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France

Eleven political theses on the movement of January-March 2023 in France

- Features -

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What's the current state of the movement initiated in France on 19 January 2023 to obtain the withdrawal of yet another pension counter-reform, and a victory against a widely hated president, and where is it going? To those who imagined a last stand of trade unions incapable of standing in the way of the neoliberal steamroller, just a few months after Macron's re-election, workers, social movements and the left have shown that the government cannot count on widespread apathy. It is not yet a definitive break with the established order, but it already amounts to a lot. To aid collective reflection, Ugo Palheta here examines the potentialities, limits and immediate and strategic stakes of the current struggle.

1

The movement that has been developing in France since January 19 is exciting in many ways. In just two months, it has profoundly changed the political atmosphere of the country, rolled back the prevailing defeatism, destabilized (even frightened) the zealous defenders of the established social order and neoliberal policies, broadened the horizons of expectation for the millions of people who have entered into struggle and, in doing so, begun to take the measure of their strength. Above all, this mobilization has accentuated the crisis of hegemony that has been deepening in France for years, in particular by revealing the extent to which the Macronist regime is socially isolated. It has crystallized social discontent that had not necessarily found the way to express itself politically and has transformed into legitimate rage the widespread mistrust of a large part of the population — especially the working class and youth — for Macron and his government.

2

From this point on, the issue is no longer just the counter-reform of pensions. It is no longer simply “social”, in the restrictive sense of trade unions. It is eminently and fully political: as soon as it became national, taking on a broad social dimension and a permanent rootedness, the movement asserted itself as a confrontation not with this or that capitalist (as in the case of a struggle against redundancies or job cuts in a company), not with this or that sectoral measure (however important it may be), but with the whole of the bourgeois class as it is represented (and defended) by the political regime. In this respect, such a movement is able to open a breach in the political order by permanently modifying the balance of forces between classes.

It is also in the nature of a great popular movement to blur the categories used to artificially corset class struggles by separating a “political” level and a “socio-economic” level. Every mass struggle, like the one we are experiencing, is thus inextricably social and political; It inevitably tends to take as its logical target the political regime and the great interests that it embodies: the owners, the exploiters, the ruling class. It is also ideological and cultural, insofar as it questions the narratives (small or large) that the dominant class builds to justify this or that counter-reform, or more broadly their social order with its procession of injustices, alienation and violence, but also in the sense that it engenders a battle between antagonistic conceptions of the world and alternative visions of what society, human relationships, our lives should be.

3

The current movement rises on the shoulders of all the mobilizations that preceded it, at least those that marked the sequence of open struggle in the mid-2010s: in particular the battle against the planned airport at Notre-Dame-des-Landes, the fight against the employment law, the *Gilets jaunes*, the feminist mobilizations against sexual and gender-based violence and more broadly gender oppression, the 2019-2020 movement against pension reform, the struggles of undocumented migrants or all the struggles (including anti-racist ones) against police crimes and all state violence. It integrates, articulates and develops their achievements, both on the level of methods and tactics of struggle and on the ideological level.

A non-negligible difference, however, lies in the rise and increased militancy of the parliamentary left, in particular the 74 La France Insoumise (LFI) deputies, who have strongly contributed to politicizing and radicalizing a mobilization that most unions – in particular the CFDT – wanted to maintain on a strictly "social" terrain. We can thus rejoice in the fact that most of the new LFI deputies – whether we think of Rachel Keke or Louis Boyard – have at no time sought to oppose the parliamentary battle (with its own means) to the classic methods of class struggle: street demonstrations, pickets (on which we have seen these deputies several times, including the president of the LFI parliamentary group Mathilde Panot), and blockades (especially of high schools and universities).

4

All our efforts must be directed towards the goal of further broadening and intensifying the movement, in order to achieve victory. We don't know how far we can go, but forcing the government to back down on its counter-reform is the bare minimum. In the months and years to come, such a victory will count double or triple, precisely because Macron wanted to make this counter-reform the mother of battles, a showdown to consolidate his power until the end of his mandate, and to initiate the total destruction of the conquests of the working class in the 20th century. As a Thatcherite having learned his lessons (from the neoliberal counter-revolution), Macron knows that he must break the most combative sectors of the social movement in order to plunge into lasting despair most of those who are currently mobilizing, building strikes and demonstrating, blocking and uniting, with the hope – vague or affirmed – of a world of equality and social justice.

5

In this confrontation, the Macronist government has already indicated – by its words and practice – that it is ready to go as far as necessary, contributing to the politicization of the movement through all-out police repression. Breaking down illusions about the new "policing scheme" and the appointment in Paris of a police chief deemed less brutal than the infamous Lallement, the police have indeed been characterized in recent days by the extreme brutality of their interventions – a normalized and routinized brutality over the last ten years, so that it is not a question of "slippages" or "blunders" but of the ordinary actions of a largely fascistic police. But police action is also characterized by a certain dismay in the face of the number and determination of demonstrators in the sequence that followed the imposition of 49-3. [\[1\]](#)

Largely in the minority in the country on its project, passed forcibly via a whole series of institutional manoeuvres typical of the Fifth Republic (whose Constitution is located as we know at a good distance from all standards, even minimal, of a democracy), destabilized by the accumulation of videos and testimonies exposing state violence, Macronism, with its ideologues in the lead, clearly fails or no longer succeeds in convincing broadly that the violence is from the demonstrators, and that police violence is a myth invented by barbarians thirsty for police blood. Proof

that the monopoly of legitimate violence is only ever “claimed” by the state, to use Max Weber's famous definition, and that sometimes, when the “success” mentioned in this definition is not there, it gets stuck.

Both through the use of these maneuvers and the extremely brutal repression of the movement in recent days, the government itself has opened a breach in favour of a democratic campaign against authoritarianism and for political freedoms. In the strict continuity of Macron's first five-year term and the Hollande-Valls governments, these *coups de force* make it possible to pose on a mass scale the problem raised by the Bonapartist institutions of the Fifth Republic: the need for a break with the current constitutional framework, via a necessary Constituent Assembly, and the possibility of a true democracy (which moreover presupposes articulation with the social question).

6

Legitimate debates have opened on the characterization of the social and political situation. People have spoken, [here](#) and [there](#), of a “pre-revolutionary moment””, with the possibility of transition to a situation or a revolutionary process in due form, where it only takes “[a little shoulder nudge to the system for everything to collapse](#)” (Jacques Rancière). The corollary of this statement, at least in the first article cited, is that the main (if not the only) obstacle to the initiation of a revolutionary battle by the proletariat is henceforth reduced to the “trade union leaderships”, or in an even more unifying way: “the leadership of the workers' movement”, namely the inter-union coordination.

Indeed, to the extent that the proletariat “as a whole” – we are told – has been radicalized in favor of the movement, the regime is only holding on through the union leaderships power to channel the social anger: “the inter-union coordination acts as the last safety valve of the regime of the Fifth Republic in crisis”. And further: “It is thus safe to say that the main obstacle for the pre-revolutionary 'moment' to be transformed into an openly pre-revolutionary, even revolutionary, situation lies in the conservative and institutional leadership of the workers' movement.”

Such a hypothesis is important because, even if the currents or organizations that defend this line are very weak, the problems it poses reflect concerns more widely shared among the combative sectors of the social movement. And it has obvious consequences: if such statements are taken seriously, it necessarily follows that the immediate denunciation of this “leadership of the workers' movement” acquires an absolutely central role for all those who work for a radical change of society, as well as the construction of a leadership of the alternative movement to the inter-union coordination.

7

The first mistake in this reasoning consists in downplaying certain limits of the mobilization, which must be taken seriously to overcome them other than by rhetorical flourishes, which are intended to convince only the convinced, or by a call for voluntarism that will hardly win the support of those already willing to act.

These current limitations make it a movement capable of making Macron back down on his counter-reform project and potentially, if it is victorious, on all the counter-reforms planned for his five-year term, but not – at least at this stage – to open up a revolutionary situation. For the militant voluntarism of a minority, although it is absolutely necessary, is not enough on its own to overcome these weaknesses and to move from social protest – however broad and radical it may be – to revolution; even in a situation that, like ours, objectively demands a clear political break and a revolutionary transformation, in an ecosocialist, feminist and anti-racist direction.

A revolution is never “chemically pure”, or faithful to a textbook written once and for all, but it presupposes some elements without which speaking of a “pre-revolutionary moment” is more wishful thinking (or self-construction tactics for small militant groups) than a strategic hypothesis. To the extent that the fundamental and distinctive feature of a revolution is the more or less assertive appearance of a duality of powers (between the bourgeois state and forms of popular power outside the state, but also within the state itself), pre-revolutionary moments presuppose certain ingredients: a consistent blockage of the economy, a significant level of self-organization, a beginning of centralization and national coordination of the movements in struggle, as well as cracks in the state apparatus and, more broadly, in the dominant class.

However, all these elements are missing precisely in the current movement:

- Only a few sectors of the economy are experiencing genuine strike activity (and even less a renewable strike), essentially public or parapublic sectors (garbage collectors, rail, electricity, national education and so on), and nearly all the big private companies are not at a standstill, including on days of major union mobilization (except in certain sectors such as refineries).
- Even in sectors where the strike has gained some magnitude, self-organization within the framework of general assemblies and strike committees is very weak, even in comparison with previous movements.
- Groupings of activists from different sectors have emerged (as in 2019-2020 by the way), but they are very much in the minority at the level of the movement (not to mention the working class as a whole), especially in comparison with the “*interpros*” of December 1995; they seem more a way for small militant groups to increase their audience and build themselves than a real way to influence the extension and intensification of the strike.
- Finally, the state apparatus is holding firm (especially the repressive apparatuses: police-army-justice) and the employers continue to support Macron (even if it seems that this counter-reform did not seem particularly urgent to them).

All these limitations do not in any way devalue the current movement and it may be that the coming weeks will allow us to go beyond the present situation and exceed certain limits, but the correct definition of tasks and strategy depends on the correctness of the diagnosis.

8

A second mistake, from which the first actually proceeds, is to claim to have resolved what should be a major strategic problem for the movement, but also for the trade unions and political organizations in the coming period. Claiming that the last two months have witnessed the “radicalization of the proletariat as a whole” ignores the fact that generalized and virulent hostility towards Macron does not amount to mass anti-capitalist consciousness. It is also important to fight against an excessive personalization and psychologization of the stakes around the figure of Macron, making him a “madman”, “unbalanced” or a “sociopath” while he is above all the proxy of capital, and in particular of finance capital. But above all, we underestimate the fact that a large majority of the proletariat has in fact not entered into movement.

Almost all workers are opposed to the counter-reform and hostile to Macron, but most have so far remained at arm's length. Only a small fraction of the class demonstrated and the vast majority did not cross the Rubicon of the strike – for unavoidable material reasons (wage insecurity, long-standing wage stagnation, galloping inflation), but also because of the anti-union repression that has weakened activist teams in many workplaces, the combined impact of the Employment Law and the Macron ordinances (which destructured and restricted trade union resources, especially in the private sector), to which is added the bitter memory of previous defeats. In addition, the level of self-organization is generally down compared to previous movements (including recent ones such as that of 2019-2020, especially at the SNCF, and still more in comparison with that of December 1995), and cross-sector

coordination is either non-existent or very weak and punctual.

The popular movement has indeed been more self-active since the imposition of 49-3, organizing daily actions everywhere in France without the approval of the inter-union coordination and using more offensive methods of struggle, the general assemblies seem more abundant in recent days, but it is still the inter-union coordination that sets the tone and rhythm of the movement, And no one is currently – directly or indirectly – able to challenge this role.

It may be objected that, even in a revolutionary process, the exploited and oppressed are never mobilized in their entirety. But, to take only the case of the France, it is estimated that in May-June 68 there were up to 7.5 million strikers (and 10 million people mobilized), in a country that had far fewer workers than today (around 15 million against more than 26 million today). Due to the broad blockade of the economy for several weeks, the large number of occupations of workplaces and the initial disarray of the political regime, the situation then had pre-revolutionary aspects (despite the limits of self-organization, which did not allow the emergence of workers' councils), and this gave tasks of a very particular nature for militants convinced of the need for a revolutionary rupture (within the French Communist Party (PCF) and the far-left organizations).

9

The difficulties of the movement are not all explained, far from it, by the harmful role that the inter-union coordination plays. On this point, we cannot be satisfied with a perfectly circular reasoning consisting in saying: if there are no bodies of self-organization, it is because it is the inter-union coordination that leads the movement; And if it is the inter-union coordination that sets the tone and the rhythm, it is because there are no bodies of self-organization.

The hypothesis of the treacherous leaderships of the workers' movement preventing the transformation of the movement into a genuine revolutionary process had at least an objective basis in 1968, deserving discussion. In the France of the time, there were powerful workers' unions, the main one of which – the CGT – was led by a Communist Party broadly rooted in the working class and with a large electoral audience (over 20%). Indeed, the PCF hindered the forms of self-organization that could have emerged in the workplaces, in favor of a generally passive practice of the strike (where workers were asked not to intervene directly and to let the union officials lead it). The party also refused to take bold initiatives that might have raised the question of power and a government of rupture, especially during the few days or weeks when the Gaullist regime seemed desperate, stunned by the scale of the workers' strike and the determination of the student movement.

The situation is radically different today: the unions are much weakened, at least compared to what they were in '68, and there is no longer a mass workers' party. If we follow Juan Chingo's hypothesis, this should constitute a boulevard for the construction of a general strike. The opposite is true, because it is in the sectors and workplaces where there are the most union members and where combative unions continue to be present (generally CGT, Solidaires and/or FSU) – because we cannot put all unions, or even all “union leaderships” in the same bag – that the strongest conflict is expressed overall. On the other hand, the sectors and workplaces without union implantation, far from being those where a supposed readiness of the masses to radical action is expressed in an unhindered way by the famous “leadership of the workers' movement”, are those where atomization, passivity, managerial pseudo-consensus reign, or even where the far-right vote thrives.

We see in universities what this argument is worth: while the unions are very weak, the activists present have the greatest difficulty, at least until now, in developing broad frameworks of self-organization (most of the general assemblies had until recently mobilized only a few hundred students); and even in universities that have recently

experienced some fairly massive general assemblies (Tolbiac in Paris, Mirail in TOulouse) the weak implantation of student organizations weakens the enlargement and self-organization of the movement. [2] In other words, if the proletariat were already radicalized as a whole, and if the union leaderships were the only obstacle to overcome for a revolutionary offensive to begin, we would see the development of radical struggles and advanced forms of self-organization in the sectors where the union implantation is the weakest, in other words where the grip of the union leaderships is the most fragile. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The hypothesis of the substitution of a truly revolutionary leadership for the (reformist) trade union leaderships has all the advantages of simplicity and all the disadvantages of simple mindedness (if not unrealism when the famous “alternative revolutionary leadership” is thought of as the product of the self-centered party-building of micro-organizations). Of course, we can think that a more combative policy from the inter-union coordination – refusal of “leapfrogging” days, clear call to renew the strike and participate in general assemblies and so on – would have allowed a more offensive mobilization from the outset in certain sectors where the unions are established (even if this is not guaranteed), but we are touching the limits of the framework of the current mobilization which is also one of its strong points: the continuing unity of the trade union front, without which it is doubtful that the movement would have taken this scale and gathered this popular assent.

In the present and future period, the challenges and tasks seem of a completely different nature for activists who do not want to give up either the revolutionary perspective or work within the real movement: extend the trade union implantation beyond the sectors currently mobilized, strengthen the “left wings” within the trade union organizations, contribute to the rise of new radical currents or movements (outside traditional organizations but in articulation, not in opposition, to them), deepen the politico-cultural work to move from hatred of Macron to criticism of the system as a whole, and finally to the need for an anti-capitalist rupture to build a completely different society.

10

One of the central points expressed by the current situation is the extreme dispersion of levels of political consciousness among workers and youth. The prospect of an anti-capitalist rupture and another society has certainly progressed in the population in the 2016-2023 sequence, but it is not growing at all at the same speed as the visceral hatred vis-à-vis the political regime and, in particular, Macron. So anti-Macron sentiment in general, and hostility to his pension counter-reform in particular, may well benefit the far right.

A [fairly recent poll](#) (late February) made Marine Le Pen the main opponent of the Macronist counter-reform project (slightly ahead of Jean-Luc Mélenchon), particularly among the working classes, even though her Rassemblement National (RN) does not propose a return to retirement at 60 and opposes renewable strikes. A [poll that has just been published](#) confirms this by suggesting that the FN/RN could be the political force that would benefit most from the rejection of the pension counter-reform. This of course takes us to deep-rooted factors and an already long history of electoral implantation and ideological impregnation, but we would not understand anything without taking seriously the way in which the political and media elites have not ceased in recent years to respectabilize the far right and trivialize its “ideas”, while demonizing the left (especially LFI).

Partial decantations may have occurred in some movements, but they only impact very partially on the classes and fractions of class that constitute the centre of gravity. The *Gilets jaunes* movement was thus the scene of a process of clarification and political radicalization. However, it permeated only a limited fringe of the popular classes, including within the fractions that were most favorable to the movement, in rural or semi-rural areas as well as in small towns in particular. This is probably all the more true since the gap is great between adherence to the movement, which can be extremely broad as in the current movement, and to a lesser degree at the beginning of the *Gilets jaunes*, and effective participation in mobilizations (especially when this participation is reduced to one or more demonstrations,

whose politicizing effects are much less than a strike, especially when it lasts and relies on a large participation in general assemblies).

One of the serious problems for the social and political left is therefore managing to maintain and deepen the movement where it has developed, while extending it to sectors or fringes of youth where the level of class consciousness – marked by organizing collectively, especially trade unions, and mobilizing for its interests, on the basis of a more or less clear and coherent representation of these – is at a much lower level. In these latter sectors and in these broad sections of the population, the stakes are a thousand miles away from the great proclamations about the “pre-revolutionary moment”: succeeding in broadly leading workers towards a first day of strike and demonstrations, getting them to participate in a general assembly to collectively decide on the modalities of action and so on. In this perspective, the mechanical and abstract slogan of denouncing “treacherous leaderships” is not only a false track, but most often an obstacle.

11

There is clearly the question of the political outcome of the movement. Social mobilizations – however massive and radical they may be – do not spontaneously generate political perspectives, particularly when they deliberately dodge the question of power and the necessary political confrontation with the propertied classes (what Daniel Bensaïd called “social illusion”). This is even more true in this case since the movement has so far been characterized by a low level of self-organization and coordination. However, it is not a question of affirming that social movements should be content with a subordinate role vis-à-vis political forces, which alone would be able to advance perspectives. It is more within the framework of a dialectic of collaboration-confrontation between the social movement and the left, of a unity that in no way prevents the most open debate on orientations and perspectives, that we must imagine a political proposal for rupture.

Let us begin by saying in this regard how the prospect of a referendum of shared initiative (RIP), defended in particular by the PCF, is far below the potentialities opened up by the movement, is profoundly unrealistic under the appearance of pragmatism, and does not respond in any way to the imperative, for the left, of advancing a solution to the political crisis. It would indeed collect 4.8 million signatures, which would require a lot of activist work for nine months. This would thus divert energies to a purely petitioning terrain where it is currently a question of extending the mobilization, and even though Macron is already announcing new deadly projects (not only the Darmanin law on immigration but also a law on labour and employment). Moreover even if the 4.8 million signatures were collected the referendum proposal would have to be examined by both chambers within six months. In other words, the situation will have largely changed in the meantime, perhaps to the detriment of the movement. Such a proposal does not in any way push the triple advantage of mobilization here and now: a strike rooted in several key sectors, a multifaceted mobilization that has become unpredictable for ten days, and a largely sympathetic public opinion.

Sometimes the prospect of a “May 68 that would go all the way” is advanced. The slogan is attractive, not least because May 1968 remains a positive (though probably vague) reference for large sections of the population – especially those who are currently mobilized. As mentioned above, however, it is not certain that the analogy with May 68 is operative here, beyond the effects of agitation that a slogan can produce. But it is above all the idea of “going all the way” that does not appear very clear. If it is a question of saying that we must go all the way in the hopes of a break with capitalism and social emancipation raised by the movement of May-June 68, it is obvious for us. But this does nothing to answer the immediate strategic questions facing the movement and the left.

With the politicization of the struggle and the enormous level of mistrust vis-à-vis the political regime, only a proposal articulating the immediate withdrawal of the counter-reform, the dissolution of the National Assembly and the holding of new elections seems up to the current stakes without falling into the double pitfall of verbal maximalism and the

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fetishism of past formulas. Of course, political rupture is not reduced to the electoral scene but as [Daniel Bensaïd recalled again](#): “It is quite obvious, especially in countries with a parliamentary tradition more than a hundred years old, where the principle of universal suffrage is firmly established, that one cannot imagine a revolutionary process other than as a transfer of legitimacy giving preponderance to ‘socialism from below’. but in *interference with representative forms*,” (my emphasis).

It is understood that it is necessary to add to these slogans the struggle for a left government with an orientation of rupture, which means specifying elements of programme, in particular around central and immediate issues for all the popular classes, and more broadly the wage-earners, but also more specifically for certain fringes within it: retirement at age 60 at full rate for all (at age 55 for physically arduous jobs), immediate increase in wages and indexation to inflation (sliding scale of wages), freezing of prices and rents, tenure of precarious workers in the public sector and transition to permanent contracts in the private sector, proactive measures against systemic gender and racial discrimination in employment, salaries and pensions, massive recruitment in the civil service, immediate renationalization of key public services and goods (transport, energy, health, motorways and so on), as well as ecological planning.

The question would necessarily arise of the relationship of social movements, and in particular of the trade unions – especially those where a class-struggle unionism continues to exist: the CGT, Solidaires and the FSU – with such a government, globally bearing their demands. Any left-wing government with a programme of rupture would find itself under enormous pressure from the ruling class (investment blackmail, pressure from the European institutions and so on). Only a broad popular mobilization would make it possible to counterbalance, to avoid a capitulation in the open countryside and to impose the proposals mentioned above. The social confrontation that would take place would carry with it a fundamentally anti-capitalist dynamic, insofar as it would inevitably lead, in the more or less short term, to the question of the power of capital over the whole of society, over our lives and over the environment, and therefore of private ownership of the means of production, exchange and communication.

In the event of new elections, a new political battle would open but a victory of the social movement over the pension counter-reform would place the NUPES in a position of strength. [3] This is particularly true the dominant force within it, which has undoubtedly proved to be the most combative against Macron and his project, namely La France Insoumise (IFI). This does not mean a royal road as social mobilizations never generate automatic effects on the electoral balance of power (think of May-June 68 and the election of the most right-wing chamber of the Fifth Republic, only a few weeks after the movement...). It has also been noted above that the FN/RN currently seems to be the force that benefits most from the broad popular rejection of the counter-reform, for fundamental reasons that the real parliamentary practices of the extreme right do not really counterbalance. It should be noted, however, that current polls are under the defeatist assumption – [widely accepted by respondents at this stage](#) – that Macron will not back down. If the movement were ultimately victorious, the hypothesis of a political-electoral surge of the left would not be fanciful, even if there is nothing to indicate that it would simply cancel that of the far right, given the trivialization of the latter in the media landscape and the political field.

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The mobilization has undeniably created a new situation and the possibility of a bifurcation, in the sense of a dynamic of rupture with the established order. Not everything is in reach, but perspectives that might have seemed irrelevant just a few months ago are now possible. There will be no truce in the coming days and weeks of struggle. It is up to us to push back not only the political regime but the limits of what is possible.

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[1] Article 49.3 of the French constitution is a mechanism that allows the executive to force laws through parliament without a vote.

[2] As a result, many students go to demonstrations, but without collectively discussing the movement in the context of general assemblies (and even less strike or mobilization committees), therefore without deciding on future initiatives to be taken (in particular to extend the perimeter of the mobilized students), limiting the effects of politicization that any movement of this magnitude necessarily produces.

[3] Nouvelle Union populaire écologique et sociale, an alliance of left wing political parties formed in 2022.