

France: Against Macron, organize the convergence between struggles

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The day of March 22nd was a real success. In the 180 cities where there were demonstrations at the call of seven public service unions, everywhere the figures represented an increase compared to October 10th, 2017, the last time there was a strike of the public sector, whereas at the time the CFDT and the UNSA had also called for a strike.

Contents

- [Everywhere, several common \(...\)](#)
- [Regarding this question, \(...\)](#)
- [All these manœuvres are \(...\)](#)

More than 500,000 demonstrators were counted by the CGT (400,000 on October 10th). Similarly, 25,000 railway workers took part in the national demonstration in Paris called by the CGT, SUD, UNSA and the CFDT, and 35 per cent were on strike at the call of Sud Rail and UNSA. In primary education, one in two teachers was on strike. In Public Finance, there was a high rate of participation in the strike, nationally higher than 40 per cent. There was also an increase in the number of strikers among hospital staff. In several cities, there were hospital workers on the demonstrations who had been on strike for several days (for example, at the Psychiatric Hospital of Dijon), and postal workers, as in Bordeaux where 20 post offices had been on strike for two weeks.

In most cities, youth contingents were present in the demonstrations, along with pensioners, railway workers who could not go to Paris and workers from the private sector: chemicals, metallurgy

Everywhere, several common elements stood out

Obviously, the slogans and demands start from questions that differ from one sector to another. Overall, the plan against civil servants aims at cutting 120,000 jobs in the next four years, the maintenance of a wage freeze and the development of insecurity. For railway workers, it is the forced start of privatization, with the dismantling of the public service and the end of statutory hiring, and on the horizon the putting into question of the pension system. Hospital workers suffer a daily deterioration of working conditions, with bed closures, and teachers are faced with the closure of classes.

But everyone is experiencing a frontal attack on public services, declining budgets for jobs and operations, and a desire to bring the country into line with the European countries that have already suffered the same attacks. These common points appeared in the demonstrations, even though the timescales are different. The goal of the government is obviously to try to splinter the fightback and at the same time suck the union leaderships into a pseudo-dialogue.

Beyond this, the preoccupations of the contingents of pensioners and youth also overlapped, with the rejection of the policies of the Macron-Philippe government, which is pursuing social regression, on the level of pensions, on housing subsidies and on processes of selection in education, which are being reinforced from high school onwards and in access to higher education.

Similarly, the contingents of private sector workers testified to the violence of the employers' policies of site closures, wage freezes and lay-off plans, with the backing of a government that reduces employers' obligations and the means of action for unions and workers, while at the same time pursuing a tax policy favouring shareholders and the privileged. The unemployed, with the new reform, will be subject to increased threats of losing benefit and to growing pressure to accept precarious and unskilled contracts.

There is therefore a climate of social polarization in the aftermath of March 22nd, a beginning of a mobilization of different categories of workers and sectors of school and university students. Now, the whole question lies in the ability to build from this, in the coming weeks, an overall movement capable of winning and blocking Macron's policies.

Regarding this question, the last few days have been revealing

The discredit of this government is increasing. Many opinion polls confirm what can be felt around us, in workplaces and on the street: despite the triumphant and confident display of the president, saying on March 23rd in Brussels that the social movements were not "not of a kind to make him retreat from the commitments made during his campaign", as though he had benefited from a plebiscite, Macron has scarcely more support than the governments of Sarkozy and Holland had ten months after their election.

For example, a BVA poll, released on March 21st, indicated that only 17 per cent support Macron's policies (this is about the percentage of voters he obtained in the first round of the 2017 presidential election); 57 per cent of those polled have a bad opinion of his policies. In another survey, 55 per cent of those polled supported the March 22nd strike; this figure rose to 82 per cent among public sector workers.

Similarly, two-thirds of those polled consider that the deterioration of public services comes from attacks for which government cuts in resources are responsible. This discredit is obviously accentuated by the image of being the president of the rich, the CEO of France, as Macron wants to present himself

The last few days have reinforced this feeling, with the information that Bernard Arnault, CEO of LVMH, often presented by Macron as an example of the "leaders of the team", who pull France upwards, increased his personal fortune by 30 billion dollars in 2017, bringing it to more than 72 billion.

The first goal of the government is to avoid the convergence of struggles. The timetable it has given itself is obviously an advantage: the National Assembly must launch the process of ordinances against the SNCF in early April, so as to concentrate the attack against the railway workers immediately, with the hope of isolating them. The bulk of the attacks against the civil service must be spread out over the following months, punctuated by "pedagogical" meetings with the union leaderships

The government propaganda, complacently relayed by the mass media whose editorial line has been to worship Macron since his election, focuses these days on several points: devaluing the success of

March 22, making it seem a half-failure, something which is contradicted by the facts; secondly, concentrating their blows against the privileges of the railway workers, who are accused of wanting to block the country for weeks; and showing images that reduce demonstrations to violent scenes, as Manuel Valls did during the demonstrations against the El Khomri law in 2016.

Finally, the government will try to strangle at birth the possibility of building a movement among students, particularly in the universities. We saw police interventions against young people during the demonstrations on March 22nd. But there is also the taking under government control of the University Jean Jaurès Toulouse 2, where students are opposing their dissolution into the School of Engineering, synonymous with increased selection, which goes in the same direction. Similarly, the intervention by thugs at the Faculty of Law of Montpellier, with the active complicity of the Dean, is part of the same logic.

All these manoeuvres are aimed to demoralize and curb the rise of a climate of sympathy and cohesion

But the main element on which activists can act directly is obviously the convergence of strikes, between movements of different sectors, and overcoming in the coming days the divisions and blockages of confederal trade union leaderships.

It is necessary to be able to bring about the convergence of movements among youth, employees of the EHPAD (accommodation facilities for dependent elderly people), the public sector, including the Post Office, Public Finance, hospitals and of course SNCF employees; and beyond that, workers from the private sector. The common points, the bridges exist, but for that to be effective, it is necessary for the militant forces in the unions to be conscious of the possibilities and to come together, locally and nationally, in each industry and sector. Because for a number of reasons, we do not have a trade union plan of action that is up to the task and serves as a point of support for building this convergence.

Nationally, only the CGT proposes a date for a broad inter-sectoral mobilization... on April 19th, that is to say almost a month after March 22nd, more than two weeks after the beginning of the strike movement at the SNCF, and right in the middle of the Easter school holidays. It is therefore contradictory to say, as does Martinez, the general secretary of the CGT, that we must raise the tone, and then propose such a date that does not provide a concrete deadline for the combative sectors. But this timidity is nothing compared to the policy of the leadership of Force Ouvrière (FO). While many federal and local leaders of FO have a combative language, Jean-Claude Mailly, general secretary, for the moment refuses any prospect of convergence. He also declared on March 6th that he doubted "the willingness of workers to take massively to the streets in an inter-sectoral movement". For Laurent Berger of the CFDT, it is urgent to wait: "the convergence of struggles is not the CFDT's cup of tea". Only Solidaires, which has less weight in the trade union field, comes out clearly for a convergence between public and private sectors.

The inter-union coordinating committee of the civil service that made the call for March 22nd is meeting on March 27th. On March 30th, the Air France inter-union coordinating committee is calling for a strike over wages. On March 31st, the inter-union committee of the Carrefour supermarket chain is calling a strike for wage demands and against job cuts. The inter-union committee of the EHPAD has not for the moment planned a new date.

Despite this apparent dispersion, all the combative sectors have in mind the date of April 3rd, the beginning of the strike at the SNCF. Even though the CGT, the CFDT and UNSA unions of the SNCF

advocate a rhythm of two days of strike every five days, Sud Rail is calling for a vote for an ongoing movement from April 3rd.

The inter-union committee of Public Finance Paris (CGT, Solidaires, FO) is calling for a strike on April 3rd. The same goes for a coordinating committee of CGT hospital workers, meeting last Friday. In several cities, such as Bordeaux, Rouen and Grenoble, the dates of the 3rd or 4th of April are put into perspective as new dates of convergence in general assemblies.

In any case, militant activists understood that the road was not marked out and that it was necessary to go beyond sectoral divisions and union divisions, and not to rely on a calendar that was empty of convergences. This will quickly make necessary the formation of strong local union coordinating committees, bringing together the different sectors; and that can give confidence to sectors who are on strike and encourage the expansion of the movement. The match is obviously far from being won.

But the really essential element lies in these coordinating bodies, this change of political climate which must prevail in the coming days. This convergence should not only be in terms of “solidarity” with the railway workers, but in terms of “bringing everything together”, of a convergent platform for the defence of public services, against the austerity policies of the government, made up of favours for the MEDEF (the main employers’ organization) and attacks against workers.

As regards the political organizations of the left, the call initiated by Olivier Besancenot and the NPA for unity around the railway workers and all of the public services, rejecting the antisocial policies of the government, was very well received. And in a sign of the times, in recent days Besancenot has become in opinion polls the most popular personality among sympathizers of the left, thanks to a language of fighting spirit and unity.

The path that is open can be extended to weave a united front bringing together unions, parties and associations of the social movement, around common demands, a front with a long-term perspective, for a broad convergence, for a general strike to make Macron retreat.

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P.S.

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