

Mouvement Communiste

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MOVEMENT AGAINST PENSIONS REFORM: TO DRAW A LUCID BALANCE

PRESENTATION

Facing one of the most important attacks of these last years against working that constituted pension reform, two months of movement rhymed by nine days of action from 7 September up to 6 November 2010 lead to a result that rings like a defeat. Not only because reform has been adopted but because, in the course of the struggle, no trace of alternative to union actions or of autonomous organization was found.

The main statement which can be made (as soon as the two first weeks) was that strikes did not bite in private sector companies and were weak in public sector. Only one exception, SNCF (French state-owned railways), where a real minority fight has been conducted precisely during those fifteen first days but that did not succeed in self-developing. Other sectors struggled for specific problems (dockers and municipal workers in Marseille, street sweepers in Paris, workers from refineries mainly by Total, etc.) and were able to gain satisfaction or, at least, to avoid defeat.

Regarding pensions themselves, a great confusion has ruled on the nature of the problem. Too very often pensions are not understood as wages. Contributory pension plan (and its joint management) is often favoured of virtues that funded pension plan should not have. Upon struggles organization, ceaseless incantation calls in favour of a mythical “general strike” without taking into account any balance of power on the grounds of struggles did not help too.

In 1995, a movement centred on SNCF and RATP (Paris municipal transport company) has succeeded in making abandon reform of specific pension regimes of government Juppé but this victory has hidden whole movement limits, notably this of strike by proxy. Fifteen years later, while movement was unable to paralyze factories, willing to play back with «All together, all together» had the taste of a bad joke.

In an opposite way and without any real analysis, a lot of people screamed from the very beginning to unions betrayal, ignoring complexity of the part of the latter that, for sure, is not to work for revolution, but who cannot justify their institutional position facing bosses and State of which they are gears, only if they have workers conflicts to canalize.

We saw arising here and there groups of people that were “rank and file and interprofessional” or blockers of economy candidates. Here also, self-intoxication on reality of these initiatives does not prevent arguable critics of these attempts. In the end, we will talk about one limited but sympathetic experience of local initiative in Douarnenez.

This text so consists of:

- A recall of government measures,
- A recall about pensions nature,
- An analytic chronology,
- A critics of general strike,
- A critics of strike by proxy,
- An analysis about role and practice of unions,
- A critics of interprofessional GA of Paris Est,
- A critics of «blockers» of Economy,
- An example of local initiative,
- An attempt of conclusion.

GOVERNMENT'S ATTACKS

The government declared that the pension funds would soon get empty. To fill them, it was decided to make the salaried workers pay. To do that, the choice is between raising contributions, lengthening their duration or lowering pension amounts or any combination of the former three. That's what has already been done:

- In 1993, full rate pensions set back from 37 and a half to 40 complete contribution years for the private sector employees, and moreover calculation on the 25 best years (instead of 10) and adjustment on price evolutions instead of wages.
- In 1995, attempt to modify special conditions (SNCF and RATP) that fails in front of the workers reaction.
- In 2003, adjustment of the contribution duration upon life expectancy at 60.

In 2010, the most important reform is the set back of the legal retirement age for private and public sectors. Until 2018, we're sentenced to 4 months more of work each year before retirement. At that time, legal retirement age will be 62. The 1952 age class is the first concerned. In the same manner, the age from which a full rate pension is acquired, even when lacking contribution years, goes from 65 to 67.

In the public sector, all right opening ages are set back 2 years. Today, among workers, state employees are hit the worst: their average deduction rate for pension contribution will go from 7.85% (current public sector rate) to 10.55% (private sector rate). This raise will be laddered during 10 years. Around 5 million workers are directly concerned.

Consequence: the number of active proletarians (i.e. good to work) will jump, whereas the number of effective jobs has hardly a chance to augment.

Result: more aging unemployed who will add to the already well provided battalions of youth unemployed or hopelessly constrained to sweat. Unemployment times will weight on pension amounts.

The paradox is that these government reforms answer to a short-term logic. The executive admits that in three to four years, another go at it will be needed and no-one and neither the government can guarantee the financial situation of pension funds at 2020, excepting hopes of a hypothetical economic recovery. So? Why so few reforms in such a dire situation? Explanations should be looked for in the great financial crisis started in the USA in summer 2007 and its transformation into states fiscal crisis. This last issue has already hit Greece, Portugal and Ireland and is now menacing Spain, Italy and Belgium. In spite of a bulk heavier than those, the French state also presents a balance in high deficit. It so depends as all the others of public debt markets to complete its financing to the height of its operational needs. Moreover, investors on bond markets accept to be remunerated at a lower rate on their loans in relation to repayment capacity. The higher the capacity, the lower rate they'll demand. Yet, a pension system resting on workers and bosses contributions that could in a short-term need public financing to balance its funds is not good news to the hears of big money lenders, not reassuring them about the state's mastery of its budget. This is even truer as rates demanded in state bond markets are today higher because of the fiscal crisis. In a classic self-sustaining mechanism, higher rates worsen budget deficits and impose more public spending austerity reforms, etc. This spiral is usually stopped by capitalist states by making first the workers then citizen in general pay for their crisis. No risk of them putting their hand in the pockets of businesses that are, let's never forget, their real social justification.

PENSIONS ARE WAGES

The wage is the sum of money necessary to the reproduction of any one's labour power. This amount is ever renegotiated following, in particular, the balance of power between workers and bosses helped by their state. The work contract is this balance of power's formalization. Amongst contractual elements is the one, essential to preserve the exploitation relation's continuity, of a guaranteed income for one's old age. That's why this theme had been for a long time one of class struggle's great factors. Henceforth, a pension is nothing else than wage whose instalment is delayed until a worker's legal exit from the work market.

Today, it is about this part of our wages. Boloney about solidarity between generations, joint schemes, life expectancy, heavy work and other age pyramids are only smoke screens set by bosses, the state and trade-unions in order not to confront the question in its own frame: the one of the wage, of the remuneration exchanged for the use of labour power.

The repartition pension scheme is deducting today to give back tomorrow. In the end, the capitalization scheme is the same! The only difference is who manages money deducted from wages. In the so-called capitalization pension scheme, in a manner more explicit, collected money, corresponding to wage that will be paid in guise of pension, transforms immediately into capital, since it is directly invested in the financial sphere by investment funds managing it. The repartition scheme acts in a same way. Money collected is given to financial institutions that make it “work” in the financial sphere while waiting to give it back to the retired.

This last contribution circuit is just a little more opaque than the one, more evident, of capitalization schemes. Accountability is there also more difficult because unionist and employer managers of these schemes claim that contributions from employees and employers are used to benefit now retired ex-employees. That the mechanism is identical in the capitalization case is forgotten with second thoughts. Money thus accumulated is admittedly stored in an individual account, but it is immediately used by the pension fund for its financial investments and to pay pensions to those already entitled.

The so-called opposition between those two mechanisms is used to entertain the myth of inter-generational solidarity as incarnated by the joint repartition scheme. In France, that would be the contributory pension plan and elsewhere the funded pension plan. In reality, in France, the so-called “complementary” pension part is already managed by classical investment funds (an example? The oldest *préfon-retraite* created for civil servants, in 1964, is managed by insurers for the unions).

The only real difference, between “contributory” and “funding”, are legal guarantees given to employees: does the fund or state office commit to pay a fixed amount upstream (guaranteed benefit) or will this amount change following the pension scheme managers' capacity to increase it by financial investments (guaranteed contributions)?

We are told that capitalization schemes expose more the retired to financial market hazards. But what else means a contribution period increase paired with a counted on total amount reduction of paid pensions? We pay more today to get less tomorrow taking into account a life expectancy that has not instantly increased by governmental decree.

CHRONOLOGY

The first month (starting from 7 September)

General overview

We have seen a growing number of demonstrators in many towns and cities of France in demonstrations called by the unions and supported by official left-wing parties. But on the side of working class strikes, strikes are not well followed.

First of all, strikes have not hit “private” sector industry (with some exceptions detailed later). Our two Paris area big automotive assembly plants, Renault in Flins and Citroën in Aulnay saw only 100 strikers among a workforce of roughly 4000 (i.e. even not all the union delegates went on strike); as some workers said, “the mood is not there”. Even in demonstrations there were very few banners relating to private companies.

In French state-owned railways the figures vary from one place to another, but general figures (unions and management) give an average from 25 to 35%. You have to know that among a workforce of 160,000¹, engineers (often the most militant sector) are only 18,000 and among them the strike figure is just round 50%. From the “user” point of view, in the Paris suburban service, management was able to keep 50% of trains running.

¹ Workforce is 160,000 and there are 40,000 in subsidiaries. Of which traction (20,000), maintenance of material (20,000), maintenance of tracks and premises (32,000), controls (11,000), commercial and exploitation (44,000) research and management (28,000)

More annoying, the attendance at general assemblies was very scarce: on 7 and 23 September, in Paris Saint Lazare only 50 people attended. On October 12, newspapers report a growing number of attendees in Paris Montparnasse (100 people) but it was only half compared to the November-December 1995 movement.

In the Paris transit authority (RATP), except express line B (see below), figures were no more than 30% for the underground and less for the bus both in Paris and the suburbs.

Relatively important was the strike in the Health sector (roughly 30%), even though striking for nurses is a very difficult thing and can get them “requisitioned” (i.e. legally ordered to work), and participation in demonstrations under the SUD union banners was important as our eye-witnesses have noticed in Orléans, Quimper and Brest.

In State administrations figures were very different but no more than 25% with the exception of tax offices that reached 1/3.

In the Post Office, in Paris there was also no more than 33%, in sorting centres, Post Offices and mail distribution. According to one comrade, a rank and file CGT delegate, even the CGT was not able to give accurate data.

In education, figures can vary widely from one place to the other, but on average there were no more than 20% of strikers.

Exceptions

We can say that the exceptions, i.e. a real strike in term of participation and organization, were not due to struggles against the Pensions reform but more for specific reasons.

Paris transit authority Express line B

Here figures were 75% strikers and only one train among five running. This is because of more than 20 years of union militancy, both among engineers and maintenance workers of the Massy Palaiseau facility.

Since creation of RER B, on June 1983, RATP operates it up to Gare du Nord and SNCF beyond, thus implying changing of engineers in Gare du Nord and that according to the two operators, is a penalty for users. Following an agreement between management and unions (except la CGT) on November 2008, progressively (30% of revenue service on February 2009, 100% on November 2009), RATP engineers drive trains beyond Gare du Nord. If management then promised a yearly bonus for interoperability of 1,200 euros, engineers faced work conditions worsen in term of shifts and lack of workforce. Aside of this, all the RATP workers of RER B (1,200 workers of which 600 engineers) fear, in the end, to be transferred to SNCF with loss of various advantages. This was reasons for strike on November 2009 and that was too in 2010.

Total refineries

There are 12 refineries in France, of which Total owns six (see list below).

In this sector, on the boss side, there are three problems:

- General over-capacity in Europe (20% of 114 facilities),
- Old installations in France (the majority date from the 30's), albeit improved. They are costly in relation to new facilities (and the trend in this industry is to build new facilities closer to oilfields and to new markets),
- A mismatch with the French vehicle market (refineries produce less diesel than petrol but, due to state tax incentives, diesel is more used, roughly 60% of consumption).

Due to European over-capacity Total decided to close half to its French facilities in 2009, first targeting Dunkerque in January 2010. But workers, led by unions, succeeded in delaying the management's project (even the government warned Total not to “*destroy France's industrial capacity*”). The unions won in court but Total called for a new judgement. So workers remain vigilant and benefited from the struggles against pension reform to maintain pressure on Total, even though years ago they concluded a company agreement regarding pensions that is better than existing laws and certainly more than the new ones.

So all six Total refineries have been on strike since the beginning of September, but only from the 12 October for Grandpuits. Refineries have a strong technical composition of capital and employ no more than between 600 to 900 workers each. Furthermore, stop production in refineries can't be done neither instantaneously nor quickly, except if we are ready to damage production tool. Workers from

other refineries went on strike but not continuously.

Name	Company	City (Department)	Workforce (as of 2009)	Capacity (millions of tons per year)	Creation	Products
Raffinerie de Normandie	Total	Gonfreville-l'Orcher (Seine-Maritime)	909	15,9 Mt/an	1932	Petrochemical products + Oil
Raffinerie de Donges	Total	Donges (Loire-Atlantique)	641	11,3 Mt/an	1933/1947	Oil
Raffinerie de Port-Jérôme-Gravenchon	ExxonMobil	Notre-Dame-de-Gravenchon (Seine-Maritime)	912	11,3 Mt/an	1933	Petrochemical products + Oil
Raffinerie de Lavéra	INEOS	Lavéra (Bouches-du-Rhône)	974	10,2 Mt/an	1933	Petrochemical products + Oil
Raffinerie de Provence	Total	Châteauneuf-les-Martigues (Bouches-du-Rhône)	500	7,5 Mt/an	1935	Oil
Raffinerie de Petit-Couronne	Petroplus	Petit-Couronne (Seine-Maritime)	557	7,3 Mt/an	1929	Petrochemical products + Oil + fuel
Raffinerie de Berre	Basell	Berre l'Etang (Bouches-du-Rhône)	1473	6,3 Mt/an	1931	Petrochemical products + Oil
Raffinerie de Feyzin	Total	Feyzin (Rhône)	641	5,8 Mt/an	1964	ETBE (additives) + Petrochemical products + Oil
Raffinerie de Fos	ExxonMobil	Fos-sur-mer (Bouches-du-Rhône)	250	5,6 Mt/an	1965	Oil
Raffinerie de Dunkerque	SRD (filiale Total)	Dunkerque (Nord)	620	5,6 Mt/an	1932/1950	Oil
Raffinerie de Grandpuits	Total	Grandpuits (Seine-et-Marne)	405	4,8 Mt/an	1966	Oil
Raffinerie de Reichstett	Petroplus	Reichstett (Bas-Rhin)	270	4,0 Mt/an	1963	Oil
Raffinerie des Antilles	SARA	Fort de France (Martinique)	N.C.	0,8 Mt/an	1967	Oil

Port of Marseille

This is a stronghold of the CGT (100 %) and the PCF preserved by maintain of union control over hiring. Movement started, on 27 September, against port reform of oil terminals of Fos and Lavéra, dedicated in processing crude oil, GPL, refined and chemical products.

On October 1st 2010, Port authority of Marseille validated recovering of tanker activities by subsidiary company Fluxel, owned to 60% by Port authority and to 40% by industrial operators. It is again some modalities of implementation of this subsidiary that CGT launched strike, notably claiming that detached staff keeps their payroll bearing header of Port of Marseille. Port management who already accepted several demands last months (keeping of advantages, possibility to go back within Port authority in case of default of Fluxel, keeping of wage bill if several refineries close...) states that «*all possible guarantees have been given*» to 220 workers who will be transferred into this subsidiary company.

Then, dockers of Port of Marseille went on strike in goods terminal of Fos and of eastern docks in Marseille where dockers blocked port gates, while dockers of western docks were working. Workers

from security firm AMO went on strike to be integrated within Port of Marseille.

In the meantime, passenger's traffic was perturbed by strike of sailors from SNCM and CMN maritime companies that leads to traffic blocking to Corsica. In total, three boats and two ferries of SNCM, and one of CMN, are blocked berthed in Marseille, other boats of these companies are blocked in Corsica.

Otherwise, all the towboats of Boluda Company (eastern and western docks) were also on strike preventing a container ship, ready to leave, from casting off.

International (mainly towards Maghreb) passenger traffic was normally operating.

Marseille municipal workers

Contrary to the port, this is a stronghold of FO more linked to the socialist party. There is a creeping competition between FO and CGT. Strike was also for specific problems (shifts, wages, and work conditions) and mainly concerned:

- elementary school canteen employees, starting from 21 September,
- street sweepers, starting from 13 October.

For elementary school canteen employees, movement, under the form of renewable strike (up to 12 October), hits half of the city canteen following call from interunion of municipal workers to which FO didn't support. Main demand was refusal of extension of duration of work that can reach up to 7 years.

For street sweepers, twelve city (among sixteen) districts were hit by strike of public sector street sweepers called by FO, the leading union among city council employees. On Monday 12, movement against pension reform in this sector took a new turn by blocking garbage stock railway yard of Aygalades, this time by the name of interunion (FSU, SUD, CGT, Unsa, CFDT). FO attempted to enlarge movement to all Marseille metro area («*communauté urbaine*») and to convince street sweepers from private sector (Véolia), potentially able to join the strike.

Week from 12 to 19 October

General overview

What characterized this week was the irruption of secondary school pupils in Paris, Paris suburbs and the Provinces. It started spontaneously with young people coming out of their schools and making short demonstrations (100 -150) to other schools and so on. In Paris it was cool, with the police "kindly" monitoring demonstrations and blocking traffic but in the suburbs (Montreuil, where a young guy was close to losing an eye, Argenteuil, etc.) the police immediately attacked demonstrators with tear gas grenades and flash balls.

It was the same in the Province (like in Caen, where a young guy was badly wounded). The message from the government was very clear: "*if you want to play with us you have to play rough!*" In fact the government feared that a situation like in 2006 during the student movement against the CPE could re-emerge, so it was better to nip it in the bud. This has not succeeded and more secondary schools have seen movements and blockades. According to the ministry of Education, 300 out of 4,300 secondary schools are hit.

But participation among pupils remains generally low (no more than 30%). In some places some young people have burned cars and rubbish bins, and looted some shops like in Nanterre. But there was no real confrontations with the police, more a game of cat and mouse. And more to say, this is possible that this contributed to reduce participation to a «movement» up to now very peaceful and "citizen".

If the Tuesday 12 demonstrations saw an increase of participants, Saturday 17 saw a decreasing number (strong in Eastern France small in Paris and increasing in Western France).

The notable difference on the railways was that strikes (with the same participation figures as before) lasted from Tuesday onwards.

New things

The main novelty is the blocking of fuel distribution centres near big cities. This was done by CGT members and in each centre it only lasted only 2 days because the police quickly expelled the workers, who then went elsewhere or came back few days after.

Following call from FO, CFDT and CGT, some wage earners truck drivers blocked here and there some roads and provoked slowdown on some highways. These actions were not able to last and quickly lost their breath.

Oil distribution is blocked because:

- Oil terminal port workers in the Marseille area don't unload tankers and so dry up southern France refineries,
- Total refinery workers continuous strike (One, Grandpuits, supplies the Paris area),
- Other refineries partial strikes,
- Fuel depots which serve petrol stations. Since 1968, the number of these depots has enormously increased to follow France's growing suburbanization, so they are easy numerous targets for blockades. In total, only a dozen of depots were effectively blocked.
- Behaviour of users themselves who have crammed service stations and dried them up by multiplying purchases.

In Nord and Pas de Calais departments (Northern France), the CGT called for a strike, on 12 October, for few hours during the same day but sufficient enough to paralyze 30 big factories (of which Alstom, Bombardier, but neither Renault nor Toyota). In the affected factories, strikers were not in the majority but were able to harm the boss by means of sectional strikes but without being able to reproduce this the day after.

In Paris, street sweepers started to strike. Albeit benefiting of a pension specific regime due to work painfulness, some being able to get retired at 55 years, demands were about wages rise, work load or career evolution. Strikers blocked garbage processing centres in Romainville, Saint-Ouen and Ivry

Participation of pupils in demonstrations changes the mood of them bringing fresh atmosphere and stops the decreasing numbers of demonstrators

We began to see at the end of demonstrations the usual French performance: people (belonging or not to the "autonomous" milieu) began to throw things from afar against the police, trying to "radicalize" demonstrators, all this without efficiency or success and above all with no organization. That leads to panic when the police charges and too many arrests of isolated "fighters" (more than 1,500 people were arrested across France). We published hereafter, a testimony from a comrade from Saint-Nazaire, found on Infozone, signed "Black Canary".

QUESTION ABOUT END OF DEMOS IN SAINT-NAZAIRE

How many times more to be considered as flesh for police or judge? And why? Yesterday, we didn't follow the path of the demonstration, after having collected funds for prosecuted people we brought boxes (of collected funds) in a car before waiting for arrival of the demonstration.

Around Ruban Bleu², we met young people with whom we tried to discuss to avoid a surging at end of demonstration with people getting arrested. This was for lost: together they boast and nevertheless, they are afraid, they are not proud, we are far away from «street fighters came for fighting», for fighting we don't stay at 200 meters from the police to throw two, three cans and small stones and flew away at any sign of police reaction.

There is anger, anger that we can understand when we analyse class situation in which they are, when we know that they are very often bored by police and what they can envision is only a shitty job or dole, when some of them have seen their mate going to jail through a trial where everything is marked in advance. Anger is unfortunately often bad adviser and leads towards traps. Dead-end street is as big as fear does not help and while fleeing away a lot of become isolated and easy prey for police.

For myself I don't want to see any more of these stupid ends of demonstrations in which, within a day, life of some randomly caught can twist because they are at the wrong place at the wrong moment. So yes question is: how far do we want to go and why.

Firstly it's a general question. I think it must be good to discuss about this in general assemblies, surely not in big ones, at least at first time. But I believe it's better to discuss today to identify our differences and to know why we don't agree instead of waiting for "cracks" at the end of movement where everybody go back home with back taste of betrayal and defeat whatever could be the conclusion of the conflict. For sure they will be some hard catches of head and nozzle but that is Democracy that is debate. Because it is so how we can escape from prejudgement how we can create social links and solidarity. Let us accept plurality of ends and means and let us make it strength instead of hiding it and let our "enemies" exploit our weakness and make us fighting against one each other.

² Ruban bleu (Blue ribbon) is a big commercial mall in the center of Saint-Nazaire.

Revolution is not sizing weapons it is re-appropriation by each of us of debate, sharing of knowledge and of know how. Secondly let us go back to ground level elements. Why to stay at end of demonstrations? Goal determines organization and action. If it's only for the fun of it, to attend to a show then it's easy let's go back home and that's it. If it's for proving that streets are public space and so belongs to us, for instance let us organize a public concert at the end of demonstration. If goal is to mark an opposition to bosses and State (or government) let us occupy public premises that symbolize them. If it is necessary for all to demonstrate up to county administration (*sous-préfecture*), then let us organize a belt not to dissuade those who want to fight to do it, that will be no worth (it's already been twice that we attempted to without success) but for prohibiting kids or drunk people who are not surely aware of danger to go there and to protect people from police raids.

From Tuesday 19 to Tuesday 26 October

General overview

In terms of number of demonstrators it was positive (for the unions), but not positive in terms of number of strikers.

Railway workers remain on strike but number of strikers diminishes (round 20% and on Sunday 24, CGT announced 19% of strikers); participation in assemblies stays at the same level. But there were no blockades due obviously to the balance of power between strikers and non-strikers, even if the atmosphere remained calm (testimony from Paris Saint Lazare and Paris Est) but the centralization of strikes is not on the agenda: in Paris Saint Lazare area (which goes up to 80 km from Paris) there is no links between strikers of all facilities.

In Post Office, Health sector and Education, the number of strikers decreased and went under 20% (with local variations).

There is no more strike in RATP, with the usual exception of RER line B (where the number of strikers went under 50%). In Marseille, workers from Boluda Company along with those of SNCM and CMN returned to work on 19 October.

In other State administrations, figures are the same than before. No significant strikes hit "private" sector industries.

Movement at Paris Saint-Lazare

15 October

Number of strikers according to unions, all kind of categories mixed together.

Paris est: 15%

Paris nord: 11.93%

Normandy: 16%

Paris rive gauche: 14.,45%

Paris sud est: 16%

Alsace: 9.68%

Provence: 27.13%

Roussillon: 35%

18 October

Clichy : during all last week, no strike, this means that nearly everybody was working (train sorting agents, switching towers). Trains that run are those decided by management and it keeps control on traffic. It plays for situation deterioration.

Saint-Lazare : in the daily general assemblies (GA), there are between 170 and 200 people of various categories. GA based on hope of a remobilization or rather a very strong one for «not letting down refineries»

Paris Saint Lazare region: 28% of strikers

19 October

Saint-Lazare: 200 attended to GA interservice that lasted no more than 1 hour and reconduction of strike voted by unanimity. GA does not represent a specific category; there are as many engineers as wards, etc.

Terminal and sorting see very few strikers. A lot of engineers present in 2007 and militant were not there, I saw some of them working. During discussion they said "to be deceived by unions"

Clichy: idem

Achères and Mantes: strike is reconducted by unanimity of attendants (100 by Achères, 50 by Mantes)
On all region, there is a picket line at Saint Lazare dispatching board and in Clichy shops but not in end stations of Marly and Versailles, nor at ticket offices neither at control towers.

21 October

Saint-Lazare: 140 to GA interservice in the morning, strike is reconducted. Very very few engineers attended to the assembly. In the afternoon, strikers march in the station and offices.

Management is going to press a lot in order to operate the greatest number of trains tomorrow, on Friday, departure in holidays

24 October

Work is smoothly taken back. For a lot of colleagues, a mean for not losing too much money is to strike from time to time when it suits them: 1 day of strike, 3 days of work, etc.

This strike remains minoritarian at Saint-Lazare. A lot of only go on strike during union days of action.

Engineers participated less than in 2007 (at that time they were GA with only engineers where 250 attended), this time, all categories together, we reach only 200.

As long as strikes are reconducted during GA, management maintains minimal operation but in Saint-Lazare, there were more trains than last week-end.

On-going things

Total workers, Marseille port and city councils workers are still on strike. Oil depots are still blocked but on Friday 22 only 14 remain in the hands of strikers. Worse, the government has "requisitioned" Total workers from Grandpuits refinery and began to dismantle the picket lines on Friday 22 but on Saturday workers came back so on Sunday all Total refineries plus the others are still on strike. And since Friday in Paris area oil is flooding again in service stations, government having tapped in the long time deposits and imported oil from other countries.

New things

In Marseille, the two transfer centres for garbage, located in Aygalades and Bonnefoy are occupied since Monday 18 for one, Wednesday 20 for the other, by territorial agents on strike following call by interunion CGT, CFDT, SUD, FSU, UNSA (so without FO).

On Friday 22, Eugène Caselli, socialist chairman of Marseille metro area («*communauté urbaine*») has asked Region préfet ("préfet de région") to order unblocking and return to work in the two transfer centres for garbage of the city for "*public health*" reasons.

Strikes have started among Toulouse and Belfort street sweepers. In Paris area, and more particularly in Essonne, pupils are on strike (but still in a minority - only 20% of pupils are on strike) By three times on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, one hundred of them blocked during one hour traffic on highway RN 20 by Arpajon along with suburban RER C trains at Brétigny sur orge.

But on Friday, when two weeks of all saints holidays start, government a freezing of the situation.

On the Total side things may get stronger. On Friday the appeal court has sentenced Total "for not having been clever regarding providing information for its workers, but is nevertheless authorised to close the Dunkerque refinery" On Saturday 23, there were kind of spontaneous or locally called demonstrations in medium size cities like Auch (500), Castres (3,000) and Narbonne (2,000)

On the contrary, we see on Saturday first counter-demonstrations in Paris (250 from far-right), Chambéry (500 by shop keepers and small companies boss).

On Monday 25, préfet of Marseilles has "requisitioned" street sweepers.

The end 26 October-6 November

Specific strikes ended and national strikes crumbled.

On 30 October, after 33 days of strike, work is starting again in oil terminals of Fos and Lavéra. At that time 78 tankers were blocked and it will take three weeks for traffic to become normal.

The last hardliners in SNCF persist up to 6 November.

Street sweepers return to work on 8 November, after having gained from Paris city council that yearly wage will be increase at end of work career of 1,000€ net and that it creates a new grade at end of work

career. This measure will concern nearly 400 workers for the two coming years and will directly increase their pensions.

CRITICS OF GENERAL STRIKE

In the conditions of a movement who since the beginning look very narrow, call for an unlimited and reconductible general strike corresponded to, at the best, a sweet dream, at the worst, a purely ideological posture dedicated to practically disarm workers disposed to go further in the struggle.

To go back to general strike, we see well (without going back to its theoreticians like Georges Sorel) on what relays its interest for those who advocate for. The more numerous we are in struggle, the more luck we have to win against the adversary, State and bosses. If we stay there, critics would be easy: advocates of general strike see only quantitative aspect of balance of power, and never its qualitative aspect. For sure, question of number cannot be neglected.

Minoritarian movements often died because they can't spread out. For sure again, within working class, every sector that does not participate can become a brake for movement success and so unifying all struggling components is a vital need for any movement whatever could be its goals. But does general strike is the miracle solution, valuable for eternity that will act both as an instrument and as finality?

Like in any simple strike, there is no positive mean as such and forever; blockade of motorways can be useful or can be used for making pressure drop down, extension can be used for drowning movement or giving it breath, the same demand, according to different circumstances, can be both unifying or dividing. A lot depends on those who impulse these actions, of those who put them in practice and of those who lead them. If we look back on big past examples³, we can draw conclusion that general strike is convoked but not decreed. We now also, as general rule, that it follows and crowns a long serial of local conflicts, and at the moment where everything is challenged, some sectors of workers often go on struggle long before any call for a global struggle.

Warranty of success for general strike is not forcedly related to power of those who convocate it. We saw mighty unions call for general strikes that failed, and call from weaker unions that turn into success.

We also saw first in France, in May 1968⁴, then in Italy between 1969 and 1977, how unions repetitively put in place general strikes for drowning movement that started without them or even against them, and of which they perhaps better appreciated potentialities than actors of the movement themselves. At that time the purpose was to smash development of autonomous initiative or, at least, to put it backwards. And we must unfortunately recognize that they reach their goal. These two high examples of class struggle also show that general strike duration is not sufficient for qualifying and appreciating its very nature. A long general strike as May 68 in France was, on one side used for drowning a minoritarian movement but started out of union orders from May 14 to May 18 and on the other side, its exceptional duration (from May 18 to May 30) has not been translated into autonomous organization of workers on strike

Advocates of the good general strike would argue that general strike can be organised only by rank and file and not by union's bureaucracies⁵. This leads to two remarks. Firstly: call for general strike, a high complexity action that implies an enormous preparation, is also informing adversary about struggle times so allowing it to install its defence lines. In 1926, English ruling classes have taken benefit from this information and gave themselves means to win in the confrontation. Secondly: if we suppose that movement that general strike makes really possible is performed by workers nucleus strongly self-organised and linked together, forged during more limited fights, why is it necessary to gamble all our strength on just one stake? In these conditions, we have to know that all this "affair" is not limited to a beautiful prolonged refusal of work.

State with its impressive means of repression and bourgeoisie, with all social strata that are gained to it and organized into an active reactionary front, have no difficulty to transform general strike

³ From strike in Belgium in 1902, strike in Germany against Kapp coup in march 1920, to 1926 strike in England without forgetting May 68 in France.

⁴ See "May June 68 : an occasion lacking for Workers autonomy" Pamphlet, add-on to MC #9

⁵ If we put aside trotskysts who would first call for unions to organise general strike while knowing that they would not do it and thus put them in contradiction with rank and file.

into a direct and violent confrontation. Part is thus played on action and reaction times and about concentrated force that each camp is able to express. In another way, this kind of general strike, expression of a mature level of workers autonomy is then coupled with problem of deployed using of force. This leads room to transform conflict into insurrections. Under this approach, it is easy to understand that triggering of a general strike is not an easy business. It is absolutely necessary to make such an attempt only when working class has a chance to win the ultimate confrontation. Before this moment, we must, again and again, put on the agenda of class struggle perennization of political bodies of workers autonomy, reinforcement by and through independent struggles and above all, growing centralization around a political and theoretical corpus perfectly fitted to this tremendous stake.

So it is necessary for a general strike to get a chance of success through its own overcoming and its mutation into a direct global confrontation between forces of proletariat and those of ruling classes, that, first an long before, a previous rooted and links-equipped with working class organization does exist. An organization whose sensors are reliable and able to continuously take workers “temperature”, those ones who are the real protagonists of class struggle. We must so always bear in mind that if organization is predicate of insurrectional general strike, it is surely not the subject. As it will never be subject of communist transformation of society that will follow. The only factor that has the quality to pretend to be the subject is working class as a whole, only able to make tip the scales in its favour. In this perspective, the most perfect and sophisticated plans of reel or presumed proletarian general staff are of very few value.

In the end, we must not restrain critics of this form as of all other forms of specific struggles. Communist transformation of society cannot be reduced to a big play of revolt, of chosen ceasing of exploitation and of expropriation of expropriators. General strike is only a complex and discontinuous moment of process of communist revolution. First of all, this process is made of various size and intensity conflicts. But this initial phase of the whole process appeared to let room, as soon as possible, to capillary transformation of relationships of production, to conscious action of the workers control upon social production of which means, products and their sharing are close to be revolutionarize towards the broadest productive cooperation and destruction of capitalist social relationships.

STRIKE BY PROXY: A CRITICISM

Suggesting a 1995 scenario was not right either. In 1995, the nature of the confrontation was totally different, if compared to the recent one. At that time, the government conducted by Juppé took the “special retirement pension schemes” as its priority target, including those “special schemes” specific of workers - like railway workers, for example - with a very high capability to freeze the nation’s economy. Option which conveyed a high cost for the executive power at the time: it had to step aside and give up the struggle.

It was not the case this time: there was no immediate threat against the pension schemes for the kind of workers that could have triggered a much larger confrontation against the State and the employers. These special schemes stayed untouched in the first series of measures. Their turn will come, of course, but quite later. Among other factors that explain why it proved impossible to repeat the comparatively winning scenario of 1995, we shall mention the shift in the balance of power between classes – in favour of capital – the freezing of salaries in real terms and the deterioration of employment.

The “strike by proxy” is intrinsically flawed, considering the making up of the class for itself. Moreover, it does not work anymore. The first symptoms of strike by proxy had appeared in November and December 1995. In fact the two sectors in strike for real, railways (SNCF) and Paris public transports (RATP) were substantially supported by other sectors in the population. Not only during the demonstrations (on Saturdays, but also on weekdays when many demonstrators were taking days off to join), but also in the opinion polls (the majority of the polled population came out in favour of strikers). Noticeable too, was the absence of counter-marches against the strikers in the Paris area.

However, as we know, except for public State-owned companies – mail service (La Poste), power (EDF), gas (GDF), education – and with unequal success, at that time, there had been no strike in the industrial private sector. As the social movement in SNCF and RATP had emerged victorious by winning the withdrawal of the reform, simplistic supporters ⁶ would not understand the limits generated

⁶ Among whom Antonio Negri was the most extremist. He got enthusiastic about the “huge social cooperation” to go to work when, at the same time he was fawning on Bernard Thibault, who at that time was only the secretary of the CGT

by such a dichotomy between those who go out to struggle, and those who support them although they don't go on strike! But, according to this outline, who were the actors on stage?

On the one hand, the fighting Good Guys, the workers in strike from the SNCF and RATP, waving the flag of uprising against a loathed government, who were supposed to struggle for all. On the other hand, ordinary good people, wage earners who were unable to go on strike for themselves, but were relying on the Good Guys and assuring them of their best support. This fairy tale would be laughable if its purpose was not to hide the reality of the balance of power during the movement, and thereafter to drive back into limbo the understanding of the nature of social struggle between the working class, the employers and the State. So, shall we remind some basic principles?

When a working sector in a factory, or a factory among others in an industrial group, or a region in a country, happens to go on strike, it is in relation with its own reasons, its own purposes, and its own means. Going on strike on these grounds, is going on strike for the others. Of course, the more we are against the enemy, the greater the probability to win, at least for the time being. On the condition that the quantitative gain will not induce losses in quality.

Moreover in spring 1995, during the presidential election campaign, social conflicts had broken out in the private sector and workers' demands had been satisfied. In Belin (Evry) and Renault (Flins)⁷, two of the most representative cases, had even seen the emergence of autonomous initiatives like strike committees that were able to lead and boost the fight. Evidence that the working class of the private sector is able to lead the fight when conditions are satisfied; evidence also that all the people that had gone ecstatic about the November-December strikes, had paid no interest in these conflicts, a few months earlier. Yet, it's true that going to suburban factories, that's a way to go...

As for hoping for a "working-class champion" who will represent the wage-earners as a whole, and staying looking at him, exempting oneself from combat, is an attitude that will only result in the following: instead of lucidly analysing the balance of forces in order to draw conclusions about the actions to initiate in a unfavourable context, it will definitely set up the conditions for the "champion's" defeat and thus one's own.

As for the "champion" himself, he will quickly presume that being endorsed as the defender for the working-class as a whole, he will be able to elude any criticism (fortunately, such attitude was not very common amongst railwaymen in 1995).

If we consider that the "proxy" worm was already settled in the fruit, in a social movement like the one in November-December 1995 resulting in no practical criticism at all, the damage caused 15 years later is simply obvious in a context of unfavourable balance of power against the pension reform. As devastating effect, it produced a kind of social schizophrenia when two thirds or up to three quarters of the population was coming out in favour of the strikes⁸, whereas they never went on strike themselves.

This only could lead to what in fact really happened: a movement that nearly did not exist except for initiatives from the unions or from specific sectors already mentioned, that quickly had to assume a kind of symbolic shape (and the "proxy" is one of them) or bring about actions (the freezing of the economy) or methods (interprofessional general meetings) in an attempt to bypass reality as it stood.

It will be necessary to achieve a comprehensive understanding of these 15 years recurring phenomena. Without lapsing into simplistic explanations of the type: "it's hard to go on strike in the private sector". Avoiding also the contemptuous attitude of those who think that wage-earners (the "sheltered") are socially assimilated, or the extremism that considers mere passiveness as lucid and valid anti-unionism.

railway trade union (*in Futur Antérieur*, 33-34, april 1996).

⁷ For the account of these strikes, see *Bulletin Ouvrier*, 2, June 2001.

⁸ Nevertheless, an opinion poll (Opinionway) dated 22 of October showed that 56% of French people were in favour of cancelling the strikes once the law would have been passed.

FUNCTION OF UNIONS AND THEIR PRAXIS

In our analysis of the 1995 movement⁹, we wrote, regarding the policy of the trade-unions:

“The reason of the failure of the movement does not rest on the “swindle” of the trade-union leadership, which would have used based a trade unionism of shop-stewards instead of the usual union apparatus, and the “ambush” of the representation. It is not either because the workers on strike would be so dumb, they would always rely on the decisions of the bureaucracies, whereas, at same time, these same bureaucracies, would be largely devalued in the eyes of the workers. To offer this type of explanation you have to look on each class-struggle for an insoluble contradiction between “rank and file” and “leadership”, between “workers” and “bureaucracy”. This terrible illusion, forbid the understanding of the dynamic relationship between the exploited class and its political and/or trade-union bourgeois expression, and prevent, more generally, to perceive the material (social) basis of the democracy and of the proletariat “corruption” in the most advanced countries of the capitalist mode of production. This true delusion of a “rank and file” naive but always ready to start the “good” fight, never tiring to try to free itself of the chains of a choking bureaucracy, are singularly connected with the Trotskyite thesis claiming that the crisis of revolutionary movement is just the crisis of the revolutionary leadership.”

And again:

“It is necessary to understand the role and the reality of the unions¹⁰ as essentially produced by the condition of the class, of the bargaining of the price of the commodity labour power and of the complex bonds which are woven between base and apparatus. For us, the unions are a State body whose aim is the distribution in a certain way of the share of the social plus-value which used for channelling the independent workers eruptions. The state unions do not defend the workers as a variable capital: the worker, in capitalism, sells a commodity, its labour power, but never exist, by itself and for itself, as variable capital (especially when one speaks about his rights, i.e. rights in an act of exchange). The wages are this variable capital, but it is it in all circumstances, for the capital and only for it. Very often, the unions do not defend the wage earner, even as a subjective factor necessary to the production; on the other hand, they can negotiate more advantageous terms for the sale of its labour force on behalf of the employed person in the condition than the governance of the company and of the State is not put in question for real. The State unions defend the worker as a variable dependent on the capitalist mode of production, as long as it remains in its place. There is nothing awful in the struggle to sell the only commodity which belongs to the wage earners at the highest possible price, it is just the defence of the real wages; one cannot criticise the unions when they bargain (we all know that to bargain is to look for a compromise) on this ground. The labour power is the only commodity whose price fixed on the market of the same name has a direct consequence on the plus-value: the bargaining on the price of this special commodity cannot let us indifferent or, worse, hostile.”

We do not cut off anything from our writings, but, now what was the trade-union attitude during this movement?

The fact that in reality the unions have given the rhythm to the sequences of the movement by imposing the dates of the days of action gave them an enormous advantage to keep the movement under control, and manage the possible reactions. To already recognize this advantage with the unions afterwards, should lead those which are satisfied with these judgements, to recognize that if the unions are (and among them, very often only the CGT) the only ones able to organize calls for the strike, then the workers are not able (in any case at the beginning) and that “movement” carries in itself severe weaknesses.

The presence of several unions gives them opportunities to vary their partition according to the running of the movement. Behind the unity presented this time between the CGT and the CFDT (contrary to November/December 1995, when the unity was between the CGT and FO while the CFDT supported the Juppé plan), unity staying on the understanding of the power balance, weak, in favour of the movement, there were divergences.

⁹ See *Bulletin ouvrier* add-on to #1, March 1996

¹⁰ Voir correspondance dans le *Bulletin ouvrier* n°1.

SUD, using its power base in Health services (as seen in Province, by the many demonstrators behind its banners, but with no strike in the hospitals) had decided to play “hard” the radicalism, calling every other day for the “general strike”. During its interventions in different the medias, the secretary of SUD Rail, Christian Mahieux, after rightly explaining what is the meaning of a strike, was showing a radicalism totally disconnected from the real balance of power, including in the railways. Since 1995, SUD plays the partition of the trade-union radicalism to trespass on the grounds of the others, first of all the CGT.

Since 2008, and contrary to 1995, the CFDT has focused its communication towards a little more “contestation” while showing its realism looking for the slightest sign of the government offering to negotiate. The fall of its adherents, its disappearance in some sectors (the SNCF), has obliged the CFDT on to change its tack, but, it doesn't really mean a lot.

CGT, evaluating the weakness of the forces in favour of the strikes, and contested by some militants shop-stewards, has, on the one hand called for as long as possible at the federal level for the prolongation of the movement, while in the same time, letting the rank and file pursue more “stronger” actions, like in the Nord-Pas de Calais.

Precisely at the basis level, in workplaces and in districts, what was the practice of the unions? In the private companies, we were able to note that the leafleting addressed to workers was reduced to the minimum service (once out of four prior to the national demonstrations); unions were just doing the updating of the trade-union boards of information (and not always). On the day of the demonstrations, according to the forecast numbers of demonstrators, the unions rented one or more coach. As for the population, there were some posters and some leaflets put, for example, in the suburban trains but nothing more serious. As a result, in several plants (like Renault Flins and Citroen Aulnay) the number of participants, outside the trade-union hard-core, was lower than the number of trade-union representatives and of shop-stewards of those same plants!

Going back to the demonstrations, unions by thinking that, the more demonstrators, the more powerful was the movement, played the ridiculous game of putting the numbers on steroids, more than doubling up the real number of the demonstrators.

So, what is the conclusion of all that? It is definitely not that the unions betrayed a movement whose existence was so frail and which, in the course of the running of the facts, did not show any potential requiring the intervention of the unions. That does not mean that if the opposite happened, they would not have done it. In December 1995, when some railway workers wanted to keep going, once annulled the Juppé plan, and whereas there had not been a single divergence between the “rank and file” and the “leadership” of the CGT during the movement, the leadership, with the general-secretary Viannet at the fore, remind to these extremists that the party was over and that all the necessary measures would be applied to make them understand.

The unions hence ensured a minimum service to show the government that they were still indispensable in the event of a possible runoff, and for themselves, that for the runoff to happen, a movement was first necessary, to which creation it was contributing.

CRITICISM OF THE INTER-TRADE ASSEMBLY OF PARIS-EST

This assembly, starting from September 15th at the initiative of around ten rail-workers from the Paris-Est station, regrouped during the meetings between 50 to 100 people, sometimes less, and for the actions (leafleting, etc.) no more than thirty.

On October 15th, we distributed this criticism there:

During the inter-trade assembly held on October 12th at the trade union centre, an interrogation and its answer went through the talks: how was it that despite the increasing number of protesters in the streets and workers stopping work, the government didn't show any sign of stepping back.

The tentative answer given then was: since the unions are only begging the government for talks, the government does not need to let go off anything.

Or, to say it in another way, the unions are, take your choice, weak, corrupt or bastards. If they confronted the government from a stronger position, the government would have to step back.

The natural conclusion of this reasoning is to say that inter-trade assemblies should be reinforced, from the rank and file, to thwart the union's control on the movement in order to prevent them from stopping the movement once the talks are over.

This reasoning seems highly prone to criticism.

It starts with the hypothesis that a high number of protesters is the mechanical consequence of a balance of power advantageous to the working class in front of the capitalist state. It is naively believed that the more people in the streets, the stronger we are.

Since it needs to be told and repeated, the working class' strength is in strike actions. Not in street protests, not in riots, not in blockades, not in sabotaging, whatever the visible (or not) radicalness of slogans and actions and whatever the number of people taking part.

On October 12th, there were a lot of people in the protests. The metro took them there. Concerning the RATP – excepting the RER's B line – traffic was normal, or nearly normal. Even in enterprises where a majorities of workers refused to show up to work, like in the SNCF, the workers didn't go to workplaces assemblies, and so they don't participate in enlarging the movement inside the enterprise in order to stop production.

Since it needs to be told and repeated, a strike is not simply refusing to show up to work in order to go the protest. A strike is not only actively participating to the total stoppage of production, and then, when this balance of power is established, to address other proletarians.

And this is something the two souls of the bourgeois state, its government and its unions, have deeply understood and integrated. In the absence of strike actions, meaning **stoppages of work hurting capital's reproduction at its source, today, the balance of power is not advantageous to the working class**. And that is why unions are ready to negotiate for anything, as long as they're allowed to negotiate to save face, and that is also why the government does not want to let go of anything.

In this situation, the high number of protesters is a temporary reflection, and not a mechanical consequence, of this unfavourable balance of power in front of the capitalist state. Everyone starts the race thinking it's already lost, thinking that strike action in his own workplace won't have any effect, thus going to the protest as a good deed. Many don't even take a risk by asking for a day off or taking a sick leave in order not to be frowned upon by their hierarchy.

In front of this situation, militants should avoid three obstacles:

- 1) Despair, since even if blind enthusiasm for the number of protesters should be avoided, this number is in spite of all the proof of resent moving through civil society; moreover, strike actions are in spite of all happening in some sectors, with majority (refineries), or minorities (teaching, transportation).
- 2) Temptation to exit workplaces, since even if these reforms are a concern for a great part of civil society, and on another level, spirits are low in workplaces, it is not by fighting on the class enemy's ground, where we have no strength, that we can win.
- 3) Last, and as a consequence of what precedes, as the result of important strikes' absence, inter-trade assemblies are made into empty institutions whose vocation, coordinating struggles from the bottom, can translate in practice in only two ways: in the best case, a place enabling militants, more or less

isolated, to exchange information about embryonic struggles, without being able to overcome the situation; in the worst case, a fighting ground, as part of an ideological joke, between fractions, necessarily in minority, of militants for the control of an institution that represents no one but themselves.

Rank and file assemblies will be useful and important only from the time when they represent struggles. Given the weak number of **active** militants inside the assembly “of Paris-Est” in relation with the number of participants, these militants should concentrate their action to a small number of well-targeted companies, chosen on three criterion: 1. presence of militants inside, 2. a combativeness level, however weak or not, that shows a potential for radicalization, 3. last the role of the company inside the productive apparel.

It is necessary now to address the bluff that this regrouping was. To be clear, we are not opposed to any action, however minority. Moreover, no action is bad in itself, what counts is who is doing it, in what frame, with what goals and results. In the case of the assembly, excepting the initiators (themselves admitting their lack of influence in Paris-Est), participants represented only themselves and not workplaces, and even less workplaces on strike. Moreover, this reality, during the whole life of the assembly, did not evolve. By sticking a scheme established beforehand that has nothing to do with it, the initiators, whatever their good will, burdened their actions quality. All the more as during the events, nothing came back on track. As the affluence went down, they persisted without any critical reflexion, whereas in the assembly, most of the people intervening came to honestly tell about “their workplace where nothing happened”.

As for the practical side of things, some effort was made toward enlargement from the assembly. However, these initiatives always suffered from the same issue: subsumption to the rhythm imposed by the interunion and a desire of numbers. The actions (leafleting, making contacts...) towards workplaces geographically near never had any other horizon than calling other proletarians to go to union led protests or the assembly, without ever caring about a qualitative leap. During these moments, very few of the assembly members took the opportunity to discuss with workers, not in a dogmatic way, but to try to understand the local realities of visited workplaces; such an understanding could have been made useful to elaborate short term objectives, maybe more convincing and reachable, than the pension reform.

Similar assemblies existed in other cities (Le Havre, Angers, Saint-Étienne, etc.), which tends to demonstrate that the movement perceived general weakness generated these bypassing trials. In the few sources we could find the highest blur (on what has been done, by whom and for how long, and with what experience call back) being associated to uncritical enthusiasm by those circulating the information, we are incited to be highly cautious in applying to them the “Parisian scheme” as much as considering that better things happened there.

ON THE BLOCKERS SIDE

From mid-October in several cities (Brest amongst them), emerged blockers collectives, often consisting of militants of small political groups or local collectives, joined by trade-union militants of SUD, FO, etc., their goal was “to block the economy”. The chosen objectives were the way-in of industrial parks (as in Caen), of the shopping malls (as in Saint-Brieuc) or the harbour zone (as in Brest).

But, carried a few dozen at a time, these blockings were more symbolic than effective and easily scattered by the police, without incident, or arrests in the large majority of the occasions.

The fact that these actions were carried out per few militants is not criticisable by itself; you have to start, even if you are just a few, but you must not forget to check if the action is going in the direction of an increased autonomy, to understand how things are working and must of all, to draw lessons.

Without claiming to know all the inside out of the blockers actions, here is a sketch featuring the main actions of a blocking scenario:

- We decide to block the economy by stopping the movement of the goods without recognizing openly that there is no strike in the production, nor in their transport, therefore that the blocking is just a palliative to the absence of strikes
- We choose a symbolic goal impossible to defend in front of the inevitable police reaction, taking into account the low number of blockers
- We don't care how our action will be received by those which will be blocked (or we hope to awake them by our example?)
- We don't take into account the failure of our action
- We do it again.....

The absence of undertaking of analysis and of evaluation of the power struggle in the movement against the pensions reform is unfortunately too familiar¹¹. To add up our forces, to perceive how they change, to carry out actions which strike hard the boss without costing too much to the workman, vanished from the social landscape including among earnest strikers and fighters. This lack of preliminary thinking leads to the mystification of actions supposed to be exemplary and efficient whatever the context, and at the same time to shamelessly refuse to tell the true motives of those actions.

The strike is the main workers weapon to block the economy. The places of production remain central and paramount in the capitalist organization (and we do integrate in those, logistics, transporting goods, machines and workers). If there is no strike, and if they try to compensate it from the inside or the outside, it is necessary to understand what happened before to start the next round.

The failures are bringing us experience, but only if we are able to draw lessons from them. The goals must be selected in order to be included in the furtherance of the movement (even weak) and must speak by themselves (including via the deforming filter of the Medias) or be easily understandable. The attempts at blocking suffered to have started while the movement was already on decline and carried out by too frail forces, without any chance of winning any success, even symbolic. Even worse, today's industrial zones are built far from the working class districts, preventing any kind of spontaneous solidarity and any basis to possibly resist to the cops.

In a different time and in another place¹², workers collectives groups were organizing marches on Saturdays to forbid overtime by overexploited workers in small factories, or were giving them a little help to go on strike. But, on the one hand, they were organized and conscious of their actions and, on the other hand, they thought of these actions not as make weight to their weakness but as the normal continuation of with their own fight. And if they "forced" factories to go on strike, they were just changing the power balance, not building it ex-nihilo.

Without thinking twice about their actions, the blockers were just happy to do the same stuff again and again, reproducing the same kind of show, as symbolic as useless, with the only satisfaction of "doing something".

That escape to nowhere, with no other objective than itself, is not only useless but, in the long-term, hazardous: who can believe that we live in a time when we have an unlimited stock of well-rehearsed militants, hardened, conscious and insensible to the recurrence of defeats? Nobody, of course. In this circumstance, to keep on doing that kind of actions without perspective is not only worthless, it may add to the demoralization of the slim forces wanting to do more than to express their discontent.

¹¹ It's the case of every movement, in France, these 20 past years.

¹² See E.Mentasti "La garde rouge raconte. Histoire du comité ouvrier de la Magneti Marelli. Milan 1975-1978" Les Nuits Rouges. Paris, 2009.

A LOCAL INITIATIVE

A comrade from Douarnenez sent us a report about a local initiative that took place from October 15th onwards.

The creation of “Penn-sardin”¹³

“Penn-sardin enarch” is the name chosen in mid-October by a group whose intended purpose is to fight against the pension reform... and possibly more.

For the initiators, the apparent incentive was a kind of “fed up” sensation fostered by the six previous demonstrations in Quimper (all the way to the County local administration): same circuit, dawdling along, or rather buddy gathering style. This time, the members of this new collective felt like demonstrating in their own town, Douarnenez. And tacitly, they also felt like setting up something on their own, without leftist parties or trade-unions.

At the most, we happened to be 28 people for the preparation meeting for the next march. No leftists in view apparently, and only one trade unionist (from SUD). Attending people were in the age range 25-40, whose sympathies were lying with the left or even a bit further. They were quite autonomous and nice people, most of them involved in associations, often of the cultural kind.

The call to demonstration leaflet was only two sentences long, including the call itself. The same text was displayed in town (A3 size). It was handed out on the market place and outside some fish canning plants (Chancerelle, Paul Paulet), the Lagasse communication company, the Hospital and the secondary school.

On Thursday, at 2 pm (schedule selected not to interfere with the trade-union demonstration planned at 11 am in Quimper), the demonstrators gather in front of the city hall: the mayor and senator is a member of the UMP [right-wing], in a town which had been historically close to the Communist Party. 300 persons or so gathered to listen to the speech delivered by one of the coordinators.

Otherwise and during the same period, 20 to 40 trade-unionists (“Solidaires” and others, of which about ten from Douarnenez) took part in blockades: a petrol depot near Brest, a sorting office (there was no mail in Quimper that day). More symbolic actions took place also: in front of the MEDEF [the Federation of employer’s syndicate], the Crédit agricole [a bank], or a commercial centre...

Carrying on

Another march, nationwide, was planned for Saturday 6th.

On the 5th of November, the date for the usual meeting of the town council, a collective of unions and left-wing organizations calls for a gathering in front of the city hall. The mayor (UMP, right-wing) of course, had voted for the pension reform law. A trade-unionist launched into a fiery speech just in front of the doors of the hall, but there were no oral confrontation at the town hall. And there we go, for a little city tour.

Outside the city hall, we were less than 100; 50 or 60 leave for the march, and the rest of us, the collective and others, meet up for a chat and talk at the local café.

The next day, on Saturday 6th, it is raining. All the same, people turn up with banners, boards and an accordion, and we set off, the about 200 of us. The “Solidaires” group displays a CGT [Workers General Confederation] and a PC [Communist Party] flag, although these two declined to join the call issued by the collective “Penn-sardin enarch”. After a large city tour, back to the city hall square; still raining, the picnic turns out impossible under the rain and takes place in a show hall.

Last demonstration against pension’s reform

At the preparation meeting for the following march, three delegates from the “Left” turn up for an announcement: they have decided on a meeting in front of the city hall and an evening demonstration, on the eve of the day of action against the pensions “counter-reform”. No arguing whatsoever, and the next moment, the delegation is gone. But the “Pen-sardin enarch” meeting goes on. An idea is to put to use a quotation from the senator-mayor back from China: “China is a great country; when you are over there, you understand immediately why things do not work here!”

¹³ “Penn Sardin” means in Britton sardine head, nickname of fishermen of this area of Brittany. “enarch” means angry.

That sentence will be split up into as many letters, each one being carried by a demonstrator. A first photo session in front of the city hall and a second one overhanging a busy street. Correspondents from *Télégramme de Brest* and *Ouest France* are present. The *Télégramme* is the only one that will publish a photo featuring the sentence.

This protest episode will conclude with a symbolic act fancied by the “Left”: a public burning of photocopies of the freshly voted reform law! The bourgeoisie won’t lose any sleep over that. The collective will try to survive. Everybody is conscious that this was only the beginning of the offensive against wage-earners. And the “Left” won’t be the one that will alter the course of the present bourgeois politics... to be continued in the next actions.

What should we think about all this?

First of all, it is quite enjoyable to hear that in a small provincial town (with a population of 16 000, falling since 1946), where the traditional industry (fishing and canning) have been devastated for 30 years, thirty or so people gather, decide on an action (in this case, a local demonstration) and successfully lead 300 persons into it.

Taking back the initiative for actions from trade-unions and left political parties is a first and necessary step we are pleased to hail. The fact was also noticeable that it was achieved without deluding oneself. A profitable lesson also for next time is understanding that, even to organize a simple demonstration, the barriers you come up against are not so much crackdown actions from the rightist city administration, as more or less emphatic notices and advice from “professionals” (unions and parties).

In Douarnenez as everywhere else, there were no strikes in the few local factories. Moreover, some of the participants in the committee were so convinced that “there were no factories any more”, that a reminder was necessary before going handing out leaflets calling for demonstrations. In Douarnenez like in other places, some people tried to compensate for the weakness of the mobilization, participating in actions to “freeze the economy” in other places. Unsuccessfully, of course. Finally, and like in other places, the same lack of understanding about the pensions matter could be noticed.

Yet and in spite of the shortcomings that had to be pointed, it is clear that without this common will to get organized in order to achieve something that has been collectively decided, nothing will happen neither in Douarnenez nor anywhere else. This is the reason why the most clear-minded members of the committee must go on meeting together, keeping alive mutual links and assessing the results of actions they initiated. That’s all the evil we wish them.

OUR CONCLUSION

On the content

We can say that confusion is deeply rooted in the movement. If everybody understands that the government “reform” is an attack on the working class, there was no expression of the view that pensions are wages. On the contrary, the ideology of defending the “French social system” is still very strong, not to mention talking about “solidarity among generations”.

In the demonstrations we see a lot of spontaneous individual posters or placards showing that people wanted to prove that they have alternative solutions to government measures.

So this allows room for alternative political solutions.

On the strikes

Firstly, strikes have not hit “private” sectors and that is one of the main weaknesses.

Secondly, in the railways the strike remains minoritarian and unable to generate autonomous workers’ organization. A minority of politicised workers wanted to go as far as possible but without taking into account the balance of power.

Thirdly, in the other state sectors (Post Office, Health and Education) strikes lasted only on day of actions and were more just a testimony than something that could lead somewhere.

Fourthly, in sectors where strikes were seriously followed, they were due to specific conditions, not to for struggle against the pension’s reforms.

On the general “mood”

Strikes were supported by non-strikers. If we rely on surveys up to Friday 22nd, 2/3 of people were opposed to the government reform and in favour of “strikes”. This social schizophrenia (action by

proxy) which arose in 1995 is a real burden and the proof of the limits of the movement.

In a certain way, this was the same among the strikers who, weak in their workplaces, try to bypass it by making blockades outside.

On the unions

Contrary to what many leftists thought, unions were not opposed to the “movement” and not ready to “betray” it. Their “offer” was very broad. From SUD completely unrealistically calling for a “General Strike”, to the CFDT being more “realistic” and waiting for a government proposal, through the CGT being more realistic according to the weak balance of power in the strikes, and divided by some extremist rank and file-ists, the usual limited scheme of “betrayal” does not apply up to now.

On politics

On one side, the general weakness of the movement leads to a political alternative: all within capital and its state institutions: presidential elections of 2012. And this allows the socialist party to recover its innocence.

On the other side, the stupid and frantic call for a “General Strike”, without taking into account any balance of power, from the SUD to the CNT via the NPA is another proof of the lack of understanding of what workers autonomy could be.

To remain optimistic

In many places very tiny groups of people tried to organize themselves on a rank and file basis to do something, for instance attempting to block the economy. However unrealistic it is, it certainly allows people to create horizontal links that could be useful for the future. We have participated in Paris in an “Inter-category assembly” (however foolish may be the name of such a gathering, regarding reality) organized around engineers of SNCF in Paris Est and other workers. This could be a chance for the future if links are maintained.

MC/KPK, January 10th 2011
Bratislava, Brussels, London, Paris, Prag

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