

# France's Union: Between Dead Ends and Renewal

October 19, 2021



The national day of strikes and demonstrations organized in France on 5 October, called by the unions CGT, FO, FSU and Solidaires, will not go down in history; it was not a failure, but the mobilization was average in terms of demonstrations and weak in terms of strikes. Part of the “trade union left” refers to “the widespread apathy of the trade union leaderships”. Apart from the point of discussion about the notion of “leadership” for a trade union organization, isn't there a risk of simplifying a more complex situation? Does our problem really come from a supposed apathy of leaders Philippe Martinez, Yves Veyrier, Benoit Teste, Simon Duteil, Murielle Guilbert[1]? We fear not. Certainly, we could have hoped that the inter-union meeting organised on the evening of 11 October would have produced a new united appeal. But if this had been the case, would it have been enough to make it carry more weight than 5 October in the balance of power?

This date of 5 October had been discussed in militant circles since July; it was made public on 30 August: during all these weeks, how many trade union tours, trade union offices, trade union information meetings in workplaces, preparatory general assemblies in the trade unions, etc.? Where were attempts made to bring the trade union unity of the national appeal to life, through inter-union initiatives on the ground? In how many companies did the trade union sections take care to make the national day of 5 October known to the staff of the company, to colleagues in subcontracting companies, to employees of surrounding companies? Asking these questions is not a criticism of the grassroots union teams: it is simply an attempt to point out the elements that made the day an average success. If these shortcomings explain, in part, our difficulties, then we need to get on with the job, to see how we can do better in the future. This will be more useful than radicalism in words.

## **There are Social Struggles!**

In all professional sectors and all regions, there are struggles, strikes, walkouts, rallies. Including in

the private sector, contrary to what trade unionists, not necessarily trade unionists, often say. Aldi in Burgundy, Bergams in Essonne, Knorr in Alsace, Arc en ciel in Paris-Jussieu, Transdev in Seine-et-Marne... This last one is significant: it has been going on since the beginning of September, it concerns working conditions and wages, denounces the system of calls for tender which organises, for the bosses, ever more exploitation of employees during each contract renewal. You can support the strikers financially: [www.cotizup.com/mec-grevistes](http://www.cotizup.com/mec-grevistes)

### **Building local and national unitary campaigns?**

The last CGT Confederal Executive Committee, like the recent national congress of the Union Syndicale Solidaires, decided on two priority campaigns: for the reduction of working time to 32 hours a week and for an increase in wages and pensions. This is the basis for common claims, by professional sector and at the inter-professional level; but also to vivify trade union campaigns on the ground and see them succeed. Company by company, department by department, site by site, how many jobs does the 32 hours mean? What contacts and claims initiatives should be taken with the organizations and collectives of the unemployed? Isn't it time to abandon the symbolic "hiring desks" and return to the requisitioning of jobs through the direct collective action of workers, those who have a job together with those who don't? On wages, the annual compulsory negotiations are a good time for trade union action on the subject, but without doubt we need to go beyond that, to take up the offensive to recover a greater share of what the capitalists are stealing from us, whether it be wages, retirement pensions or unemployment benefits.

### **What prospects?**

For a part of the social forces, including trade unions, we take refuge behind the traditional "necessary political outlet". As if the actors in the struggles were not themselves constructing this outlet, in the light of the emancipatory collective struggles they have waged! For these comrades, the "political outlet" can only come from the Party, from their party, not from others, or from institutional elections. In any case, it is only approached in the form of the seizure of state power, by delegating it to the parties. From the perspective of a self-managing society, this deserves another look.

On the occasion of 5 October, the secretary general of the FSU (union of teachers) summed up very well what these political currents carry: "The workers remain convinced of the importance of mobilising in the present period but lack political perspectives. This means that many have passed on their turn today". As far as perspectives are concerned, this hardly offers any!

Trade unionism is political. It brings together those who decide to organise themselves on the sole basis of belonging to the same social class. Together, they act to defend their immediate demands and work for a radical transformation of society. The oppression linked to the capitalist system, the economic oppression resulting from the relations of production and the right of ownership, is common to all those "from below". This is where the class confrontation is played out: if that isn't political! This does not prevent us from considering that there are other forms of oppression, which should not be ranked in order of importance, neither among themselves nor in relation to economic oppression. Feminist struggles, anti-racist struggles, struggles against oppression and for equality, freedom, against police violence, environmentalist struggles, etc., are also political.

The division of roles that says that the party is in charge of politics and trade unionism is in charge of social issues is a dead end. While the unions are, or at least should be, the tool for autonomous organisation of the working class, it confines them to a minor function, denying them the capacity to act to change society. Conversely, it pushes political organisations to consider that this task is their exclusive one and therefore disconnected from social movements.

## **Redefining the Trade Union Space**

A large number of associations play a considerable role in the social movement. Almost all of them were set up because trade unionism abandoned fields of struggle or ignored them and, in fact, they do “trade unionism” as defined here: associations for the unemployed, for the right to housing, for the defence of undocumented workers, coordination of precarious workers, etc. Others intervene on subjects that are fully within the trade union field: they are feminist, anti-racist, and have a strong social dimension. Others intervene on issues that are fully within the trade union field: they are feminist, anti-racist, environmentalist, anti-fascist, anti-sexist, etc. There is also the question of the link with the workers of the land. There are also anti-colonialist movements, claiming the right of peoples to self-determination, anti-militarist, pacifist, etc. All of this concerns the interests and the future of our social class and it is from this point of view that we must deal with them.

If we highlight the social movements, it is because they are the ones who organize the struggles, the direct action of the workers. Among these movements, trade unionism has an essential particularity: as we said earlier, it brings people together on the sole basis of belonging to the same social class. This is fundamental. A trade unionism of struggle of course, but also a trade unionism that dares to break with what exists in order to move forward. The question of unity, even unification, is important. It is also a question of redefining the contours of the trade union organization, so that it takes into account the diversities described here. But all this should be neither “experts” reflections from outside the trade union and social movement nor treated independently of the concrete issues mentioned more in terms of trade union campaigning, presence where the workers are more than with the bosses, trade union priorities decided and implemented collectively.

[1] Respectively general secretaries of the CGT, FO, FSU and co-spokesperson of Solidaires.