France: Crescendo of the Class Struggle

written by Vincent Présumey | May 27, 2010

IN FRANCE WE HAVE JUST EXPERIENCED a great wave of strikes that directly addressed matters of political power. French history is defined by explosions of militancy which, for our governing class and for most of our journalists, are a "French sickness" that would be good to get rid of: before 2003 there was 1995; before 1995, 1968; before 1968, 1953 and so forth, all the way back to the Revolution. But this time there is something new: the latest wave of militant action is not an end to itself and is only an introduction.

In writing this, I do not claim there is a general strike around the corner. Although we can be sure that there will be struggles, we cannot be sure of their pace. But what is certain is that we are entering a phase of political turbulence and of newness. And yet, for any observer with even a little attentiveness, the dramatic events of the past year or so could have been more or less predicted.

Jean-Pierre Raffarin, a leader of the free market Liberal Democracy Party, was appointed by President Jacques Chirac as prime minister in 2002. Raffarin had a reputation as a moderate but he was also known for his Thatcherite views regarding France's public sector and labor market. Both Chirac and Raffarin were appalled by the massive public sector strikes of November and December 1995, which undermined the last conservative government's efforts to slash-and-burn the public sector. This time the government made it clear it would be waging its campaign on two fronts — first, by confronting salaried employees on the question of retirement and, second, by promoting the cause of decentralization in public education.

Government and business leaders knew they would at some point face a wave of strikes and protests, perhaps stronger than those of 1995. Their intention was to impose their agenda by playing the trump cards that they have held since the 2002 elections: a president elected with 82 percent of the votes prompted by "the danger of Le Pen"; a reliably conservative assembly; and the consolidation of a single hegemonic party of the right — the UMP (Union for a Popular Movement). These elites also knew also that the electoral left — the PS (Socialist Party) above all, along with the PCF (Communist Party) and Greens — did not offer a credible political alternative. Not only had the PS lost the presidency in 2002 under the leadership of Lionel Jospin, but the left had lost in 2003 because it was the same politics that it had conducted when it was in power and because the union leaders feared more than anything a true general strike.

The Chirac- Raffarin government's intention was to inflict on the country's labor and social movements a lasting defeat on the scale of Reagan's dismantling the air traffic controllers union in the early 1980s or Thatcher's smashing the miners union in the mid-1980s. The problem facing the government is that solidaristic activism is quite strong on the ground. Campaigns around issues of trade, agriculture and protection of social provisions gained considerable momentum from the militancy of the mid-1990s. Much of the public strongly opposes the right's antilabor, antiwelfare state agenda and rejects the neoliberal model. With the right unable to achieve their full program, we are entering into a zone of turbulence not programmed by those who believe they control history.

How to Begin a Strike

THE STRIKES OF MAY-JUNE 2003 BEGAN in the teaching establishments, mainly at the high school level. There had already been massive protests centered around educational issues in the 1990s. This time the government was proposing nothing less than a major overhaul of the public school system, which we can summarize as follows: budget cutbacks and a reallocation of resources to the

private sector, adoption of certain U.S. pedagogical practices and a policy of decentralization in which the management of personnel and other questions would be transferred from the national to the local level.

The decentralization of education has been heralded by its defenders as part of a package of overdue public sector reforms. For those who work in the schools, however, the proposed reforms have never been popular. During the 2002 presidential elections, which in the second round pitted Chirac against LePen, the majority of public sector employees did not think at all of striking. But blows soon rained down in the form of new cuts and a series of administrative measures designed to undermine the cohesiveness of the education sector.

In the French context a policy of decentralization is aimed at the national and secular character of the education system. That all children and young people should have access to the same educational programs and opportunities, formulated and implemented on a national basis, has been a core civic value that the neoliberals would like to do away with. Opposition to this decentralization of education surfaced not only from those directly employed in education, but ordinary citizens. The conditions soon became ripe for the development of a united mass movement in defense of a national education system.

But despite ritualistic calls for a general strike, combined with days of small-scale job actions (not useful, and less and less observed by the national unions), between this and the real mobilization of isolated categories like student monitors, things in reality developed very slowly and with difficulty. The majority of education sector workers hesitated to enter into the struggle because it is said that the new government (elected with their own votes, after all), had well calculated its blow and that this struggle would be long, hard and uncertain. These hesitations, once the step was taken, would be transformed into strong determination, but they began by weighing very heavily.

"It is necessary to know how to begin a strike." This was the message we received in late April from colleagues in Seine-Saint-Denis, who informed us that the general mood was turning militant in their area. It quickly became apparent this was not another confused gathering of dispersed activists and minority sects, but a call to action that was powerful, massive, supported by a majority and organized by the workers themselves through general assemblies. They too hesitated, weighed the pros and the cons and chosen to fight.

Seine-Saint- Denis is an area where the children of unemployed workers and immigrants are the most numerous in France, where the teacher's work is the most difficult, and where teachers are the youngest, and have become, in the last few years, the most united. Relatively speaking, it is the Petrograd of national education. It is with them that the strike started, and after it took off on the Island of Réunion and in Bordeaux it became general.

"It is necessary to know how to begin a strike." This formula is charged with irony, as it intentionally parodies the declaration of the Communist leader Maurice Thorez, who said in 1945, "it is necessary to know how to end a strike." It is a message that had been addressed to me personally by one of the militants of the Seine-Saint-Denis strike, Benoit Mély. Armed with this message we began to build for a strike in our region. Benoit was among the best of the thousands of French teachers who became combatants in the general strike. He died suddenly and unexpectedly on June 22, while getting ready to write an article summing up the strike. May this article be dedicated to him.

The Pension Question

THE MAY-JUNE STRIKE WAVE joined two related causes: the movement by educational personnel to

defend the national system of public education, together with a mass campaign to defend pension rights.

As of 1993 French workers gained the right to retire at the age of 60 with a decent pension, either after 40 years of work in the private sector or "only" 37.5 years in the public. Ten years later, the Raffarian government's labor minister tried to introduce a package of "reforms" which would effectively suppress the right of retirement at 60 and impose a 40-year work requirement for everyone. The proposed reforms also sought to gradually increase the number of years that workers would have to put into the labor market before becoming eligible for retirement benefits. The government and the media insisted that the country could not afford to do otherwise, and that the growing numbers of older people were a drain on the national budget. They also claimed that the public sector was running an enormous deficit, which was simply not the case.

But just as we had a consensus that favored Chirac in 2002 and presented him as "the savior of the Republic" and "the president of all Frenchmen," we now have a media-made consensus that says pension reform is necessary. In this context the union confederations made it clear that they were not willing to fight in favor of the 37.5 year figure for public sector workers, or to expand it to cover all workers. At the same time, the unions appealed to the government to "please reform the retirement system."

Two days later electric and gas workers, by a majority, voted against any change in their retirement plan. The government moved to impose the new reforms despite their vote. Other groups of workers got involved. A growing number of people began to assemble in meetings convened by local unions, under the banner of "37.5 years for all."

Feeling the pressure mount, the CGT proposed a one-day strike on May 13 along with mass demonstrations on Sunday, May 25. This call was quickly taken up by teachers, who saw the one-day strike as a protest against both pension cuts and decentralization — in other words, against the entire politics of the government.

Support for the one-day action surpassed all predictions. Since the 1970s there had not been a general strike in industry. An interunion appeal for a "national strike" in the public sector (where they do not use the term "general strike," but talk instead of days of national action) actually consists in organizing a strike in the public sector and persuading delegates from the private sector to lend their support. These were then expected to help organize small groups of workers in their specific industry to strike for an hour or two.

This ritualistic approach to one-day job actions was completely shaken up on May 13. On the one hand, it was shaken up by protests of angry teachers. On the other hand, the participation of the private sector was massive. At Clermont-Ferrand, the industrial city of the Auvergne, the demonstration joined together teachers with workers from the Michelin Tire company in blue work suits who stopped work for the first time since 1977. The Renault automotive works at Cléon likewise shut down for the day.

In the evening and during the night that followed, railway workers and workers in the Paris Métro voted to continue the strike against the retirement plan. This act carried more weight because these workers are not immediately affected by the government's plan, since they have special retirement plans and the government had promised them that these would not be touched. Their strike showed, therefore, not only that they have no confidence in the government — quite rightly — but above all that they do not just fight to feather their own nests (for "special privileges," as the employers' press says).

The CGT has strong support in the public transport section. The union confederation put its full weight behind getting the train workers and the metro agents to go back to work. We saw behavior that recalled the sad Stalinist epoch: make train workers of a given depot believe that train workers of another depot had voted to return to work, while they told the same thing to the next depot, spouting slogans like "we train workers are not going to let ourselves be dragged by these little women teachers" and so on. The return to work was also sold to the rank and file on the basis that "it is necessary to wait a little; we should go there all together." Another transportation strike was announced for May 26, one day after the national demonstration of May 25. A few days later, once the return to work had been effected, the CGT federation decided to postpone the transport strike to June 3, and the other federations of train workers fell into line.

While this ensured that a general transit strike was at the very least postponed, and indeed sabotaged, we soon found out that Jacques Chéreque, national leader of the CFDT, had decided to support the government's pension plan and to appeal to wage earners to stop striking and demonstrating. But his efforts had little effect on the growing mobilization taking place at the grassroots, in which numerous union members and CFDT locals continued to participate.

When Everything Collapses

THE STRIKES CONTINUED TO SPREAD inside the teaching establishment, and in mid-May workers at hospitals and tax agencies decided to join the ranks of strikers. After the unprecedented protests of May 13, demonstrations in small cities, towns and villages multiplied.

For many militants, the return to work in public transport was not experienced as the end of the movement, but as an instance of "one step back so as to jump further." The actions undertaken by the CFDT leadership did not curb the movement's rise, even though the CFDT had become, in recent years, the union with the largest membership in the private sector. Moreover, it was the CFDT's position that provided an argument for the other unions, notably the CGT, to say, "let us moderate our demands to preserve unity." This argument no longer held, as more and more CGT officials and locals rejected the policy of collaborating with the government.

In the days and weeks that followed the May 13 protests, numerous mass meetings were held. These assemblies were usually "interunion" or "interprofessional." Militants of all unions felt the need, independent of instructions from above, to know each other better and to connect with each other.

These assemblies helped address the fragmentation of the labor movement which is endemic in France. But they also helped stoke the flame of militancy. A kind of ripple effect was encouraged by these meetings. While the first general assemblies were held in the high schools, the model was adopted elsewhere. Many union militants and delegates elected in these assemblies after May 13 looked for ways to link up their struggles with those of militants in other industries and parts of the country.

This process was most advanced in three regions: in the Marseilles region the assemblies brought together public service workers and sections of the CGT and FO (together with a CFDT opposition group); in the region of Rouen and Le Havre (Seine Valley), an industrial region, we saw the development of liaison committees and meetings between teachers, dockers, merchant marines and truck drivers, while the region of Clermont-Ferrand mingles characteristics of the previous two.

One of the most militant sectors is the construction industry, which tends to be dominated by small companies. Of the various union confederations the CFDT has the strongest roots in construction, and the many CFDT-backed strikes that have taken place on construction sites in

recent years gives the lie to official rhetoric that "the private sector does not strike." In Paris, on the other hand, the national union apparatus tends to dominate the scene, but in certain neighborhoods the interunion assemblies remained extremely active, with teachers playing an important part. Not surprisingly, union officials tend to oppose or distrust this move towards democratic self-organization.

The government during this period seemed paralyzed. Furthermore, leftist forces inside the Socialist Party revived as a result of the strike wave. As it happened, the PS's national congress was scheduled to meet during mid-May in Dijon. Before the rousing example of May 13, party leaders had expected that they could beat back the party's more militant wing, which was expected to attract approximately 40 percent of the votes of party delegates. The leadership assumed that the congress would affirm their "social liberal" orientation and prepare the groundwork for the presidential elections of 2007.

On the heals of the mid-May protests, these same party leaders practically painted the rooms of the congress red, and dragged out the old portraits of Jaurès. The climactic moment of the congress was the ovation saluting the entrance of the secretary of the CGT, Bernard Thibault. In fact, there was even talk that the Raffarin government might collapse, producing a new socialist government. The prospect of having the party return to power on the basis of a mass strike wave made the spines of party leaders shiver.

Humming with Demonstrators

WHEN THE GENERAL ASSEMBLIES of teachers learned that the federations of railway workers had decided to postpone the public transport strike to the remote date of June 3, it was seen as a bad blow. When you are on strike, when you are losing your pay for weeks and when they tell you that they are going to come to your aid in three weeks, at the moment when exams at the end of the year for students approach, people can get angry. This anger took the form in many cases of a redoubled energy to go to meet the workers directly.

There was a national demonstration on Sunday, May 25. In 1994 the police had estimated that a million demonstrators had occupied two parallel series of streets and boulevards (it was then a demonstration for school and for secularism). This time, the CGT announced that "only" 600,000 people had taken part in the protest, when in fact Paris was humming with demonstrators. According to other estimates, over a million and a half people took part in the Paris demonstration, many of them calling for a "general strike." The fact that the police doctor numbers at demonstrations (all the while knowing the real numbers) — that is classic; the fact that the union leaders themselves divide by two the success of their own appeal — that is original. And this does not even take into consideration the hundreds of thousands of protesters who took part in demonstrations in Marseilles, Toulouse, Bordeaux and Lyon. So great was the force and power unleashed from the cobblestones that an optimist could be forgiven for concluding that everything would unfurl without problems during the following days.

In the wake of the mass turnout on May 25 the CGT and FO called for a new "storm" on the 27; then all was suspended in the wait for June 3, since May 29 was the Pentecost holiday, and many businesses and administration offices closed their doors during the weekend.

During the long weekend, thousands of teachers and militants from the interprofessional assemblies, aware of the danger, that the rail workers might strike for a few days while the teachers' strike was losing momentum, left to meet workers at the doors of their firms.

The "interpros" on these fine warm days began to change themselves into mobile pickets. This

was necessary so that the CGT and FO delegates in the factories could overcome the immense apprehension that invaders would come and tell who knows what to "their" guys. It is not their union federations that gave the means to a group among them to overcome that anxiety, but rather their own participation in meetings with strikers of the teaching establishment over the last few weeks.

When the transport strike finally got off the ground during the night of June 2, it was clear that while the movement was growing in certain respects, it was already on a downward slope in others. The wear and tear took its toll. The teaching strike held fast only because other sectors had entered the struggle. In the east of France, where the strike wave was feeblest, one had nevertheless seen that the workers of Alsthom, threatened with firings, went to stop work at the professional schools. The total number of strikers was highest on May 13 and never afterwards surpassed it.

From June 3 – 10, the numbers of workers mobilized by the assemblies and local unions began to diminish, but at the same time militants kept meeting to explore the possibility of strikes in the private sector. In many areas rail workers and teachers formed the nucleus of militant action. At the same time, most train workers did not intend to stay out on strike for a sustained period of time; their hope was to stir up things up in tandem with teachers, then return to work.

In my small city we "stirred up" the three main factories, which saw partial work stoppages after the ritual days of action. In the Rouen region, metal and automobile factories saw repeated work stoppages, as did the chemical factory of Lacq, in the southwest. The case of Lacq is interesting; here, groups of union militants "made" the strike, and went beyond work stoppages to demonstrations, without achieving a takeover of the plant. What they did was create daily assemblies which extended the strike every day, cooperating with workers from other firms. Strikes, stretching over several days in a given plant, calling for the withdrawal of the government's pension proposals and also giving voice to demands (usually related to salary) of specific groups of workers.

The events of May-June 2003 offered nothing that could be compared to the thunderclap on the night of May 14, 1968, when the radio announced that "workers of South Aviation at St. Nazaire, copying the methods of students, have declared an unlimited strike and imprisoned their boss." Still, we had achieved a level of mobilization that is comparable to the early days of the historic 1968 general strike and superior in terms of the sheer number of demonstrators, despite much greater levels of unemployment, and widespread fears of further job losses.

Everything happened as if, after arriving at this elevated level, the movement was held back from going further. This rests on the awareness of a political problem, which had not played such a braking role previously: to carry out effectively this general strike would be to destroy the government politically, but what would be put in its place? And there the union leadership relied on this real problem in order explicitly to reject a general strike, which the CGT leadership presented in a pathetic enough manner as something still very distant and difficult and which "does not unfold in an orderly way," as they kept saying.

Despite the militancy of the May-June strike wave, many wage earners, including a sizable majority of women and young people working in small businesses, did not strike, except perhaps for an hour or two. Furthermore, many workers in the private sector remain outside the union movement (the case of the construction workers in the region of Clermont-Ferrand is in this respect a positive exception). Union militants made the most headway within the context of large and midsized firms that were already unionized. At the same time, it seems certain that many non-unionized workers, even in small-scale industries, would have responded to a well-organized general strike. Not only would this appeal have resonated far beyond the ranks of paid-up union members, but it would have produced an upsurge of the most vulnerable, of the super-exploited, of those silent ones and would have turned those forgotten ones in all the little firms "where one never strikes" into

a tidal wave.

Things Fizzle Out

THEIR EXPERIENCES IN THE DAYS following May 26 and June 3 helped militants recognize that union leaders remain resolutely opposed to the general strike. Thousands of motions were voted during those weeks asking union leaders (CGF and FO especially, since the leadership of the CFDT was no longer the object of such expectation) to appeal for a general strike. But these motions went unfulfilled.

The last large- scale mobilization was held on June 10. On that day, tens of thousands of workers marched in Paris toward the National Assembly. When they reached the Assembly, those at the front of the demonstration collided with the CGT stewards, who then vanished and gave way to the police, who were exceptionally aggressive in their treatment of demonstrators.

That evening the secretary of the main teachers' union, the FSU, declared that the Bac (Baccalaureate, the tests imposed on young people at the end of their secondary education) would take place as scheduled two days later, while insisting that the strike would continue. At the same time the government announced that the decentralization policy would not affect several categories of teaching personnel, while applying the category to numerous personnel in maintenance, cleaning and kitchen work. In this context, the partial success of the teachers' strike was experienced as a betrayal by lower-paid workers in the school system.

On the other hand, the same night the executive committee of the CGT-Force Ouvière, the third principal union after the CGT and the CFDT, announced that it proposed "the general strike" to other unions. This initiative, deliberately taken late in the day, could no longer alter the situation. On June 12, during a meeting at Marseilles, Bernard Thibault was booed by thousands of unionists of the CGT, chanting "general strike, general strike," not because they thought it possible, but for the principle of the thing. The secretary of the CGT-FO, Marc Blondel, declared that he, at least, had proposed a "general strike," even though FO members in Marseilles, government and sanitation workers, in a majority vote, called for an end to the strike the following morning.

The CGT nevertheless continued to "amplify the mobilization during the vacation" by new daily actions to which no one came because people had other things to do. The government's pension proposals, as expected, were ratified by the legislature just as the strike wave was tapering off. The demand made, primarily by the CGT and FO, to the parliamentarians to postpone their vote received a few hundred thousand signatures, which is relatively few: the masses were no longer interested in this kind of thing.

Everything Continues

THE HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS of strikers, the millions of demonstrators, when they felt that "this was giving up," somewhat as one feels variations in the weather, did not abandon the cause at all. In fact, they knew full well that everything was only beginning.

Admittedly, the government has effected its reform of the retirement program and some of its decentralization measures. But the government has been weakened rather than strengthened. They have been unable to "transform the rehearsal" of May 5, 2002, that is, to transform their electoral triumph into a social victory. And in recent months there have been further signs of labor agitation. The movement of May-June continues, having divided into little streams which could unite again.

There is first of all the movement of contract workers in entertainment, who defend their system of unemployment insurance. Their protests prevented the holding of the Avignon Festival in early

July and seemed about to develop into a general strike in that sector. But there, again, their principal union, the CGT, failed to organize its membership. Local actions took the place of a national mobilization. In these conditions, the contract workers were dispersed and dislocated, and were confronted with antistrike actions led by employers, a prosperous audience and merchants near the festival. The manner in which this movement of contract workers has been demolished shows a possible danger: that the class struggle in France will get bogged down in a long "rampant May" during which sector by sector, the government will advance its pawns.

This government is, however, divided and uneasy. On June 22 it deliberately sent helicopters and tanks to imprison the farmer and union activist José Bové, who was freed a month later, thus revealing the government's contradictions. The antiglobalist rally, of which José Bové was the "star," brought together 200,000 people.

In Corsica — a unique case among metropolitan French regions – the existence of a national question historically not yet settled, has served successive governments, in alliance with mafioso and corrupt nationalists, to try out their "reforms" against equality before the law, against the public services, against secularism. But the alliance of the government and the mafia, supported in this instance by the PS leadership, submitted to a stinging reverse at the beginning of July: a local referendum on measures connected to decentralization saw the "no" vote carry.

There is not a single policy area which does not hold difficulties for the government. In particular, the substantial loss of life (nearly 15,000 deaths) during the August heat wave, which came about partly as a result of cutbacks and retrenchment, redounded against the government and further weakened it. In addition, following the arrest of José Bové, President Chirac has become again more and more the target of protests, although he had been relatively spared during May-June.

What is new and has the most weight, but is difficult to measure, is the radicalization of thousands of strikers. They have confidence only in themselves. These masses represent the basis on which new political alignments are possible and even necessary. Their political education could well ensure that the next cycle of confrontation, whose date no one knows, but which everyone thinks about, can be victorious; that is, can result in a political alternative. But industrial militants are not the only group who have become radicalized. Most employers, as well as segments of the middle class, notably the cadre of small and middle-sized businesses, want to rip the stitches off these "lazy strikers."

In France, you can't finish changing the world without seizing power, so we need to occupy ourselves seriously with this good old question of power.

Translated by Marvin Mandell

Footnotes