

# France: An isolated government, but a movement in suspense

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Photo: via L'insoumission

The weekend of March 25 represented a real turning point in the political climate, marked by the violence of police repression organized by the government and its Minister of the Interior Gérard Darmanin, a situation also marked by the maintenance of a high level of mobilization during the day of strikes and demonstrations of March 28.

But the general feeling is, again, that of a moment of waiting, without either the movement or the government tipping the scales in its favour. This creates a certain climate of wait-and-see, giving way to deadlines external to the movement: a meeting without real purpose of the inter-union coordination on Wednesday, April 5, a deliberation of the Constitutional Council on April 14 which can validate, or not, the law imposed without a vote by the government.

A first fact should be noted: the passage in force of the government, on March 16, imposing with the use of article 49.3 its attack on pensions, has in no way demobilized the millions of workers who have been mobilized for three months, nor modified in the population the massive support for this movement, the rejection of the reform and the impressive isolation of Macron and his Prime Minister, Elisabeth Borne.

This situation is wearing them out, to the point that they can no longer make the slightest public appearance without running the risk of being confronted with popular anger under the eyes of the media. This isolation of Macron, his government and his parliamentary minority is reflected in the large number of parliamentary offices tagged with graffiti or walled off with breeze-blocks, in successive polls predicting a collapse in the number of Macronists who would be elected in the event of dissolution of the National Assembly.

The discredit of the regime has had repercussions on the party of the Republicans, guilty of supporting Macron in this social attack. Social crisis, democratic crisis and political deadlock are therefore cumulating, maintaining a situation of interrogation, of instability. It can be resolved by a slow running down of the movement and a dull rise of popular resentment, but also by a new upsurge, such as the movement has experienced for three months.

## **Violence**

The most important fact of the last few days was undoubtedly the wave of police violence in Sainte Soline, near Nantes, on the Atlantic coast, a violence that reveals the feverishness of Macron and his government. For several years, the associations of ecological struggles and the Peasant Confederation, with the support of several unions and left-wing parties, have been mobilized against the construction of sixteen megabasins in the Deux Sèvres department, raised open-air reservoirs sinking to a depth of 10 metres, allowing the water table to be pumped in winter to create water reserves with a capacity of up to 260 Olympic swimming pools (650,000 m<sup>3</sup>).

The prefecture of the department and the government want to impose these projects, which correspond to the needs of large farmers for water-hungry crops, such as maize cultivated for animal feed. A broad front of resistance has been built in connection with networks denouncing the obvious risks of such basins, at a time of global warming, of the impoverishment of groundwater, to satisfy a mode of cultivation that must of necessity be questioned. In addition, these megabasins are synonymous with the impoverishment of rivers, of their biotope, but also the privatization of water, a resource for the common good, for the benefit of the operators of these reserves and for five per cent of the farmers of Deux Sèvres, with effects of considerable waste of resources, since the rate of evaporation varies from 20 to 60 per cent, according to experts in scientific research.

30,000 people gathered on March 25, at the call of the broad network, "Bassines non merci" (Basins, no thanks!), Soulèvements de la Terre (Uprisings of the Earth) and the Peasant Confederation to march towards the construction site of one of these basins, that is to say a vast cavity covered with impermeable tarpaulins. To protect this mound, the demonstration was banned and 3000 gendarmes and police were mobilized. Invoking a climate of civil war and the "will to kill" of the demonstrators present, a deluge of more than 5,000 tear gas grenades, 89 de-encirclement grenades and 81 LBD shots fell on the demonstration. More than 200 protesters were injured, including by GM2L explosive grenades that release tear gas and project debris that could seriously injure people. All these munitions are classified as munitions of war by the Internal Security Code.

This did not prevent Gerard Darmanin, interviewed by the press, from lying, at first claiming that "no weapon of war" had been used, later having to deny this assertion himself, following police assessments. According to the latest information, two men are still in a coma, a young woman has a broken face, another has lost an eye. For several years, the League of Human Rights, Amnesty International, the United Nations Commission against Torture and the Council of Europe have published opinion after opinion expressing anxiety or denouncing the methods of intervention used in France during social demonstrations, in vain.

Macron and Darmanin, following on their predecessors, claim that police violence does not exist in France, wrongly invoking Max Weber to hide behind the "legitimate violence of the state". What is certain in this dramatic episode is that it was not the construction site of a basin that the police were protecting. It was rather the swamp of Macron and his government and the fear of a social and political crisis that affirms its multiple dimensions and highlights that, in the question of basins as well as pensions, we are confronted with societal choices and especially with the absence of any popular sovereignty, any democratic control to challenge and oppose class choices that are made in the name of capitalist rules and interests.

Implicitly, a large majority of the population, the popular classes, refuse this mechanism and these choices. The fear is, of course, that this hollow refusal will turn into demands and political will for positive affirmation. It was therefore necessary to criminalize, suffocate and gas the 30,000 demonstrators present at Sainte Soline. The government panic went so far as to delay for three hours, according to the organizers present on the spot, the intervention of the SAMU (emergency medical assistance service) to evacuate one of the men now in a coma. Since then, demonstrations of denunciation of this violence have multiplied, several complaints have been filed, but the Minister of the Interior hastened above all to initiate a procedure for the dissolution of the network of Uprisings of the Earth, which organized the demonstration.

## **Repression**

Echoing the violence of Sainte Soline, recent days have seen the multiplication of bans on gatherings, “preventive” arrests around demonstrations, police custody, indictment of many demonstrators and even union officials, control of entry into universities by the police, as at the university of Paris Tolbiac, the intervention of the RAID (intervention group dedicated to cases of organized crime and terrorism) to put an end to the occupation of a faculty in Bordeaux. Here too, the obvious goal is to put an end to all the actions of blockades and occupations that are multiplying to maintain pressure on the government and maintain mobilizations, as were the evening demonstrations in the days following 49.3.

This repression goes hand in hand with violent attacks on La France Insoumise, which is supposedly calling for civil war. While the National Rally remains totally within the institutional framework, hoping to reap the fruits of social anger in 2027, without questioning capitalist policies, LFI, and even the parties of the NUPES as a whole, provide an echo, with more or less force, for the social movement and its demands. And it is true that the fear of the government is that there will be created, which is not the case, a front of social and political forces, a junction making credible an alternative based on popular needs. Also, discrediting the NUPES is necessary to defuse such a perspective. “Better the National Rally than popular unity” seems to be the government’s line.

In this context, the tenth national day of action, called by the inter-union coordination on March 28, once again demonstrated the strength of the mobilization. With more than two million people nationally, 450,000 in Paris, it was lower than on March 23 but in the high figures of the demonstrations since January, especially again in dozens of small and medium-sized towns. In addition to the demonstrations, there were dozens of actions to block ring roads, as in Caen, Rennes and Le Mans, oil depots, motorway tolls, airports such as Biarritz, and the Louvre Museum in Paris. There were 450,000 young people in the demonstrations, a figure almost equal to the 500,000 of March 23. But, nevertheless, this day clearly marked a pause in the strike action, with the end of the strikes of garbage collectors in Paris and Marseille and a clear decline in the civil service and in National Education. Similarly, at the SNCF, where 45 per cent of the drivers were on strike on the 28th, the movement is not so much renewable as determined by the days of action chosen by the inter-union coordination.

## **Limits**

The limits of this movement – even though it has seen the most important days of demonstrations in decades – are still present: no generalization of renewable strikes beyond a few sectors that can hardly stay longer on renewable strike, a low presence at general assemblies in the sectors on strike, and few intersectoral general assemblies, which had been at the heart of previous large mobilizations, as in 1995 and 2010. These limits exist despite the militant action of tens of thousands of activists, workers who are today at the heart of the movement in organizing demonstrations and blockades. There is also the contradictory role of the inter-union coordination. Such unity of all the

trade union confederations is a first, it is on the scale of the profound disavowal of Macron's reform and has been until today a real support for organizing mobilization in many towns and sectors, even if today the question of clashes and the necessary denunciation of police violence is becoming a bone of contention in several departmental or local inter-union structures. Obviously, it is not the national inter-union coordination or the presence within it of the CFDT or UNSA that have hindered the establishment of local intersectoral structures or attendance at general assemblies of strikers. On the other hand, by setting the pace itself, the inter-union has based itself on the possibilities of sectors least able to enter into renewable strikes, to the detriment of a timetable of confrontation based on the sectors that are most mobilized in renewable strikes, in order to promote their extension. This was the case, if not by written agreement, at least in practice around March 7, with limited success. This has not been the case since then.

At the moment, all eyes are fixed on deadlines external to the movement itself. This is the case with the meeting between the inter-union coordination and the Prime Minister on April 5. This is a little manoeuvre by Elisabeth Borne to try to get out of the blockage in which she finds herself. Charged by Macron "to expand his majority", she knows that the only partner theoretically possible, the Republicans, will express a clear rejection of what is not even an offer of a common contract of government. Therefore, in the field of the "social partners", she seeks to appear open to discussing new issues. But this is to consider that the question of pensions is settled and that the union leaderships accept a frontal defeat. This is not the case today, even for the CFDT. Therefore, barring good or bad surprises, the meeting will be nothing but a facade.

During this time, in a revealing event, the government will debate the 2024/2030 military programming law, which plans to increase the military budget to 413 billion euros, whereas the previous one was 293 billion. An increase of more than 100 billion euros, 100 billion that will go neither into social budgets nor into the financing of pensions.

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