

Pension, social and democratic crisis - Making the movement a political force in France

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Clearly, France is going through a social crisis and a democratic crisis. It can even reasonably be said that these two crises reflect a regime crisis, that is, an inability of the ruling class, the capitalist class, to continue to exercise power in a normal way by relying on the current political institutions.

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This does not mean that we have entered a revolutionary crisis, not even a pre-revolutionary one, but a phase of social and political instability whose outcome can hardly be predicted. As such, it raises a series of political questions and paradoxes.

A global revolt

The massive rejection of the postponement of the retirement age to 64, with a law imposed by several institutional diktats including Article 49.3, which allows the government to force a bill through the National Assembly without a vote, the prolonged popular mobilization on an undoubtedly unprecedented scale, are obvious manifestations of the social crisis. Demonstrations, because this movement, around the question of retirement at 64, crystallizes a deeper crisis. The popular classes have been attacked for several months by the consequences of inflation, the rise in the cost of living in general, food and energy in particular, the effects of Covid. Added to this are longer-term attacks that have led to the immiseration of the public health system, public housing, difficulties of daily life, low incomes, problems of stable employment, transport, the schooling of children, care for the elderly. All these difficulties are experienced just as much in popular neighbourhoods as in small peripheral towns. They all reflect the will of capital to further reduce the share of value added devoted to the popular classes, directly through wages, indirectly through compulsory levies and redistribution.

All these concerns of daily life have been reflected in the demonstrations since January, even if pensions are the point of crystallization and the sole basis of inter-union action. The constancy of the rejection of Macron's law cannot be understood without considering all the anger that is found in the current movement. It is therefore, generally, the living conditions of the popular classes that determine the unfailing popularity of support for strikes and demonstrations and even blockades. Macron's political isolation obviously corresponds to this social reality as he is the representative of a society where the wealth produced is captured for the profit of the capitalist class, whose wealth, through the companies it owns or through other assets, has continued to increase in recent years. 5% of households own 95% of industrial assets. Macron finds relative support, apart from the capitalist class itself, only in a part of the upper layers of the salaried workers, managers, the liberal professions, basically those who link their prosperity to the capitalist system, who have hardly suffered from Covid, are not attacked in their standard of living by inflation and have no fear of the raising of the retirement age. The cleavage over pensions is clearly a class divide: it brings together those who can only live on their wages or social incomes and suffer attacks on social protection and all systems of redistribution.

The political expression of the movement is limited by the Intersyndicale

We can say that the unity forged around the national *intersyndicale* (inter-union coordination) since January has allowed the construction of the movement, its vigor, especially in small towns usually less mobilized in social movements. But this *intersyndicale*, if it has until now brought together all the unions, has voluntarily limited itself, to maintain its unity, to the demand for the withdrawal of the measure of retirement at 64, the only common basis. It can therefore be said that in the country a general, complete united front of the trade union and political organizations of the workers' movement has been built, reflecting and strengthening the movement.

But everyone also understands that this obligatory self-limitation of the inter-union rank and file (let us not forget that the CFDT supported the Touraine reform of 2014 and the gradual transition to 43 annuities) means that this movement does not take the political place which, objectively, corresponds to its depth, to its radicalization. It is not that those who demonstrate, the activists in strikes and blockades, the participants in the hundreds of demonstrations, do not express all the demands that underlie this movement, but that the self-limitation of the *intersyndicale* limits its passage to a political stage. Objectively, the movement challenges power, the organization of society by the parties and the capitalist class, puts forward the main social demands. It weakens the intellectual and political hegemony of the ruling class, which has lost the battle on the question of its reform (even if it succeeds tomorrow in imposing it) but the movement does not produce its own political expression to collectively advance another policy, other social choices for the benefit of the working classes. In this we can say that the content of the demands of the *intersyndicale* is not the emanation of the level of consciousness, but is well behind it; On the other hand, the movement does not have the strength to create its own structures capable of shaking up the *intersyndicale*.

Achieving the unity of the exploited

Revolutionary Marxists have been confronted many times with similar situations, often in the midst of confrontations at another level, in revolutionary or pre-revolutionary crises. The elaboration by the Communist International of the tactic of the united front and the promotion of the slogan of a "workers' government" at the third and fourth congresses in 1920/1921 reflect this concern.

The tactic of a united front must allow the widest unity of the exploited to be set in motion. This does

not mean the arithmetical addition of unions and parties, but mobilization, starting from fundamental needs and, through collective action, struggle, the advancement of consciousness, the questioning of capitalist hegemony. In this, the alliance, in the realization of the united front with reformist organizations materially and ideologically linked to capitalist neoliberal politics, is, paradoxically, necessary to achieve unity, but this must not be at the expense of action itself. "The historical problem is not to mechanically unite all the remaining organizations of the different stages of the class struggle but to rally the proletariat in the struggle and for the struggle. These are absolutely different, sometimes even contradictory, problems" explains Leon Trotsky in "Fascism - What It Is and How to Fight It."

In the early 1920s, at the heart of crisis situations, the problem facing Communists was that of coexistence with important Social Democratic parties, in several advanced capitalist countries, especially in Germany, and to elaborate a revolutionary policy. The aim was indeed to create a movement, a process which sets in motion and, starting from struggles over demands, unites the exploited and leads to a revolutionary confrontation. It was paradoxical to seek unification with the Social Democratic parties with which the Communists had just split during the First World War, the Russian Revolution and the revolutionary crisis in Germany of 1918/1919. "If we could have united the working masses around our flag, or on our current slogans, neglecting the reformist organizations, parties or trade unions, it would certainly be the best thing. But then the question of the united front would not even arise in its present form. The reformist group tends to peace with the bourgeoisie. But in order not to lose its influence on the workers, it is forced, against the deep will of its leaders, to support the partial movements of the exploited against the exploiters" Trotsky told French Communists in 1922, a year after the Tours Congress.

The "workers' government"

At the time, the congresses of the Communist International debated the question of the "workers' government." The International Committee of December 1921, and then the Fourth Congress of the CI, in November 1922, detailed this question, and the Resolution on the tactics of the CI precisely explains that "the slogan of the 'workers' government' is an inevitable consequence of the whole tactic of the united front." In the movement of the exploited and oppressed made possible by a united front tactic, the outcome is a workers' government, on a revolutionary program of confrontation with the bourgeois state. The resolution therefore lists the various scenarios of "workers' governments" which can reflect the alliance between the Communists, and Social Democrats, warning in particular against a liberal workers' government as in Australia, or a social-liberal government as in Great Britain, both of which are only "governments camouflaged as a coalition between the bourgeoisie and counter-revolutionary workers' leaders." But the Congress deemed possible the participation of Communists in governments that organize confrontation with the bourgeois state and begin to fulfil revolutionary tasks. The best-known example is the KPD decision in January 1923 to build a KPD-SPD government in the Länder of Saxony and Thuringia, a decision hampered by the Fischer-Maslow left opposition.

As an extension of what Gramsci then elaborated on hegemony, it appears that the slogan of a workers' government can translate, in an algebraic or more concrete way, in propaganda or practical situations, this idea that the oppressed and exploited must break the political and cultural hegemony exercised by the bourgeoisie in civil society. which allows it to complement its power beyond the economic sphere and the coercive political state, to legitimize itself by hegemony in the institutions structuring society, unions, churches, parties and so on. Creating a new hegemony, that of the exploited and oppressed, in the movement of struggle, is therefore a challenge, affirming a project for the whole of society, questioning capitalism, starting from the satisfaction of the needs of

the popular classes and the demands of democratic struggles and struggles against oppression, affirming it to confront the coercive state and tackle exploitation.

Reclaiming the power of the exploited and oppressed

These tasks had been elaborated by the Communists in the early 1920s, years of revolutionary incandescence. But, once again, the context of the struggle for pensions and the problems it raises can underline both the importance of a united front tactic - understanding that its dynamic must extend its base of social demands - and the place of the slogan of government of the exploited and oppressed, which in this case would first mean the positive manifestation of the claim of the working classes to stand as candidates for power, not by delegation in the current institutional frameworks, but by their ability to organize themselves at all levels of society. This obviously goes hand in hand with the ability to converge, in opposition to capitalism, all struggles acting against exploitation and oppression.

The many demands expressed in this movement have not materialized in structures bringing together activists, the organizations that have been animating the struggle for three months. The link has not been made with social concerns which, crystallized around the question of retirement at 64, are not reduced to it. In a word, to use a political terminology, this movement has indeed achieved a front of the trade union organizations, a mass uprising of the popular classes, but in the absence of structures that bring together political energy, expressing the demands present in this movement.

Let us remember that four years ago it was the *gilets jaunes* who manifested, in smaller numbers, a similar anger, also crystallizing the most precarious layers of wage labour, especially in rural and peripheral regions. The anger and the demands were the same. "We revolt against the high cost of living, precariousness and misery. We want, for our loved ones, our families and our children, to live in dignity. 26 billionaires own as much as half of humanity, this is unacceptable. Let us share wealth and not misery! Let's put an end to social inequalities! We demand the immediate increase of wages, social minima, allowances and pensions, the unconditional right to housing and health, education, free public services for all... We are strengthened by the diversity of our discussions, at this very moment hundreds of assemblies are developing and proposing their own demands. They affect real democracy, social and fiscal justice, working conditions, ecological and climate justice, and an end to discrimination.! (Assembly of the Assemblies of Commerce).

It was socially, too, a class revolt, explicitly targeting the exploiters, as do the demonstrators at the current mobilizations. We find this social anger in local struggles against public housing companies, concerning rents or energy prices, those in the popular suburbs suffering discrimination, high unemployment rates, the disappearance of public services, transport difficulties. It is also found in the broad united call for the feminist strike of 8 March 2023: "Still paid a quarter less, concentrated on the lowest paid and part-time jobs, more and more women are unable to make ends meet. Instead of punishing companies that discriminate, instead of increasing wages and pensions, fighting against gender-based and sexual violence against women, this government and employers want to impose a violent and unfair pension reform."

The appeal of the 2021 Earth Uprisings also expressed this popular anger, "which brings together young people rebelling against the ecological catastrophe and farmers who refuse to make the land a market... After having enclosed and privatized the commons, the capitalist market and its institutions are now precipitating the ravages of biodiversity, climate change and social atomization."

Faced with the illegitimacy of those who govern us

The current social anger, strikes and demonstrations are therefore the product of all these social demands. The immense majority is faced with a regime that rests on an institutional legitimacy, the “democratic” rules that allowed the election of a president, a national assembly. And as these rules, themselves, are not enough, there are all the legislative artifices allowing the regime to escape the absence of a majority - in a system designed to ensure a presidential majority - to escape the pressure suffered by the deputies in their electoral constituencies.

Therefore, to the social question is added an obvious democratic question: how can a president who has received the assent of only 20% of the electorate, and a parliamentary minority which has received the assent of only 11.97% of this electorate have the arrogance to claim legitimacy to impose a law rejected by an immense majority of the population?

This dual situation, social crisis and democratic crisis, raises a directly political question: How to impose the needs, aspirations, choices of those who express themselves through strikes and the streets against the pension reform, those who lead the battles targeting the capitalist system, to affirm a force capable of imposing its legitimacy in the face of a minority and illegitimate regime?

The danger of the far right

Moving in this direction is also a vital need in the face of an aberrant situation. Three months after the beginning of a social movement that fights an attack emanating from neoliberal capitalism, a social movement organized by the trade union movement and with the participation and support of the anti-neoliberal left, the far right appears to be largely taking advantage of the current social crisis, while it obviously refuses to put forward any demand for measures that would attack the interests of the capitalist employers. Like its Italian colleagues of Fratelli d'Italia around Meloni, the French far right is only biding its time hoping that the absence of a powerful popular anti-capitalist dynamic will make it appear as an institutional alternative in 2027, while taking advantage of the criminalization and demonization of the left wing NUPES alliance by the government.

The isolation of this extreme right can only advance if a front of the popular classes is built, a trade union, social and political front which traces a bridge between the pension movement and all the social, democratic and environmental demands of the day, structured around measures which challenge the power of capitalist groups. The foundations of such a front exist in the social struggles that are being waged in the social, feminist, ecological and anti-racist fields, because capital structures and restructures exploitation and oppression for its own benefit and generalizes its power within society as a whole. We are in one of the moments where the task is to “destroy one hegemony and create a new one” as Gramsci put it.

In civil society, the hegemony of the ruling class is asserted, which in ordinary times finds allies in the reformist leaderships of the workers' movement. But there are times when this hegemony can be challenged by social struggles, when a political identity of the exploited and oppressed is asserted, overcoming their divisions. We are in a moment when this political identity could assert itself, expressing the fight for its own hegemony. It is therefore a political hegemony of the exploited and oppressed that must be built, a hegemony corresponding not only to their social weight - by bringing together all the struggles against exploitation and oppression - but above all by directing these struggles around the questioning of the system that structures this exploitation and oppression, the capitalist system.

Interior Minister Darmanin's violent repression of ecological protests in Sainte-Soline is indicative of the great fear of the convergence of the social struggle around pensions with that of the ecologist struggles. Similarly, Darmanin and Macron have everything to fear from a convergence with the struggles of the popular suburbs over public services, racism and police violence. The positive convergence of these struggles does not exist today. To move in this direction, it would be necessary to build and assert a social and political front, around urgent social demands, outlining the perspective of what could be a society of the commons, managed by and for the exploited and oppressed, structured from businesses, neighbourhoods and localities, taking charge of the organization of society for the satisfaction of popular needs.

For unity in the service of combat

To speak of a government of the exploited and oppressed implies at the same time starting from the current situation, to consider the social and political organizations that engage in current struggles, which organize social struggles. It would obviously be up to them to come together to define, to debate what could be a program of satisfaction of social needs, of breaking with the current system. This touches on a key problem of these weeks: the need for the convergence of social and political forces to break down the current mutual ignorance.

The weakness of local assemblies, of self-organizing structures in this movement should not prevent us from taking steps forward. The indispensable autonomy of the social movement vis-à-vis political parties cannot lead, as it does today, to the absence of broad common initiatives based on the social and democratic demands for which both are fighting. Contrary to what the NUPES essentially does, the issue is not limited to an institutional, parliamentary struggle, coupled with support for social struggles, and waiting for this to translate into electoral support in 2027 or in the event of dissolution. The parliaments of Popular Unity (currently dormant), if opened widely, could have helped in this task. This should be concretized now, not only by the realization of national and local meetings bringing together parties, unions and associations, but also by a joint activist effort to build national and local unitary structures to advance this convergence within the struggle. This obviously concerns common tasks on issues of repression and response to the actions of the far right, in defence of democratic rights. But it also concerns the need to converge, beyond the rejection of the pension changes, common social demands in a programme of struggle. It is necessary to give a meaning, a political orientation to the social struggle, a political orientation that is built in the dynamics of the current social movement.

Similarly, we are at a time where the evidence of social demands and the evidence of democratic demands are combined. The current situation puts back on the agenda democratic demands such as those we put forward when the Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste (NPA) was created (and which were re-established during the *gilets jaunes* movement). It is not a question of fighting for a simple cleansing of the "excesses" of the Fifth Republic but of advancing a series of concrete demands: "An expanded political democracy requires breaking with the institutions of the Fifth Republic and their hyper-presidentialism, abolishing the presidential function. To demand full proportional representation, the election of a constituent assembly, the abolition of all the bodies, such as the Senate and the Constitutional Council, which further confiscate democracy. To establish rotation and strict term limits, parity in any elected body. To develop a full citizenship of resident-workers based on integral birth right. These new democratic conquests cannot be thought of without profound, emancipatory mobilizations, inventing new forms of democratic practices...."

The slogan of a constituent assembly is therefore clearly on the agenda, not as a simple passage to another Republic, as if the state could change its class nature in favour of the passage to another

number of Republic. It is not only a question of bringing down institutions that fragment, laminate, scatter, “puzzle-like” all the social dynamics of the popular classes, but of putting forward a process of popular self-organization that explicitly fights delegation and is a tool for breaking and not cleaning up the bourgeois state. The movement carries the seeds of dynamics that can go in this direction. It is up to us to stimulate them, whatever the outcome of the current phase of the movement.

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