

France at a Crossroads

January 16, 2020



The nationwide general strike in France, now in its record seventh week, seems to be approaching its crisis point. Despite savage police repression, about a million people are in the streets protesting President Macron's proposed neoliberal "reform" of France's retirement system, established at the end of World War II and considered one of the best in the world. At bottom, what is at stake is a whole vision of what kind of society people want to live in - one based on cold market calculation or one based on human solidarity - and neither side shows any sign of willingness to compromise.

Now or Never?

On one side, the Macron government has staked its legitimacy on pushing through this key "reform" intact as a matter of principle, however unpopular. On the other side stand the striking railroad and transit workers, who are bearing the brunt of this conflict and have already sacrificed thousands of Euros in lost pay since the strike began last Dec. 5. After six weeks, they cannot accept the prospect of returning to work empty-handed, and they have set their sights high: withdrawal of the whole government project.

This looks like a "now or never" situation. Moreover, it seems clear that the transport workers mean business. When the government (and the union leaders) proposed a "truce" in the transport strike during the sacred Christmas/New Year vacation period, the rank and file voted to continue the struggle, and their leaders were obliged to eat their words.

Nor are the transport workers isolated, despite the inconvenience to commuters and other travelers. They have been joined by emergency-room nurses and doctors (who have been on strike for months over lack of beds, personnel and materials), public school teachers (protesting undemocratic and incomprehensible "reforms" to the national curriculum), lawyers and judges (visible in their judicial robes), and the dancers at the Paris Opera (visible in their tutus) among the other professions joining the strike.

Strikers and "Yellow Vests" Together

Alongside the strikers, and quite visible among them, the so-called Yellow Vests are a crucial

element. For over a year, they have been setting a “bad example” of self-organized, largely leaderless, social protest which captured the public imagination and through direct action in the streets won some real concessions from Macron in December 2018. This victory impressed the rank-and-file of the French organized labor movement, which after three months of disciplined, but limited, stop-and-go strikes in the Spring of 2018, failed utterly to wring any concessions and went back to work poor and empty-handed while Macron pushed through a series of neoliberal privatizations and cuts in unemployment compensation. ^[1]

Although their numbers diminished, the Yellow Vests continued their spontaneous protests throughout 2019 despite savage government repression, distorted media coverage stressing Black Bloc violence, and snubbing on the part of the union leadership; but their “bad example” was not lost on the union rank and file. Today’s general strike was originally sparked last September by a spontaneous walkout by Paris subway workers, who, contrary to custom, spontaneously shut down the system without asking permission from their leaders and management.

Meanwhile, the Yellow Vests, initially suspicious of the unions but isolated in their struggle with Macron, had begun to seek “convergence” with the French labor movement. Finally, at the Yellow Vest national “Assembly of Assemblies” last November, their delegates voted near-unanimously to join the “unlimited general strike” proposed for Dec. 5 by the unions. Reversing his previous standoffishness, Philippe Martinez, head of the CGT labor federation, immediately welcomed their participation. ^[2]

Government Provocation

Today’s intractable nationwide confrontation over retirement – a sacred cow, like Social Security in the U.S. – is best understood as a deliberate provocation on the part of Macron, both in its form and its substance. There was no urgent reason for pension reform, nor for abolishing the venerable system outright and hastily replacing it from above with an abstract neoliberal plan based on “universality.” The pension program was not in debt, and the alleged need to replace the twenty-odd “special” retirement funds – negotiated over the years with the representatives of different trades and professions – with a single “point system” in the name of fairness, efficiency and rationality was only a smokescreen.

In fact, these “special funds” cover only about one percent of retirees – a million or so miners, railroad workers, transit workers, sailors, ballet dancers and such – who get to retire early because of the physically or mentally taxing nature of their specific labors. (Even if you include the four million public employees as “special,” the figure rises to under 25%). Moreover, Macron has himself recently violated this principle of “universality” by giving special exceptions to the police and army (whom he cannot afford to alienate) and the ballerinas of the Opera (whom no one can imagine toe-dancing at the age of sixty).

Behind this confusing smokescreen of “fairness to all” is an old con: equalize benefits by reducing them to the lowest common denominator. Indeed, according to independent calculations, under Macron’s point system the average pension would be reduced by about 30%. And since these “points” would be calculated over the total lifetime number of years worked before retirement, rather than on the current criterion of 75% of the worker’s best or final years, Macron’s point system would particularly penalize those whose careers were irregular – for example women who took off years for child-care. Yet the government brazenly claims that women will be “the big winners” in this so-called reform!

A Pig in a Poke

However, the biggest con embodied in this point system is that the actual cash value of each accumulated point would only be calculated at the time of retirement. The sum in Euros would then be determined by the government then in power on the basis of the economic situation at that moment (for example in 2037 when the plan goes into full effect). Thus, under the present system, every school-teacher, railroad worker and clerk can calculate how much s/he will receive when s/he retires at 62 and plan accordingly (for example opting for early retirement). Macron's point system would leave her in total darkness until it is too late. His system resembles a gambling casino where you buy 10 chips for a certain amount (say 10 Euros each), place your bets, and later take your winning chips to the cashier's window only to discover that your chips are now worth only five Euros each. Surprise! The house wins!

Today, thanks to their existing pension system, French people live on the average five years longer than other Europeans. Moreover, according to the *New York Times*: "In France the poverty rate among those older than 65 is less than 5 percent, largely because of the pension system, while in the United States it approaches 20 percent, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. In France, life expectancy is increasing, while in the United States it is diminishing in significant sectors of the population." And although the pro-government French media have presented Macron's confused and confusing reform in the best possible light, it is a hard sell. So why change it?

Not an Ordinary President

When Emmanuel Macron took power in 2017, he vowed he would not be "an ordinary president." From the beginning he has openly proclaimed his iron determination to revolutionize French society in order to bring it into line with the neoliberal Thatcher/Reagan revolution of the 1980's, and his methods have been authoritarian. He has imposed his program of privatizations and counter-reforms from above, mainly by decree, deliberately circumventing negotiations with "intermediate bodies" like the parliament, the political parties, the local authorities and above all the labor unions, who have traditionally been the "social partners" (official designation) of government along with the employers' associations (who are Macron's main base of support).

Backed by the mainstream media (controlled by the government and three big corporations) Macron has been so far largely successful in steam-rolling through his neoliberal program, openly designed to improve French "competitiveness" (i.e. corporate profits) by lowering living standards (thus increasing inequality). If successful, his proposed "reform" of pensions would open the gates to his ultimate goal, the "reform" of France's socialized healthcare system (Medicare for all), already on the road to privatization.

Naturally, all these moves have been unpopular, but until now Macron, whose executive style has been characterized as "imperial," has been successful in dividing and destabilizing his opposition - if necessary, through massive use of police violence. This has been the fate of the spontaneous movement of Yellow Vests, who have been subjected to routine beatings and tear-gas attacks as well as hundreds of serious injuries (including blindings, torn-off hands and several deaths) - all with police impunity and media cover-ups. Now the government's savage repressive methods - condemned by the U.N. and the European Union - are being applied to strikers and union demonstrators traditionally tolerated by the forces of order in France.

This repression may turn out to be like throwing oil on the flames of conflict. On January 9, at the end of the peaceful, legal, mass marches (estimated half-million demonstrators nationwide), members of the particularly brutal BAC (Anti-Criminal Brigade) in Paris, Rouen and Lille were ordered to break off sections of the marches, surround them, inundate them with teargas, and then charge in among them with truncheons and flash-ball launchers fired at close range, resulting in 124

injuries (25 of them serious), and 980 sickened by gas.

These brutal attacks, which focused particularly on journalists and females (nurses and teachers) were captured on shocking videos, viewed millions of times on YouTube, but pooh-poohed by government spokesmen.[3] Far from discouraging the strikers, this deliberate violence may only enrage them. And, what with the “bad example” of the Yellow Vests,” the labor leaders may not be able to reign them in.

The Center Cannot Hold

Why is Macron risking his prestige and his Presidency on this precarious face-off with the labor leadership, traditionally viewed as the compliant hand-maidens of the government on such occasions? Historians here recall that in 1936 Maurice Thorez, leader of Communist-affiliated CGT (General Confederation of Workers), brought the general strike and factory occupations to an end with the slogan “We must learn how to end a strike” and that at the Liberation of France in 1945 the same Thorez, fresh from Moscow, told the workers to “roll up your sleeves” and rebuild French capitalism before striking for socialism. Similarly, in 1968, during the spontaneous student-worker uprising, the CGT negotiated a settlement with De Gaulle and literally dragged reluctant strikers back to work.

Not for nothing are today’s government-subsidized French unions officially designated as “social partners” (along with government and business), yet Macron, loyal to neoliberal, Thatcherite doctrine, has consistently humiliated the CGT’s Martinez and the other union leaders and excluded them - along with the other “intermediary bodies - from the policy-making process.

Something’s Got to Give

France’s “not-an-ordinary-President” has from the beginning remained consistent with his vision of an imperial presidency. Although seen by many abroad as a “progressive,” Macron, like Trump, Putin, and other contemporary heads of state, adheres to the neoliberal doctrine of “authoritarian democracy,” and he is apparently willing to stake his future, and the future of France, on subduing his popular opposition, particularly the unions, once and for all.

Thus, what is at stake today is not just a quarrel over pension rights, which would normally be negotiated and adjudicated through a political process including political parties, elected representatives, parliamentary coalitions and collective bargaining with labor, but a question of what kind of future society French people are going to live in: social-democratic or neo-liberal authoritarian. The seasoned Paris bureau chief of the *NY Times* Adam Nossiter put it simply in his revealing Jan. 9 article: “A fight between the rich and the poor amplified by 200 years of French history.”^[4]

A technocrat and former Rothschild banker, Macron rose to power unexpectedly in 2017 when the traditional Left and Right parties fell apart during the first round of the Presidential Election, leaving him alone as the lesser of two evils candidate in a face-off with the proto-fascist National Front of LePen. Considered “the President of the rich” by most French people, Macron must remain inflexible because he has nothing behind him but the *Bourse* (Stock Exchange), the *MEDEF* (Manufacturers’ Association), and the police.

Second Thoughts

On the other hand, as the struggle enters its seventh week, it occurs to me that if this were true general strike, if all the organized workers had walked out on December 5, if the railroads, the

subways, the buses, the schools and the hospitals - not to mention the refineries and the electrical generators - had been shut down, it would all have been over in a few days.

But this is not the U.S. where in Sept-Oct. 2019, 48,000 members of the United Auto Workers recently shut down 50 General Motors plants for more than six weeks, and where not a single worker, not a single delivery of parts, not a single finished car crossed the picket lines until the strike was settled.

In France, there are no “union shops” much less closed shops, few if any strike funds, and as many as five different union federations competing for representation in a given industry. Here picket lines, where they exist, are purely informational, and anywhere from 10% to 90% of the workers may show up on the job on any given day during a strike. Today, for example, seven out of ten TGV high-speed bullet-trains were running as many railroad workers returned to the job to pay their bills while planning to go back on strike and join the demonstrations later in the week. How long can this go on?

“When in irresistible force meets an immovable object, something’s got to give,” goes the old saying, and a show-down seems to be in the offing. With his arrogant intransigence over the retirement issue, Macron is apparently risking his presidency on one throw of the dice. Only time will tell. And Macron may be betting that time is on his side, waiting for the movement to slowly peter out so as to push through his reforms later in the Spring.

Update: French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe’s much ballyhooed Jan. 12 declaration of a “provisionary” withdrawal of his proposal to extend the “pivotal” age of retirement from 62 to 64 is yet another smokescreen designed to divide the opposition and further prolong the struggle, as suggested above.

Although denounced as such by the CGT and other striking unions, the government’s promise was immediately accepted by the openly class-collaborationist (“moderate”) CFDT union, to their mutual advantage. The CFDT will now be included in the negotiations over the financing of the proposed point system, which the CFDT, having collaborated with previous governments in earlier neoliberal reforms, supports.

Philippe’s declaration is obviously an empty promise, as there are only two ways of increasing the retirement fund: either by extending the number of years paid in or by increasing the amount annual contributions, which are shared by labor and management. And although labor has signaled its willingness to raise its dues, the MEDEF (manufacturers’ association) has adamantly refused to pay its share, ruling out the obvious solution to this manufactured crisis. Even if the official “pivotal” retirement age is retained, if the value of their pensions is reduced, employees will be obliged to continue working past age 62 in order to live.

[1] For details on 2018 strikes, please see my <http://divergences.be/spip.php?article3348>

[2] Please see <https://newpol.org/french-unions-yellow-vests-converge-launch-general-strike-today/> by Richard Greeman.

[3] <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/110120/le-prefet-lallement-libere-l-extreme-violence-policier>
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[4] <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/09/world/europe/france-strikes-pensions.html>