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Global Issues

From Pension Reform to Regime Crisis: The Social Movement of 2023 in France

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At the time of writing, France had experienced more than a dozen days of combined industrial and protest action since January 2023, with numerous strikes and millions of people walking in the streets, and some kind of secession of many citizens from the political authorities. Although they coalesced around a simple slogan – the refusal to accept a new pension reform that would raise the legal retirement age from 62 to 64 – the protests fostered the expression of a wider social and democratic revolt. As such, they have revived many aspects of the global cycle of “anti-austerity and pro-democracy protests” (Flesher Fominaya, 2017) that had been put on hold during the pandemic.

Indeed, beyond the issue of pensions, the movement gave voice to a latent social anger about the degradation of work that has been less and less acceptable after the celebration of “essential workers” during the COVID-19 crisis. According to the European Survey on Working Conditions, France is at the top of the list for work-related exhaustion and accidents (Eurofound, 2022). In small and medium-sized cities, workers performing physical tasks, whether in the manufacturing or care sectors, are over-represented; echoing concern about this, the protests were particularly strong in such cities: 10 to 15 per cent of the population was sometimes found demonstrating. More broadly, as the “Yellow Vests” upsurge had already reminded us, the lowest-income workers are concentrated in those areas where the disappearance of public services and the rise in the cost of living is felt the most.¹ But the movement has also expressed a democratic break-up with political leaders who continue to implement the neo-liberal agenda in spite of the protests that have been taking place since the mid-1990s, both in the streets and in the ballot box (Amable, 2017). This feeling that the political elites are indifferent to popular demands proved all the stronger against Emmanuel Macron as he was re-elected president by default in 2022, more because of rejection of the far-right candidate than adhesion to his project.

Given this dual dimension, both social and political, the protests have taken diverse forms. A first sequence, between January and March 2023, was characterised by the centrality of the labour movement, which gave the impulse and structured collective action throughout the country. The massiveness of the demonstrations was made possible by the militant network of labour organisations, and especially their dual structure – professional and territorial. The unity between usually divided trade union organisations in the *intersyndicale* (a collective of trade union federations) gave great strength to the movement, because it increased the legitimacy of the unions’ discourse and allowed their respective militant networks to reinforce each other. The role played by trade unions refuted all those who, in the political, media or academic fields, presented them as marginal

¹ During the winter of 2018–2019, the spontaneous mobilisation of inhabitants residing mainly in these neglected areas had been interpreted as a revolt of “peripheral France”.

and unrepresentative actors. The low rate of unionisation – it has been around 10 per cent since the early 1980s, one of the lowest rates among the countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) – is often cited in support of this idea, but in absolute terms it means nothing: in France, joining a union is an individual, voluntary and militant act. It does not bring any advantages in terms of social protection or contractual coverage but can instead provoke retaliation from the employer. In this respect, here is at least one union victory: since January, all unions have registered a significant increase in membership, a phenomenon not observed for years.

There have also been controversies among labour activists about the right strategy to adopt against the government project, as the movement was placed under the leadership of the Confédération française démocratique du travail (CFDT). Since 2018, the CFDT has been the first labour organisation in terms of electoral results among workers, losing narrowly to the Confédération Générale du travail (CGT).² For three decades the CFDT has sought to present itself as a “responsible” interlocutor with government and employers, promoting a “social dialogue” free of class antagonism. While this model had been widely encouraged by political authorities since the 1990s, the contempt for the unions on the part of the current government, and of president Emmanuel Macron in particular, has made the CFDT strategy less and less feasible. The simple fact that it decided to engage in protest action marked the exhaustion of its own model of “reformist” trade unionism. However, in keeping with its position as a responsible social partner, the CFDT leadership did not support any other form of protest than large demonstrations, the interpellation of public opinion and punctual calls to strike on days of action. They refused to consider any form of economic blockade or political disruption, even though the government’s position was clear from the start: the unions have the right to demonstrate – if they do so in a calm manner – but this would not prevent the reform from passing. The furthest that the CFDT-led *intersyndicale* went was an ambiguous call to “shut down the country” on March 7, which was interpreted by some as a call for a general strike while others saw it as a mere symbolic gesture. Thus, although this day was the most important in terms of demonstrations and strikes, it did not go so far as to effectively paralyse the country.

Labour organisations advocating a more confrontational approach promoted direct actions such as power cuts targeting large corporations and government officials, occupations or blockades, and most importantly a generalisation of the strike. Although the *intersyndicale* did not prevent this strategy from being deployed, it did not spread beyond a few sectors. One of the reasons was that the CGT, which is the second labour organisation and the main militant force at national level, was at the same time holding a difficult congress which deeply divided it. But most of all, this more radical strategy failed because the unions’ capacity to strike has eroded over the years.

The rarefaction of strikes is due to economic reasons, with the stagnation of wages and the return of inflation to levels not seen since the 1970s (6 per cent last year, and up to 16 per cent on food products). But it also points to the weakening of the structural power of labour over the past few decades, because of changes in the economy and the labour market such as deindustrialisation, the casualisation of employment and the development of subcontracting, as well as neo-liberal policies that have specifically aimed to limit the right to strike and weaken union representation. In the months following his first election in 2017, Emmanuel Macron notably adopted a reform of

² Since the end of the 2000s, the resources of trade unions and their weight in collective bargaining have been determined at all levels, from the workplace to the sectoral and national cross-sectoral levels, by the results of elections to the works councils (known since 2019 as *comités économiques et sociaux*). These elections are generally held every four years. In 2021, in the private sector, the CFDT received 27 per cent of the votes and the CGT 23 per cent.

labour law that reduced the number of workplace representatives in companies by one-third. Some strong, long-term strikes developed in a few sectors only, mainly in oil refineries and waste collection. They were all the more visible and noticed because of their specific capacity for nuisance, but they were soon dismantled by the government which did not hesitate to “requisition” the strikers.³ In the traditionally most militant sectors, such as railways, education and urban transportation, long-term strikes mobilised only small proportions of the workforce and workplace general assemblies were depopulated, notably because of the legal measures pushed in these sectors by former president Nicolas Sarkozy in the late 2000s to prevent strikes, especially the introduction of “minimal service” requirements and the obligation for workers to declare themselves on strike two days in advance. Although the railway sector remains a stronghold of industrial action in France, the weakening of trade unions at the Société nationale des chemins de fer français (SNCF) is also the result of a dismantling of the company, with the subcontracting of a growing share of its activities, the opening up of some activities to competition and, in a decisive blow, the abolition in 2018 of the employment status of railway workers, which guaranteed them a job for life.

This challenge to labour strategies explains the emergence of forms of mobilisation that partly escaped them, when the government decided in mid-March to pass the reform without a vote in Parliament – which is allowed by Article 49-3 of the Constitution. The issue of the 49-3 was very sensitive because it was the tenth time in less than a year that the government used this procedure, even though it had announced that it would not use it on the sensitive issue of pensions. Since then, social unrest has been unfolding in a more autonomous manner, opening a second sequence marked by the denunciation of the anti-democratic tendencies of the regime, owing to the government’s forcing through of its reform and the repression of street protests. In this more political sequence, the role of youth has been more important, the visibility of the Yellow Vests and of the “black blocs” has been stronger, and there were convergences with other social movements, notably climate change struggles. In many large cities, “wildcat” night demonstrations were organised spontaneously via social networks. These demonstrations reactivated the insurrectionary imaginary of the Yellow Vests movement of 2018–2019, while involving quite different sectors – mostly young students and workers in urban areas, networks that more closely resembled those that formed the *Nuit debout* movement in 2016.⁴ Protesters also imported a Latin American mode of banging pots and pans, forming “welcoming committees” wherever they found government officials.

Despite the weakening of labour mobilisation, which was evident with the interruption of strikes and days of action that were spaced out in April, these forms of action allowed the persistence of protest, creating a new peak of mass mobilisation on the occasion of May Day marches. This led the *intersyndicale* to announce a new date of action on June 6, two days before a parliamentary vote on a bill to cancel raising the legal retirement age to 64 years. As this suggests, another important feature of the movement is that social protest has developed a strong interaction with parliamentary struggles. As Macron had only a relative majority in the legislative assembly

³ In the French context, “requisitioning the strikers” means that the government could use its official representatives in the departments, the *préfets*, to threaten criminal prosecution in order to force certain employees to return to work to provide a minimal service. This could be rationalised on the basis of public health concerns (as for waste collectors) or public safety (as for workers in oil refineries).

⁴ While the Yellow Vests represented a revolt of the peripheral and low-skilled working class, the occupations of public squares organised in the wake of the union mobilisations against a reform of the Labor Code two years before had mostly mobilised the young, urban and skilled – though precarious – fractions of the workforce. What these mobilisations had in common, however, was that they revealed the lesser implantation of unions in these fractions of the working class (Yon, 2019).

since his re-election as President, opponents of the reform were able to find support in the political arena. However, collaboration between the *intersyndicale* and the parliamentary groups, in particular the left-wing opposition led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon's La France insoumise (LFI), remained difficult. There were in fact several moments of tension between the *intersyndicale* and LFI over the conduct of the movement, with the unions reproaching LFI for wanting to take the leadership on a field of action – street protest – which they considered to be their own. This is the result of thirty years of union distancing from the left-wing parties, but also of an inclination in certain sectors of LFI, in line with a left-wing populist leaning, to think of trade unions as outdated organisations. However, the election of a handful of labour and social movement activists among LFI members of parliament in 2022, the important role that some LFI members of parliament have managed to play by showing their solidarity on the picket lines or by documenting police violence and, most of all, the fact that the far right is now on the doorstep of power⁵ may put the subject of relations between unions and left-wing parties back at the forefront of discussions.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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⁵ While remaining extremely silent, the far-right candidate Marine Le Pen has garnered support by presenting herself as the one who will repeal the reform once elected.