

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > France > Social Movements, economy and labor (France) > **A youth-led nocturnal protest movement - French youth are 'Up All Night' (...)**

A youth-led nocturnal protest movement - French youth are 'Up All Night' to get ... something

Friday 15 April 2016, by [VINOCUR Nicholas](#) (Date first published: 14 April 2016).

Nocturnal movement with undefined goals is turning into a headache for François Hollande.

PARIS — If only they could be paid off.

A youth-led nocturnal protest movement known as La Nuit Debout (or “Up All Night”) is becoming a serious headache for President François Hollande — not because of its onerous demands, but precisely because its demands are so difficult to define and neutralize.

Born out of protests against a labor law reform bill, Nuit Debout started on March 31 with a call to “stay up all night” launched by François Ruffin, director of the film *Merci Patron!* (“Thanks Boss!”) to a crowd in central Paris. It quickly morphed into an all-encompassing sit-in movement that has drawn thousands of people each night to Paris’ Place de la République, where they use hand gestures inspired by Spain’s anti-austerity “Indignados” movement to vote on issues ranging from feminism to constitutional reform and whether to buy a sound-system with donations.

Asked on a recent weeknight about the aim of Nuit Debout, a group of several young men and women on the square shook their heads at the question before offering a correction.

“There is no specific goal per se. The idea is to bring people together, to debate and to reclaim public discourse from the parties and labor unions that control it,” said a 27-year-old student at a “Welcome Committee” tent who did not give his full name because, he argued, “individual views don’t matter.”

Rather than writing up a list of demands and delivering them to the relevant minister’s office, as is normally the practice in France, Nuit Debout, like Los Indignados before it, wants time to figure out what those demands might be.

Some participants voiced hope that Nuit Debout would gather enough grassroots support to become a political force on par with Podemos, the Spanish party born out of the Indignados sit-in movement. But of the largely white and middle-class people present in Paris, most said they had no specific ambition beyond being able to speak their mind — without meddling from politicians or trade unionists.

“It’s really a form of defiance vis-à-vis any kind of corporate body including the unions,” said Julien Bayou, a spokesman for the Europe Ecologie Les Verts party, who said he attends the soirées frequently in a “strictly personal capacity.”

Said Bayou, "What we want is something completely different, even if all this is not totally thought out with words and talking points."

Pot legalization bid

It is the very amorphousness of Nuit Debout, as well as its anti-authority bent, that makes the movement such a headache for France's ruling Socialists and anyone else who hopes to gain from it politically.

Left-wing personalities including Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a well-known firebrand, have showed up at Place de la République, eager to shine in the glow of youthful enthusiasm. But participants said they had no interest in giving Mélenchon, a former presidential candidate, or any other professional politician, a bully pulpit on their occupied turf.

For Hollande and his prime minister, Manuel Valls, Nuit Debout poses an increasingly vexing conundrum: Should they crack down, or let it flourish?

While the Paris police prefecture could ban a gathering that ostensibly violates France's state of emergency prohibition on public demonstrations (the city has granted special authorization for the gatherings), doing so would probably invigorate the protesters. It would also confirm their narrative that Hollande is not really a left-wing president, but a stooge of banks and tax-evading millionaires.

The result is light-touch policing of the occupied square. Protesters are allowed to set up their tents and equipment in the evening on the condition that they pack it up and stow it away again each morning. Despite clashes in the early hours of Sunday morning, when a car was torched, there has been little violence between protesters and cops.

Another option for Hollande is to pierce the movement's momentum by answering its demands.

Manuel Valls uses payouts to nip student movement

This is the approach the government took to a student-led movement against plans to overhaul the labor system. After weeks of sparsely attended rallies, Valls unveiled some €500 million in subsidies and hiring incentives for young workers. That followed a €2-billion payout for public sector workers — another key demographic angry with the government for freezing their wages as part of a deficit-cutting drive.

When it comes to Nuit Debout, however, such interest group targeting is far more difficult. For one thing, there is no single agenda or identifiable demand. Moreover, what some of the protesters are asking for — a full rewrite of the Constitution, for example — amounts to a rejection of the system, and is beyond purchase.

In one clumsy attempt to target the Nuit Debout crowd, junior minister Jean-Marie Le Guen floated the idea of legalizing cannabis. He was quickly shot down by government spokesman Stéphane Le Foll, but not before protesters had laughed off the proposal as an obvious bribe.

"We should not complain that young people are gathering, acting and dreaming of collective action," Valls told *Libération* in an interview. "It's a sign that French society is full of life... But I will never let it be said that we have done nothing for the youth since 2012."

No Podemos

In terms of sheer numbers and geographic reach, Nuit Debout is a limited phenomenon. On Tuesday

night, a crowd of some 500 to 1,000 people filled up just half of Place de la République, or the surface of a few soccer pitches.

What's more remarkable is the movement's persistence over 13 consecutive nights, some of which were very rainy. Participants measure the duration by saying it's currently the "43rd of March," a winking reference to the movement's March 31 birthday, and to its improbable persistence.

The resilience is largely thanks to the efforts of organizers, many of whom are students and members of anti-capitalist groups, who gather each evening to deploy tents, tables, food supplies and amplification equipment for the "General Assembly" — a sort of democratic forum where votes are conducted by show of hands.

Then they take everything down early the next morning.

Even so, the movement remains tiny when compared to the mass following that fed into Podemos in Spain, or Syriza in Greece.

At its peak, Spain's Indignados gathered tens of thousands of participants in central Madrid for weeks on end. It drew a broad demographic of Spaniards affected by sky-high unemployment and a housing crisis that hit 80 percent of the population.

While France has 10 percent unemployment and slow growth, conditions are not quite as inflammable as in Spain. And the demographic that participates in Nuit Debout is made up largely of young white people, leading critics to dismiss the movement as a rich kid's fantasy bound to fizzle at the first sign of an extended school holiday.

Crucially, the banlieues — or tough, immigrant-heavy suburbs where riots erupted in 2005 — have shown little interest in Nuit Debout.

That is a blessing for France's leaders, who might not want to discover what happens when the utopianism of la République combines with the raw anger simmering in housing projects across the country.

NICHOLAS VINOCUR

P.S.

* Politico. 4/14/16, 5:35 AM CET:

<http://www.politico.eu/article/french-youth-are-up-all-night-to-get-something-nuit-debout-labor-reform-bill-protests/>