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France

To defend pensions against Macron, the perspective of the renewable strike

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For a month now, the mobilizations against Macron and his government have not weakened, quite the contrary.

Last week, two days of action were announced by the national inter-union coordination: a day of strikes and demonstrations on Tuesday 7, and demonstrations on Saturday 11 (without calls for strikes). Tuesday 7 was of the same order as the day of action on January 19 in terms of the number of demonstrators, but with a lower number of strikers than January 31. These lower rates for a third day of strikes in 20 days obviously testify to the question of the effectiveness of repeated strikes while the government remains totally bent on its determination to pass in force to adopt its counter-reform. But on the other hand, the massive character of the demonstrations has continued to manifest massive popular opposition and a clear understanding of the consequences of this reform.

Saturday 11 February, with 2.5 million people in the demonstrations, according to the union count, was a clear confirmation of this popular rejection. In a large number of cities, often small and medium-sized, the turnout was even higher than on 31 January, even according to police figures. In Paris, the police announced 963,000 demonstrators, the highest figure announced not only since the beginning of the movement, but also the highest in decades for a social mobilization.

These two days have therefore confirmed the clearest phenomenon of the social and political situation of the country: Macron and his government remain totally isolated and the population, the workers, overwhelmingly support the mobilization movement against this project.

Every new debate on the issue of the bill sees ministers announce untruths, making erroneous calculations which they themselves are forced to disavow. This is the case with Elisabeth Borne's promise that "the reform will make it possible to revalue the pension of retired workers, artisans and small shopkeepers who were on the SMIC (minimum wage): they will receive nearly 1200 euros per month", voluntarily suggesting that 1.8 million pensions would be concerned. In the end, the disavowal came directly from the Minister in charge of the reform, Olivier Dussopt "to tell you whether it will concern 10,000, 20,000, 30,000 people, I do not know". The same applies to the inclusion of years of apprenticeship in the calculation of years of full pension, which only concerns young people who were in apprenticeship after 2014. So many inaccuracies and little lies completely discredit all government communication.

The government's shock arguments are the most caricatural. Budget Minister Gabriel Attal dares to declare that "the system of distribution [of pensions] must be saved from bankruptcy". Many very detailed articles have demonstrated the indecency of such arguments, when we remember the destabilization of the pay-as-you-go system because of reductions in social contributions. Employers' exemptions from social security contributions amount to 85 billion euros in the 2021 Social Security budget. In addition, the government requires the departments concerned to show the rating agencies and the European Commission its exemplary nature on public accounts, by amortizing every year by 17 billion euros the capital of its debt. Finally, it is paradoxical to see the deputies of Renaissance castigate the deputies of the NUPES who, by refusing the reform, would like to "create an unbearable debt of 160 billion euros". These 160 billion would supposedly correspond to a cumulative deficit over 20 years of the deficit of the pension system, in the most pessimistic hypothesis of the COR (Pensions Orientation Council). Eight billion euros per year of a hypothetical deficit projected over 20 years, a burden qualified as unbearable, while the Social Security budget is more than 700 billion euros each year and the deficit of the State budget is in 2023, 165 billion euros. This budget deficit does not prevent the government from having programmed an increase in the military budget of 100 billion euros over the period 2024-2030 and from having abolished in the 2023 budget the contribution on the added value of companies (CVAE) which represented an annual revenue of 9.7 billion. It should also be remembered that the aid paid by the budget (in expenditure or exemptions) to companies represents 157 billion euros per year. It is therefore

obvious that the issue at stake in this whole debate is that of the distribution of wealth, starting with the resources of taxation and the distribution of public expenditure. The demonstrations, especially in small and medium-sized cities, saw a massive popular participation, expressing not only the rejection of the pension reform, but giving voice to discontent, to exasperation faced with inflation, the increase in the cost of living, especially food and energy, and with the liquidation of public services, starting with hospitals and schools. All this while the CAC 40 groups listed on the Stock Exchange announce expanding profits, and the enrichment of a tiny minority in the face of the precariousness of the greatest number: 80 billion euros (including 56 billion in dividends) were distributed to CAC 40 shareholders in 2022; and Emmanuel Macron can be proud that Bernard Arnault, who recently accompanied him to Washington, has become the proprietor of the first fortune in the world, with 213 billion dollars.

The situation regarding mobilization is obviously not simple. The government totally ignores the will of the majority that is expressed in the streets. On the other hand, it seeks to establish its legitimacy by a parliamentary agreement with the Republicans, the only possibility of obtaining a majority in the Assembly and the Senate. All dialogue with the unions has been closed for several weeks but, on the other hand, Elizabeth Borne and her ministers are negotiating with the traditional party of the right. The class contempt shown for the popular will further deepens the determination against this reform but also reveals the political approach of the government: to repeat Sarkozy's tactic in the autumn of 2010 which, in order to raise the retirement age from 60 to 62, resisted a series of strikes and demonstrations that were on a level equivalent to what we are seeing today: between September and mid-October 2010, there were seven major days of strikes and demonstrations, with a trade union front identical to the one of today, and with major strikes. From October 12, the SNCF, the RATP, ports and docks and refineries went on strike: 18 days of strikes at the SNCF, 12 refineries blocked with a third of service stations lacking fuel. At the time, the inter-union coordination limited itself to calling for days of mobilization, more and more spaced out and leaving the movement without perspective on the evening of October 19. Sarkozy and his minister Woerth thus succeeded in passing a disavowed reform. He even allowed himself the luxury of congratulating the union leaderships on November 16, 2010 on TF1, the main television channel: "Tribute must be paid to the trade-union forces in our country, we have made this considerable pension reform without violence. (...) The French people can be proud. They manifested their difference, their concern, but with respect for each other. (...) The unions were responsible." The UMP paid for it two years later by leaving the presidency and the parliamentary majority to the Socialist Party, which not only did not go back on the Woerth reform but added the Touraine reform of gradually increasing the number of annuities.

The question of a renewable strike, of a general strike to make Woerth and Sarkozy yield, was already raised in the demonstrations and in the unions. But a large part of the inter-union coordination was opposed to it, such as François Chérèque, general secretary of the CFDT at the time who, on September 23, declared to Agence France Presse: "Those who want to radicalize the movement, who call for a general strike want to enter into a political approach (...). But the strength of this movement is that it is not political, but social. We have a quiet strength, let's use that strength." Bernard Thibault, general secretary of the CGT, avoided a frontal response by declaring on September 10 in *Le Monde*: "The more intransigence dominates, the more the idea of renewable strikes will gain ground," he thundered on Friday, September 10. All in all, the inter-union coordination did not oppose the renewable strikes by sector, but allowed them to take place without trying to strengthen them, to expand them by organizing a calendar to develop the confrontation. The combative initiative emanated, in 2010, from a large number of unions and militant activists who set up coordinations, interprofessional general assemblies, especially in Toulouse, Rouen, Marseille and in the 92 department in the Parisian region, in particular to solidify strikes and organize blockades.

So the question is very present today. Two important differences with 2010, concerning the policy of the union leaderships, are noteworthy: first, all the unions are clearly in favour of withdrawing the bill defended by Elisabeth Borne; this was not the case in 2010. The other difference is precisely the experience of 2010 and its failure, a failure of which the union leaderships are also aware.

On 7 February, the co-general delegate of Solidaires, Murielle Gilbert, declared: "We will not be able to win if we do not move towards a real renewable and a generalized blockage of the economy. Big demonstrations won't be

enough." Solidaires has concretely proposed to prepare for March 8 by putting into perspective the renewable strike from this date. The aim was clearly to link together the strike and the feminist demonstration on March 8, International Women's Day, in the calendar of the battle against the pension reform, knowing that the CGT, the FSU and Solidaires were already engaged in a unitary approach for this date.

The national inter-union coordination, as a whole, partially took into account this proposal. In its declaration of 11 February entitled "The Inter-union coordination is ready to harden the movement ", it declares: "if the government and parliamentarians remained deaf to the popular protest, the inter-union coordination would call to harden the movement by bringing France to a halt in all sectors on March 7 ... and will take advantage of March 8th... to highlight the major social injustice of this reform towards women." Obviously, this announcement is in line with the proposal of Solidaires, calling for preparations in all sectors for a general strike, renewable from March 7. Already, the CGT railworkers' federation is calling for a renewable strike for this date, as well as the inter-union coordination of the RATP. Solidaires is expected to make a general announcement in the coming days. It is more than likely that more calls in the same direction will come out in the coming days. There could then be established a clear and interprofessional timetable for renewable strikes from 7 March. This date is, moreover, the end of the winter school holidays, also opening the possibility of a mobilization in high schools and a strengthening of the movement that has been initiated in the universities. The scenario could then be different from that of 2010.

The essential question is obviously that of the confidence among workers that it is possible to win, that it is worth it to go on strike from March 7 in order to make Macron give way. And the social movements will have to manage carefully the next 25 days, because although they can help in different industrial sectors to prepare a global movement at the beginning of March, they can also more widely give rise to a feeling of resignation in the population.

The government and its media supporters are well aware that a new stage is opening.

Macron no longer seeks to convince; he seeks more to weaken or even divide the movement. First, by addressing essentially the "reformist" unions, CFDT, CGC and UNSA in particular, in order to dissociate them from the "hardliners" of the renewable strike. Up until now the trade union front has held and CFDT general secretary Laurent Berger has himself repeated that the government would bear full responsibility for the hardening of the movement.

On another note, the media and the government are seeking to shift the spotlight to the parliamentary debate, which runs until Friday 17 February in the National Assembly. Accusing the NUPES, and particularly La France Insoumise of turning the debates into a shambles, of blocking them by the tabling of 11,000 amendments. The Macronist deputies, allied on this terrain with the National Rally, have begun reacting hysterically to the slightest minor incident of which the deputies of the NUPES are supposedly guilty, such as playing with a ball made by strikers bearing in effigy the image of Olivier Dussopt, the minister responsible for the reform. Similarly, the government is screaming blue murder because of a doll bearing the effigy of Elisabeth Borne hanging from a gallows during the 11 February demonstration. However, the social demonstrations of the last fifty years have seen slogans, placards and various dummies caricaturing and covering with invective presidents and ministers. The aim, obviously, for the Macronists, is through these diversions to loosen the vice in which they have put themselves.

Moreover, the most recent sessions of the Assembly have also seen the Macronist and Republican deputies ganging up as a last resort to cancel a majority vote deciding in favour of meals at one euro for all students in university restaurants. Similarly, they could not prevent the adoption by this assembly of a Socialist bill for the renationalization of EDF, an almost exclusive producer of electricity in France, and the exit from EU rules concerning the price of electricity. Obviously, this vote will be challenged by the right-wing majority in the Senate, but all these events testify to the feverishness of the Renaissance group (Macron's party) in the Assembly. In a minority, they are increasingly dependent on the group of the Republicans to get measures adopted; they face the hostility of their own electorate in their constituencies and fear for their future in the next legislative elections.

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So the social and political climate in France may be on the verge of a turning point. Politically there is a lot at stake: to defeat Macron, to improve the relationship of forces in favour of the popular classes and to give confidence in an alternative that can put an end to the attacks of neoliberal capitalism and satisfy popular needs. Beyond the question of pensions, there is a window that can open and a fear that can arise on the side of the capitalist leaders. The acrimonious offensive aimed at discrediting the NUPES and flattering the far right, which is compatible with liberal policies (as the Meloni government in Italy clearly shows) expresses the beginning of such a fear. The construction of a real anti-capitalist political front in the heat of the movement against Macron's reform could make a real leap forward. This will depend first of all on the ability to maintain the mobilization, anchor it and prepare in the maximum of sectors the renewable strike. Not letting the movement be defused over the next 25 days will be decisive in this regard.

12 February 2023

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