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France

# A beautiful Indian summer of social mobilization

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**The preparation of the Woerth-Sarkozy [1]** reform on pensions has generated one of the most important social mobilizations that this country has known, comparable to, if not more important than, those in November-December 1995 against the Juppe plan [2] and in spring 2003 against the Fillon reform [3], concerning pension systems. Although having as yet only a little hindsight, we can already draw some lessons from the movement...

Although he had not announced this reform at the time of his election campaign and had at that time confirmed that he would keep his commitment not to touch the legal retirement age, which was fixed at 60 years, Sarkozy made a volte-face. His bill, as adopted by Parliament, aims in particular at raising the age for retirement from 60 to 62, raising the age at which you can retire with a full pension from 65 to 67 and lengthening the duration of contributions necessary to obtain a full pension from 40 to 43 years.

To justify these radical choices, the government repeated a simple argument, that increased life expectancy would be likely to cause the bankruptcy of the French pension system. The avowed aim of saving the public pension system scarcely concealed the real one, which was to get rid of it.

The companies which want to generalize pension funds in France were not fooled. The group Malakoff Médecin, one of whose leading figures is the President's brother, Guillaume Sarkozy, who is also one of the principal figures of the Medef [4] lobbied in favour of the reform and prepared to launch its products on a massive scale. Throughout the mobilization, tens of thousands of civil servants received mails from Préfon, an insurance organization which offers contracts for complementary pensions.

## Social polarization

The public pension system in France is one of the branches of the Social Security system, whose creation, obtained after 1945, was the result of decades of social struggles. Based on solidarity, it is in the eyes of the bourgeoisie an archaism and a nonsense in a globalized capitalist world. From the point of view of the ruling classes, to destroy these remnants of solidarity is to release layers of profits which are "sleeping". There is no doubt about it; this offensive on the sector of pensions is part of an overall plan which also threatens unemployment and sickness benefits. This is a global offensive against Social Security, whose benefits have already been reduced on several occasions. It is taking place in a context of economic crisis and is part of the austerity programme which aims at purging the system in order to restore the rates of profit.

To put an end to the "French exception", i.e. to remodel the society of this country so as to align it with the rest of the developed capitalist world, to increase profits, that is the task that the bourgeoisie has set itself and which guides the policy of the government, which is entirely in the service of the bourgeoisie.

This reform could have gone through in the discreet silence of the salons of the Republic. The fact that it caused so much sound and fury constitutes a first victory for the partisans of the class struggle, among whom we count ourselves. It is also a first victory from the point of view of the need to make anger heard, to show the combativeness of those who refuse to pay for the crisis, all over the world. Clear about what was at stake, and yet without any guarantee concerning the possibility of forcing this right-wing government, which is "steady on its feet", millions of workers and young people moved into action. Participation in the days of strikes and demonstrations became

stronger and stronger, in spite of the government's lies aimed at underestimating the numbers. According to the newspaper *Le Monde*, as a result of the turnover, 8 million people demonstrated at least once. That is quite simply colossal in a country of 65 million inhabitants. The rejection of the government project, thus expressed, was confirmed by many opinion polls. The duration of the movement was also rather exceptional, since after the scale of the first days of action in May and June, which was already surprising, the mobilization lasted even after the definitive adoption of the law.

To these many-millioned days of action was added an ongoing strike movement of hundreds of thousands of workers and young people in a certain number of sectors. It concerned ports, oil refineries, rail transport, the refuse collectors of big cities like Marseilles and Toulouse, the employees of certain local and regional authorities and tens of thousands of young people, in particular school students. The ongoing strike in these sectors was combined with the increasing number of blockades. Airports, stations, industrial and commercial zones and crossroads were in turn the target of determined demonstrators. It was a question of simultaneously raising the level of mobilization, supporting the sectors that were on strike and having an effect on the economy in order to inflict losses on employers. An unprecedented phenomenon on this scale from a qualitative and quantitative point of view, this type of action made it possible to bring down the barriers between militants of different trade-union organizations and to help foster unity between organizations and solidarity among workers and with young people.

The government made considerable efforts to defuse the discontent. Since its "pedagogy" had not been particularly effective, we saw crude operations like the aborted attempt to divert attention onto law-and-order issues or onto the Roms, who were massively stigmatized during the summer; we saw the government playing on the fear of violence by targeted repression and by invoking threats of terrorist attacks. Nothing worked. Nothing, except attrition.

## The need for and difficulties of the general strike

Although the movement considerably complicated the task of the government and contributed to weakening and discrediting it, it could not prevent it from getting its reform through. That poses problems of a strategic order on which it is necessary to dwell.

Taking into account the scope of the attack and the level of determination of the government to impose it, it would have been necessary to strike much harder. Not to be satisfied with blocking this or that branch of industry but blocking the whole country. Only an ongoing general strike would have made that possible.

In spite of the conscious action of tens of thousands of workers and young people aimed at generalizing the mobilization it did not happen. Although the rejection of the government and its policies is obviously much stronger than in 1995, and although the days of action were more massive [5], the ongoing strike movement was weaker. There is not one single cause for this irrefutable fact. It is a mixture of closely related phenomena which explains it.

That relates first of all to a lack of confidence in the possibility of winning, of imposing the withdrawal of the bill. From this point of view, in certain sectors the weight of past defeats weighs negatively in the balance. Other important factors were the atomization of the working class, the extent of unemployment and precarious work, uncertainty about the future, the difficulty of "making ends meet". It should be noted that the level of household debt is today 10 per cent higher than it was in 1995. To overcome this last factor, millions of workers must become convinced that the strike will hit their wallet less hard than the consequences of defeat, quite simply because they are convinced that victory is within their grasp.

It is also necessary to examine the attitude of the leaderships of the big trade-union confederations. Nationally, the Solidaires union [6] which defended the need for the general strike from start to finish, was isolated on this position. Not being of the same nature, neither the leadership of the main confederation, the CGT [7], nor even more so that of the second, the CFDT [8], are motivated by radicalism, the will to drive forward struggles to their maximum intensity, with the aim of inflicting, on the basis of a relationship of forces, defeats on the government. They are much more in the mould of “social dialogue”, negotiation, compromise. If unity could be forged and could last in spite of the differences between the leaderships, in spite of the effects of inter-bureaucratic competition, if the calls for mobilization were multiplied, it was above all the result of the attitude of the government, which at no point wanted to make any concessions. However it was not for lack of overtures, on the side of the Thibault-Chereque duo, who asked for the opening of negotiations, without ever demanding the withdrawal of the project. It is also because the pressure came from the base. The first tests of mobilization showed a high level of readiness for action and trade-union activists on the ground wanted to push further and harder, also being conscious that their credibility, their utility, their role, depended on it. Showing what was possible, local inter-union co-ordinating committees, for example in the departments of Puy-de-Dôme, Haute-Garonne and Ardennes demonstrated greater combativeness, multiplying blockades involving workers from different sectors, adding departmental one-day strikes to those announced at a national level. These local one-day strikes were also successful, a sign that it was possible to go further.

The other weakness of the movement lies in the low level of self-organization of the struggles. Where the struggles were hardest, it was the inter-union co-ordinating committees in the workplaces which pushed the mobilizations forward and at same time kept control of their rhythms and forms. There was a generalized phenomenon: the weakness of participation in the general meetings held to decide to continue the strike or to organize the action contrasted with the massive character of participation in the one-day strikes and demonstrations. So it became impossible to get the struggle out of the cramped framework in which it was maintained, by the national inter-union coordination and in the different industries, sectors and workplaces, by teams of local trade union officials who were too timid.

It is nevertheless the case that the attractiveness of the trade unions was reinforced by this mobilization. That can be seen with the naked eye. Above all the CGT, but also Solidaires and the FSU [9] are recruiting. And that is positive. Teams of radical young trade-union militants have emerged and that is an asset for the future.

## Unity and its limits

Over and above their function of defence of workers' interests, it could also be seen that the population invested the trade unions with a political function of opposition to the government of the Right. That is logical when you see the crisis of credibility which affects the big institutional parties of the parliamentary opposition, and in the first place the Socialist Party. The SP sought to surf on the rejection of the Right in order to further its objective of a change of government in 2012 [10]. The principal leaders of the SP were present at the demonstrations, at the head of the contingent of their party. The fact that it was possible to constitute a broad front of the entire Left, political, trade-union and associative, against the Right, was a positive factor for the movement. But at the same time, the affair was difficult, so great is the proximity of the Socialists to the government on the fundamental issue. Sarkozy, Fillon and Woerth did not miss the opportunity to fustigate the duplicity of the SP, evoking the remarks of the current president of the IMF and potential socialist candidate at the future presidential election, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, in support of the reform. Nor did they have any difficulty underlining the contradictions of the SP whose principal leader, Martine Aubry, got herself in a pickle by approving the raising of the retirement age to 62 then backtracking. The PS has never demanded the withdrawal of the bill nor put forward measures for a really alternative programme, that is, one based on the sharing of wealth -and for good reason. As for the vote of the Socialist members of Parliament in favour of the provision of the law concerning the lengthening of the duration of contributions, it was a resounding admission. Some SP leaders pushed this logic to the end. In Marseilles, in the city which appeared as the “capital of

the strike”, the principal leader of the local SP, Guerini, launched a joint appeal with the right-wing mayor, Gaudin, to stop the strike...

It is nonetheless the case that many militants and sympathizers of the SP took part in the movement. Like those of the other left parties, the Left Front [11], Lutte Ouvriere and the NPA. A unitary campaign of meetings, on the initiative of Attac and Copernic [12], made it possible to associate all these forces to distribute material with arguments against the law and to popularize alternative answers to the crisis to those of liberalism.

But differences also surfaced. While the generalization of the strike became the key question, the leaders of the Left Front, and above all Jean-Luc Mélenchon, conducted a battle for... the holding of a referendum. That does not only constitute an unattainable objective for various reasons, it also reveals fundamental differences with this anti-liberal and reformist current, which is regaining a certain influence in France. At the time of a full-scale political and social crisis, the leaders of the Left Front were seeking an institutional response. This way of approaching politics is based on a certain division of labour. The trade unions decide the calendar of mobilization. The parties find a political solution.

In the NPA, although we know that there exist differences of function between parties and trade unions and that these two types of organization have their specificities and their utility, we reject this mechanical and disjointed view of political action. What could be more political than the masses bursting onto the scene? What better solution than the majority of the population taking its destiny into its own hands? To affirm the need for the general strike is both to indicate the best way to win and to reinforce the political crisis, to allow it to crystallize, and solutions will appear with the overthrow of a government, with the defeat of its policies. When the opportunity to defend this solution finds the ear of hundreds of thousands of workers in struggle, then it must be done. That should not certainly be put forward in a timeless or dogmatic fashion, but it is the most reliable strategic road to revolutionizing society. It is a strategy which is verified and refined through experiences drawn from the analysis of the course of the class struggle. From this point of view, the strategy combines both the patient but constant preparation of the confrontation between the majority of the population and the privileged minority and the search for the expression, for the consolidation of majorities with ideas which are radically opposed to the very organization of the system and which prefigure the outlines of an alternative society. Without exaggerating the significance of it, the fact that a big majority of the population is ready to defend a system based on solidarity constitutes a political victory in the fifth capitalist power of the planet. Because although the government won on the institutional terrain, with the adoption of a law, although it inflicted a defeat on millions of workers who will suffer from its policies, it did not succeed in convincing. It lost on the terrain of public opinion. It lost on the idea that its policy is the only one possible, that it may not fill people with enthusiasm but that it is in the general interest. That is an invaluable gain in these times of crisis.

## A discredited Right

The government of the Right comes out discredited, including in the eyes of workers who had believed in the promises of the candidate Sarkozy, who had been taken in by his electoral slogan, “work more to earn more”. In their eyes, Sarkozy is not any more the president of a better standard of living; he is the president of the rich. The Woerth-Bettencourt soap opera largely contributed to this discredit at the same time as it provided an additional reason to mobilize. While the Minister for Social Affairs was asking people to tighten their belts by an additional notch, he was demonstrating a sleazy proximity with the principal fortunes of the country. The image of corruption, of the vulgar display of wealth, of favouritism, is not very good for their standing in the opinion polls. Beyond that, it is Sarkozy himself who is the target, provoking a profound and virulent rejection. And the government reshuffle that he has just carried out changes nothing. That does not mean that his defeat in the 2012 elections is already certain. But the number of those who can no longer stomach him remaining in office has increased considerably.

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A movement is also rich by its diversity. Among the demonstrators of this autumn, a certain number have decided to wait until 2012 to kick Sarkozy out, by replacing him by his Socialist challenger. But others understand well that the SP in power, with the example of what is happening in Greece, in the Spanish State and in Portugal, is another way of making the majority of the population pay for the crisis.

At the end of this movement, it is them that the NPA is addressing. In the midst of preparing its first national congress, it is working on a document which starts from the analysis of the double crisis, economic and ecological, of unparalleled scope, which the capitalist system is going through, to put forward transitional responses to this crisis. Its last National Political Council launched a call to discuss the anti-capitalist alternative. This debate does not relate only to organized political forces but also to those tens of thousands of workers and young people who are looking for an alternative to the policies of the Right and the institutional Left. To turn our backs on the Socialist sirens, on the dead end that an umpteenth version of governmental coalition with the PS would represent, is a necessity in order to open up another perspective. In this context, the NPA is working to develop frameworks of discussion that make it possible to confront different points of view as to the preparation of the next stages of the struggle and the outlines and content of an anti-capitalist alternative.

Toulouse, November 23, 2010

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[1] Eric Woerth was the minister of the Sarkozy-Fillon government who was in charge of piloting the project for the reform of pensions. Mixed up in financial scandals and profoundly unpopular, he lost his job in the government reshuffle which followed the mobilization.

[2] Alain Juppe was Prime Minister of the right-wing government, under President Jacques Chirac, in 1995

[3] Francois Fillon, currently Prime Minister, was Minister for Social Affairs in the Chirac-Raffarin government

[4] Medef is the French acronym for the Movement of Employers of France, the big employers' organization, whose president is Laurence Parisot.

[5] In 1995, the unions mobilized about two million demonstrators for the big days of action, compared with 3 million this time. Although lower on both occasions, the number of demonstrators according to the government estimates shows the same tendency.

[6] Solidaires ("In Solidarity") is a minority trade-union organization, coming partly from expulsions from the CFDT at the end of the 1980s of radical trade-union militants who then set up the SUD trade unions, which became influential in certain sectors (Post Office, rail, tax offices...)

[7] The General Confederation of Labour (CGT) is the biggest trade-union organization in France (34 per cent of votes in the elections to the conciliation and arbitration boards in 2008). Led for a long time by the French Communist Party, its central apparatus became autonomous at the same time as the party was relegated to the second rank on the political scene. It has joined the European Confederation of Trade Unions (ETUC) and the International Trade-union Confederation (ITUC). Bernard Thibault, of the Federation of Railway Workers, has been general secretary since 1999.

[8] The Democratic French Confederation of Labour (CFDT), is the second-biggest trade-union organization in France (21.8 per cent of votes in 2008). It came from the radicalisation of the Catholic trade union movement (a majority split from the Catholic confederation, the CFTC, in 1964). Radical and committed to workers' self-management in the 1960s and 1970s, it was "re-centred" under the leadership of Edmond Maire after 1978 and expelled its radical currents from the Post and Telecommunications and Health sectors in 1988.

The CFDT supported, against those workers who were on strike, the reform of pensions in 1995, then again in 2003, which caused new departures of the radical currents of the confederation. Francois Chereque has been general secretary since 2002.

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[9] Unitary Trade-union Federation (FSU), the main union of those working in education, research and culture.

[10] The next presidential and legislative elections in France will take place in 2012.

[11] The Left Front comprises in particular the French Communist Party and the Left Party. The latter was formed in 2008 from groups of militants who left the Socialist Party. Its main leader is the former senator and Socialist minister, and current MEP, Jean-Luc Mélenchon.

[12] Attac is an association for popular education whose aim is to combat liberalism and to popularise arguments against liberal policies and in favour of another distribution of wealth. Copernic is a foundation whose objectives are similar.