railway workers union that led the fight against pension reform in 1995. But the struggle is much broader today, and that is creating all kinds of difficulties for the government.

The government—and particularly Raymond Soubie—is in the habit of negotiating with the union

leaders. Soubie is used to having one strike or one big day of demonstrations, and then you negotiate. But now, the movement has developed in so many sectors that the government no longer has the same ability to just negotiate with union leaders.

Soubie and Sarkozy and the prime minister, François Fillon, are negotiating around the clock with the Bernard Thibault and François Chérèque of the French Democratic Confederation of Labor (CFDT), but this is no longer functional for reaching a settlement. There can no longer be a summit meeting at the top around a negotiating table. This is very different from 1995.

NOT MANY years ago—not even many months ago—Sarkozy was broadly popular in France. But now, he’s the chief target of these protests, right?

YES, THE main target is a much-hated government. It’s also a failed government in most people’s minds.

First, unemployment remains high—especially among youth, where it’s very high. This relates back to the pension question. Young people realize that if they’re going to be unemployed after school, that means they’ll have to work until they’re 67 to get a real pension under the new law.

So everyone in the media who said that young people won’t see themselves as affected by this reform and therefore won’t care have been proved wrong.

Plus, young people can see for themselves that many of their parents aren’t working any longer at age 62 or 60, or that they’re being laid off at 58. So for youth, the idea of working at a good job until they’re 67 appears to be an impossibility—and so they’ll end up having to work several part-time jobs, as so many elderly people do in the U.S. This is why young people are completely involved in pension reform.

There’s also bitterness at the other end, too—among people who are 50 or 55 years old, and who had it in their minds that they were almost there, with only a few more years before they could retire with a good pension.

WHAT’S DIFFERENT about the movement today from past struggles?

THERE ARE two aspects that are particularly important.

First, the movement is taking place in all of France. This isn’t just Paris. There are much more important things taking place in little towns. We’ve seen towns with a population of 20,000 in which you have demonstrations numbering 6,000 or 7,000.

These are towns where small business owners close up shop and pull their curtains for the days of action, because they understand that if pension benefits are pushed back to 67, then there will be people between the ages of 58 to 67 who are unemployed or on social assistance who will get a minimal pension that won’t allow them to live. For small business owners in small neighborhoods, they know they would be finished.

So across France, you find enormous mobilizations, relatively speaking, in small towns. For the first time, the center of gravity isn’t Paris or Marseilles or Lyons or Lille—it’s dispersed across the whole country. What the former Socialist President François Mitterrand and the right wing have dubbed “La France Profonde”—“the real France,” or the equivalent in the U.S. of the red states—is completely integral to this process.

The other very important development is that different forces, whether local unions or groups of

unionists or different organizations, are pushing for mobilizations that are much more radical than the national union leaderships who live in Paris. The theme and slogans that are emerging now isn't to renegotiate the pension law, but for the counter-reform to be withdrawn altogether.

Behind this theme is the idea that the mobilizations have more legitimacy than Sarkozy's Union for a Popular Movement party, which leads the government—that the two votes in parliament, the first in the Assembly and the second in the Senate, are worth less than the vote of social opinion.

So the idea is that democracy from below is more important than the institutions of formal democracy. Of course, all of the mainstream parties and the media say that real democracy is what happens in parliament. But the strike movement has raised the question: Where is the power? Who decides? Is it only in the central apparatuses of the government, in parliament or the presidency? This is utterly decisive about the current situation.

In the face of this movement, the government has been trying to get the police to intervene—in particular, against the blockades of the refineries. I think the workers there were very intelligent in avoiding a confrontation with police. For example, last week, they allowed the police to herd some fuel trucks into the facilities—and then on Saturday, they reoccupied them. So the police are forced to run from one facility to another.

I think the right will try to sway opinion by using certain incidents—for example, when cars have been burned, essentially due to the provocations of police, who have already arrested hundreds of youth. Already, the media is going for this line.

The youth movement isn't controlled in any way—it's a spontaneous movement. As such, during the demonstrations, some store windows have been broken and some cars set on fire. This is utterly natural under the circumstances, but there will be a concerted effort by the international press to emphasize these actions.

Many of the people who are involved in such acts are unemployed youth from the areas surrounding Paris. Their actions are symbolic. They are looking at high unemployment and being told you need to work in order to get a pension. They say that they will never see good jobs. There is obviously an aspect of frustrated radicalization here, but the grievances are very real.

Of course, the right will try to take utilize this to disparage the mobilizations. But I think the movement is very deep and very radical. This is a general picture of what's taking place. There are things happening in France that we haven't seen before—and certainly not in the last 15 years.

The vote in the Senate won't change the situation. This is very possibly the beginning of a crisis for the regime in France, with a class fight in the form of strikes and demonstrations against the government on one side, and the working masses on the other side. The result will be key in Europe where the right wing, including the extreme right, has been on a political offensive.

P.S.

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