ONLY A BIG MOVEMENT OF STRIKES FOR WAGES CAN MAKE THE GOVERNMENT BACK DOWN OVER PENSIONS

A mobilisation which is impressive but insufficient

This day of protests, like the previous one, will culminate in hundreds of thousands of proletarians taking to the streets of France. But like all those that proceeded it, whatever their motivations, it is going to run up against the insurmountable obstacle of the social peace which reigns in workplaces. The head of the government, Elisabeth Borne[1], even welcomed the "good conditions" in which the demonstrations of 19 January 2023 took place, despite an opinion largely unfavourable to the pension "reform". As long as business continues, sparse walkouts in private sector companies, just to allow workers to join marches, will not worry the government, even less the bosses. On 19 January, the strike was mainly in the national education system, the civil service (especially regional), the SNCF (but not so much in the commercial sector), the RATP (especially in the metro and not so much on the buses and trams), local transport and energy, but unfortunately not enough in the hospitals.

However, this strike movement did not become established, with the exception of the refineries and limited sectors of energy workers. The vast majority of the strikers on 19 January went back to work the next day. The real risk is that the struggle against the umpteenth anti-worker "reform" of pensions will take place around big street demos that won't change much in the balance of power with the dominant classes. If we add to this the fact that many young workers don't feel concerned by this struggle because it doesn't respond to their current worries about low wages, rising prices, expensive housing, punishing work rhythms and harassing management hierarchies, we can see that we need to give a new direction to the struggle.

Block the economy for real, but how?

Pensions are deferred wages. Wages must be paid by the employer and only by the employer, including pensions. Separating the struggles over wages from those over pensions is the best gift we can give to companies. The "parity" principle has always concealed this fundamental issue. Parity, which since the post-war period has brought together with complete understanding, state unions and employers' organisations around their state, conceals the fact that, in this system of social protection, workers pay for their pensions in three ways: once with their pension contributions, once with their taxes, and once through their labour, which gives employers, whether public or private, the means to pay their pension contributions. Separating the struggles over wages from those over pensions is in the interest of the "social partners" and the state, but not in the interest of proletarians. On the contrary, workers, the unemployed and pensioners have a common interest which is antagonistic to that of the bosses, the unions and the state: to link their struggles to increase wages, pensions and unemployment benefits. To do this, we must hit the economy as a whole hard by generalising conflicts in all factories, offices, employment centres and pension funds. The aim is to raise the tide until the bosses and their state give in. The spread of these struggles depends in the first place on their taking root in all corners of production. The greatest participation of workers, the unemployed and pensioners is the only factor that will decide this process. All other ways, including ritualised "citizen" demonstrations, or so-called Robin Hood actions, when they are isolated, lead to failure. The same goes for proxy strikes and betting everything on polls favourable to the struggles of others.

[1] Prime Minister of France, member of Macron's party (Renaissance).

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Foiling the tricks used to sweeten the pill of pension "reform"

On the terrain of pension "reform" big manoeuvres to prepare the knockout blow for mobilised proletarians are well under way. Here's a progress report:

- €1,200 for all pensioners who have completed all the quarter-years of contributions and reached the legal retirement age. This concession will only concern a decreasing number of employees and not those who work in low-skilled jobs, especially women. These workers are the first to be hit by the precariousness of their jobs, by so-called discontinuous careers, that is those interspersed with periods of unemployment without compensation;
- the opening of numerous areas of negotiation on the issue of hardship in order to distribute quarterly bonuses of benefits to this or that category of workers. The objective of the state is to divide employees by category, by job, by age, by gender, and even to divide them individually. It will be necessary to demonstrate to the "social partners" and to the state that we will not put up with its millstone round our necks just to be able to get the handout of earlier retirement. The unions that today denounce the strictness of the government's definition of hardship have, however, enormous leeway to revive their role in these endless negotiations;
- the "senior index", which should oblige companies with more than 300 employees to publish the proportion of older people among their employees. According to government propaganda, this index should push companies to fire fewer older employees. The MEDEF [employers' association] and the companies it represents are opposed to the introduction of this indicator, fearing that it will become restrictive over time. Yet, the government has specified that the constraint only concerns the publication of the index and not any obligation to keep the oldest employees. The reality is much more down-to-earth: companies drop older employees because they consider them less productive and overpaid. Nothing will change on that front.

A "reform" which will hide plenty of others

The government pretends that this pension "reform" preserves the system of redistribution. The same tune we have heard over the decades. The latest "reform" to date is always the last… Consider the speech by the Economy Minister, Bruno Le Maire, quoted in *Le Monde* on 19 January 2023: "*the government sees the reform as* 'just' *and bringing* 'progress', *while* 'preserving' *the system* 'as far as 2030'" This is a statement that ministers in charge of defending the pension reform have been repeating over and over again for a few days. As far as 2030, but after? After the 2027 presidential election, will the government have to work on the reform again? Bruno Le Maire admitted privately: *"this reform is not the last one. In France, there is a pension reform every five or six years, and it is impossible to promise that one of them will be definitive in such an uncertain area".* See you in five or six years if proletarians do not put an end to these repeated attacks...

The truth is that this "reform" does not aim to "solve" the problem of financing pension funds. Jean Pisani-Ferry, former Commissioner General of France Stratégie and a renowned economist, close to the current government, made no secret of it in *Le Monde* on 22 January, 2023: *"France is now faced with a marked tightening of its budgetary equation. We must, simultaneously, invest in education, health, ecological transition, reindustrialisation and defence, the armed forces will have 413 billion euros between 2024 and 2030, a third more than the previous [military] Programme Law, to name only the major priorities. ... If they are not zero, our margins of manoeuvre for financing through debt, taxes or redeployment of spending are too narrow to meet the needs... The way out is therefore to reduce the weight of pension spending in the gross domestic product (GDP), and for that we have to increase the employment rate of seniors".* The "reform" is certainly indispensable for the government, but only to reduce the budgetary expenses associated with pensions.

FOR THE RETURN OF WORKERS INITIATIVE

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