

## \* Spring 2016: an unexpected movement.

### French social climate warms up

From the beginning of the year, following the announcement of the labor code reform (“El-Khomri law” or “labor law”), presented to the Council of Ministers on March 9, several demonstrations have been called by the unions. If the CFDT<sup>1</sup> (followed by the CFTC, UNSA and CFE-CGC – the last union modifying its position later) was satisfied with the first small changes quickly introduced in the first draft, the coalition formed by the CGT, FO, FSU, Solidaires, UNEF, Fidl and UNL expressed its opposition. It was to be joined, on many occasions, by the UEC and various components of the “Front de Gauche”, high school and university student organizations (like the Mili), but also the DAL, LDH (particularly against police violence and recent state of emergency), Gisti and several associations supporting undocumented migrants.

The dates of these events coincided often with solidarity demonstrations with migrants and against the state of emergency. They followed the mobilization against the COP 21, which the French state managed to control during the final months of 2015; many people felt that the state of emergency was more used to stifle the environmental movement than to protect the population from terrorist threats<sup>2</sup>. So they quickly understood that the mobilization against the El-Khomri law was part of a warming social climate.

The protests intensified before the law was presented to the parliament: January 9 (at Paris-Nord railway station in solidarity with Calais migrants), January 11, January 26 (public service workers), February 7, March 4 (at Paris-Nord railway station against the destruction of migrants’ barracks in Calais), March 6 (Belleville, in a northern district of Paris), March 9, March 10 (pensioners), March 12 (against the state of emergency), March 24, March 31, April 5, 9 and 14 (unauthorized night demo followed by incidents), April 28 and air traffic controllers strike, May 1st, May 2 (against the dispersion of a camp regrouping 1,600 migrants in Paris), May 3 (students), May 4 (resistance against the expulsion of 277 migrants squatting a former high school), May 10 (railway workers), May 12, May 18 (demonstration of the Alliance police union and counter-protest organized by the UNPA<sup>3</sup> collective), May 17, 19 and 26. A national demonstration was called in Paris on June 14. The police deliberately planned aggressive interventions against the demonstrators, so the government was able to politically use the “violence” perpetrated by so-called “casseurs” (rioters) and minimize the presence of hundreds of thousands of protesters in the streets. The mass media slavishly followed the State’s political line. Another demonstration was organized on June 23, first forbidden and then authorized but on a very short distance, and totally surrounded by the cops; a final demonstration was organized on June 28 which could mark the funerals of the movement. To this list, we should add several spontaneous demonstrations, sometimes organized at night, in different districts of Paris, about which the press made little or no comment.

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<sup>1</sup> See the explanations about the various trade unions and political organizations at the end of the article (translator’s note).

<sup>2</sup> The videos showing police violence in November and December 2015 on République square don’t allow any doubt.

<sup>3</sup> UNPA means Urgence Notre Police Assassine (Urgency Our Police Murders) (translator’s note).

## \* “Nuit debout” (Night-on-our-feet) in Paris

An unforeseen event occurred after the 31<sup>st</sup> of March demonstration : at the Parisian Labor Exchange where the film *Merci Patron* (“Thank you, boss”) was shown, a group of protesters, led by François Ruffin, the film's author and publisher of *Fakir* bimonthly magazine, offered to stay on République square to continue the debate: “Nuit debout” was born.

If we consider the movement’s capacity to mobilize the whole society, it appeared very limited from the start. But if we analyze its internal dynamics, it offers a rather different picture.

- It differed from other “square movements” because of the circumstances of its birth, directly related to the current anti-“labor law” movement. Originally it was conceived by a few dozens of youth who were trained in the “citizenist” mobilizations during the recent years (disobedients movement, “Action Climat” around COP21). They decided the occupation should continue after the first night on the square, and found the necessary means to fulfill that aim, implement their methods and defend their values every night.

These methods functioned fairly well and were largely inherited from anti-globalization movements. One could observe a certain dichotomy between “bystanders” (be they chatterboxes or passive hearers) and organizers who were mobilized almost 24 hours per day. The various “commissions” which were formed from the beginning (“hospitality”, “logistics”, “serenity”, “first-aid”, “cafeteria”, etc.) reproduced, with the passage of time, a “specialization” of the tasks, and a division between those who belonged to the movement and those who used its services. The commissions showed signs of exhaustion at the end of June, a factor which heavily influenced the fate of the movement.

In the debates, some principles were immediately adopted, which are also proper to this generation:

- Free speech for all, on an equal basis. In practice, each meeting offered a succession of short interventions, with no hierarchy or structure, producing a certain confusion and, at times, giving way to a big emotional release.

- Political groups did not speak as such; organized militants could express themselves, but as ordinary citizens.

However, some changes emerged as the weeks passed:

- From the second week onwards, commissions were formed to enable debates and take initiatives, but they replicated the traditional segmentation of questions and demands (ecology, feminism, antispecism, anti-colonialism, popular education, etc.). Within these commissions, the militants belonging to traditional regroupings had a significant weight as they were already active on the issues at stake ;

- Quickly, some commissions began to organize thematic discussions on the sidelines of the “general assembly”. These debates attracted more and more people, their content was more and more interesting, and gradually overrid the “general assembly”, which became less and less frequented.

- After a month, by a complicated voting process in several stages, it was tried to give a common political expression to the movement through the “general assembly”. This very lengthy process, which did not succeed, reflected a common desire to practice direct democracy, but which was primarily focused on formal questions, regardless of content. Most participants refused to set a mandate system based on specific and precise aims. On the other hand, the call for a new Constituent Assembly found some echo in the

square, confirming that democracy was primarily perceived as a question of method, and not as the product of a collective struggle.

- The original link with the fight against el-Khomri law, however, maintained an important relationship with workers struggles:

The idea of a “general strike” was more and more discussed and quickly became the subject of a special commission, which attracted rank and file union activists decided to support cross-industry links to compelling union bureaucrats to call for an indefinite general strike. These rank and file trade unionists had already supported the petition initiated by Caroline de Haas<sup>4</sup> (1.3 million signatures), and March 22 call “Let’s block all” ; they provoked fierce debates at CGT Congress in mid-April, congress which in the end only decided new “days of action”.

These union activists also allowed that the Labor Exchange (under the umbrella of the Parisian CGT) would welcome action groups reunions ; rallies against state repression ; and meetings between trade unionists, ordinary workers, protesters and “nuit-deboutistes”.

After April 28 demonstration, this commission managed to hold a “general assembly” on the République square about the general strike. It attracted many people and enabled rank and file trade unionists who were struggling (taxi, railway and post office workers) and members of the two CNT unions to call for a renewable strike and organize daily assemblies in the workplaces. CGT and SUD general secretaries also talked to the crowd but did not take any concrete commitments. The same logic which led to defeat the 2010 movement against pension reform was reproduced here, but, this time, it happened on the République square, not in Labor Exchange closed rooms. Militant voluntarism had to face not only the union bureaucrats inertia – who saw the mobilizations just as an additional element in a negotiation process respecting the established political framework – but also the passivity of most wage-earners, locked in their workplaces where no union sought to mobilize them locally against their own difficulties and to promote good reasons to oppose corporate power.

The “convergence of struggles” was immediately very present in the speeches, and also the subject of a specific commission. But rather than a real convergence which could have changed the power balance, one could feel an intense desire to realize a strong unity and concretely help those who were fighting: in other words, convergence was a strong ideological phenomenon which at times managed to materialize. Some examples: the mutual help provided to occasional workers of the entertainment industry during several actions, especially the occupation of the Odeon and the Comédie-Française theaters ; the junction with railway workers demonstration at Saint-Lazare railway station in April ; the blockade, during a few hours, of some McDonald's affected by strikes ; the physical presence of “nuitdeboutistes” in solidarity with migrants expelled by the cops from camps or squats ; and, when the strikes spread, the (sometimes massive) support to the picket lines in Paris, in waste treatment factories, and in refineries outside Paris.

Widely agitated in 2010 during the movement against the pension reform, the idea of “blocking the flows” was often debated as its supporters claimed that, in a context of growing precarization of the workers, it could be a substitute to a general strike and

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<sup>4</sup> Caroline de Haas is a feminist politician. Former leader of the student trade-union UNEF, she made her political career inside the SP which she suddenly left in 2014 after working as a political adviser for the « Socialist » government (translator’s note).

succeed to block the economy. This concept did not exceed the stage of an agitational idea.

In May, the two attempts to block Gennevilliers river port were quickly neutralized by the cops, and the blockade of a department store in the suburbs for a few hours necessarily had a limited effect given the lack of links with the workers concerned. Then blockades spread in relationship with the strikes (on roads and bridges, at the gates of harbors and refineries) but the quick intervention of the police reduced its economic impact to almost nothing. The importance of these actions lied more in the fact that they provoked transversal regroupments and boosted common actions.

From the second week onwards, trade-unionists from the sectors which were struggling against the labor law came to République square to organize debates about specific issues linked to their demands (SUD activists from the Heath and Social work sectors “Hospitals on-our-feet” ; the “Group of 37” for “Psychiatry on-our-feet”). But these initiatives did not last long – probably because the desired coordination couldn’t emerge in a setting which often looked more like a playground than a place of serious debates. Some teachers, however, fighting for a long time against the last education reform, were present as individuals, especially in the education commission. There were no specific discussions about the students condition. Members of highschool and student coordinations sometimes spoke during general assemblies but they were organized outside République square.

- The struggle against the state of emergency was sometimes mixed and confused with the struggle against cops’ violence. This violence started with the highschool mobilizations and seriously worsened after April 28 and May 1<sup>st</sup> demonstrations. From the end of April, the government apparently decided to bet on the exhaustion of “Nuit debout” movement and mainly sought to discourage people from demonstrating, fearing the junction between the young “nuit-deboutistes” and older workers during these demonstrations.

On République Square, police harassment became a daily procedure: after imposing the dismantling of facilities during the second half of the night (officially in order to clean the square), Paris municipal authorities imposed a ban on selling beverages (the first days, the police encouraged street vendors to occupy the square); then they prohibited any procession on the square, allowed to use sound systems only until midnight, and finally only until 10 PM. All these decisions created multiple opportunities for the cops to control and body search people on the access roads to the square and at subway exits, and to harass all visitors of the “Nuits debout” event.

Physical confrontations with the police (which occurred in all the demonstrations against the labor law, but were also organized at night by some grouplets) led to frequent debates about violence during general assemblies or elsewhere. One could observe a clear contradiction between a moral condemnation of violence in general by the majority of youth belonging to this social milieu, and a refusal to desolidarize oneself with concrete violent minority actions which were seen as forms of expression belonging to the movement itself. This question was frequently debated. The political inconsistency of this form of “radicalism”, which only fueled the media lynching of the whole movement, seems to have been understood by some but rarely discussed in public.

At the beginning, the solidarity against repression (against mass arrests at the end of demonstrations or during highschool students actions) was organized with some know-how, inherited from the anti-globalization and environmentalist struggles: permanent

presence of lawyers in the square, legal mobilization team at demonstrations, anti-repression meetings, etc. But, later, these initiatives were apparently not strong enough to face the multiplication of arrests and indictments.

The fear of terrorism, which was and is manipulated by the government, did not seem to bother anyone on the square, and the state of emergency was largely understood as a state of legal exception.

Finally we must praise the obstinacy of the “nuit-deboutistes”: despite the bad weather, despite police harassment, despite the tensions provoked by some violent incidents in the middle of the night, despite all the energy required to ensure daily “logistics”, they remained convinced of the importance of their movement during three months and a half.

#### \* **The political weight of “Nuit debout”**

One must first emphasize the importance of occupying a large central square in Paris dedicated to political reflections and exchanges. Not only because Paris sorely lacks independent meeting and discussion places<sup>5</sup>. The fact that anyone could come and participate in the general assemblies or commissions transformed this square in a true agora; the freedom to organize any debate (even if the fact of registering to a commission allowed your subject to be officially announced and to benefit from a sound system), all this contributed to make of “Nuit debout” a political place in the full sense of it.

And this initiative met a real need. In a highly atomized society, in a city increasingly colonized by tourism, by the show and “feast<sup>6</sup>” industry, in a world where public expression is confiscated by ubiquitous media, the need to be listened to and to listen, but also to share and reflect together is important. This need was revealed by the unexpected success of “Nuit debout”. And it was confirmed by this exceptionally long dynamic which matured and structured itself, belying all the predictions according to which it would quickly disappear.

The initiative quickly expanded through the Net (Nuit debout website, Radio debout, Télé debout) and its spontaneous geographical expansion: “Nuit debout” appeared in many other cities (with some offshoots abroad) but also in some districts of Paris and some suburbs, where the existing proximity allowed to articulate the mobilization with more local issues and a friendlier dimension.

Media and skeptics were quick to focus on the limited social composition of “Nuit debout” sympathizers: they were presented as young, white, precarious middle-class Parisians – a statement contested by a recent study<sup>7</sup>. It’s true that suburban folks did not come to the square. Nevertheless, these daily meetings and debates enabled the youngest participants to experiment a first political socialization – a role which university and high school students struggles had lately ceased to perform because they became weak or nonexistent.

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<sup>5</sup> Even « La Parole errante », in Montreuil (a western suburb of Paris), is threatened now, and we don’t know if its defense committee will be able to impede its closure as it happened in other activists’ places which were obliged to stop their activities.

<sup>6</sup> The SP has promoted, among others, a tradition of organizing « feasts » about almost everything under the « friendly » injunction of the State : music feasts, neighbour feasts, etc. (translator’s note)

<sup>7</sup> <https://gazettedebout.org/2016/05/17/qui-sont-les-nuitdeboutistes-enfin-une-etude-serieuse/#more-7821>

The political naivety of the young generation involved in the movement was not in itself a weakness, no matter what the ultra-left or post-autonomous groups said. It pushed the youth to test the state and measure the government's hypocrisy. This political maturation factor must not be underestimated. Those who focused on political maneuvers and behind the scenes manipulations did not understand that, for those to operate, the movement should have first lost its propulsive capacity and accept the hegemony of the dominant political culture.

“Nuit debout” also played a significant role in the struggle. Thanks to its “general strike” and “convergence of struggles” commissions which debated every day about the forms of action and relayed the various initiatives; thanks also to “general assembly” debates which were focused, on the evening of mobilization days, on the issues concerning the struggle ; but above all thanks to the fact that “Nuit debout” provided a form of continuity to the overall movement, a link between the different demonstrations punctuating the trade union calendar – something that the 2010 movement against the pension reform was not able to produce. Although at the end of May and during the month of June, a certain form of exhaustion became more and more visible – and the bad weather did not help.

Despite all its shortcomings, this movement remained a major thorn in the side of the government, which still has not found a way to get rid of it, without too much damage. The systematically hostile and contemptuous treatment of the major media also expressed well why those wild and uncontrollable speeches and debates upset the authorities and those who had the mission to produce and propagate the government's line. They were clearly frightened by the existence of a place where political ideas and actions were discussed without any control and outside any established framework. Especially as the “professionals” of political action who might, as in Spain, have guided the movement towards a simple staff renewal in existing structures, have not (yet?) found a place<sup>8</sup>.

#### \* **The fight against the "labor law"**

The labor law was presented to the Parliament, during the first half of March. On May 12, its first draft was adopted by a special speedy procedure (called “49-3”) which shortens the discussion in Parliament before it goes to the Senate. The nonconfidence motion presented by the rightwing was rejected and the so-called dissident left (environmentalists, Communist Party, Left Party and some Socialist Party “rebellious” MPs) failed to gather the 58 signatures necessary to present its own motion. The SP started to crack, and the use of the 49-3 procedure only exasperated its opponents. Therefore the mobilization expanded and reached some strategic companies, and the government appeared trapped by its own intransigence<sup>9</sup>.

Around mid-May, the movement took a more militant turn. Truck drivers blocked roads near harbors and refineries, as a warning shot, but the government quickly promised not

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<sup>8</sup> Personalities like Ruffin and Lordon who contributed to the start of the movement progressively played a less and less important role. In reality, they are still fundamentally influenced by the Leninist idea that mobilizations should be conceived and organized by an enlightened small committee. Their position was not really in tune with the political sensitivity and will of the actors of Nuit debout who were convinced of the validity and strength of their movement.

<sup>9</sup> An attitude which reminds its failed attempt to change the Constitution in order to deprive the terrorists who had two nationalities from their French citizenship.

to touch their overtime hours – which account for up to half of their wage – and enabled them to escape to the general conditions laid down by the labor law.

Meanwhile, the strike reached several harbors and oil refineries, which were stranded. On May 24, the police attacked a dockers picket which blocked Fos-sur-Mer fuel depot and promised to remove the roadblocks in front of the other refineries and fuel depots. During three weeks, the 8 refineries were on strike and stopped production. The police actions to remove the blockades only strengthened the determination of the strikers, particularly in the west of the country. However, the government was able to prevent that massive fuel shortages hit the Paris region, which was the focus of media attention. If at the beginning, the strikes touched only a minority of workers in the refineries, then the situation became much more favorable to their struggle. But it did not last long enough, the service stations began to receive fuel and the strikes stopped one after the other.

At the SNCF (national railway company), the CGT<sup>10</sup> union called for a renewable strike every Wednesday and Thursday from May 18. The Sud-Rail union wanted a more aggressive movement and called for a renewable strike until July 11, which marks the end of the Euro Cup, but, alone, SUD was not able to make a difference. On May 18, SNCF management announced 15% of strikers, which was clearly a lie as a third to half of the trains didn't run. But, at the SNCF, the fight against labor law intersected with the struggle against rail reforms. The UNSA and CFDT unions supported the latter because they did not want to lose their rank and file members which are more corporatist. The unity between the four unions did not last long, because, on the second day of the strike, the last two confederations withdrew their support and invited their members to go back to work. The first week of June promised to be very interesting, even if the trade unions had not planned any street demonstrations. The unions chose to use the threat of a renewable strike during the Euro Cup rather than to coordinate a broad strike movement in a moment where many categories had entered the struggle..

The SNCF company agreement was approved by the CFDT and UNSA (which have 39 % of the votes), and rejected by the CGT and Sud (which represent 51%). If CGT and SUD had agreed on a veto, the company agreement would have been invalidated; SUD sought to do that, but the “responsible” CGT railway workers federation did not veto the agreement, so it was enforced.

The CGT also called for a strike at the RATP (metro and buses) from Thursday, June 2, but it had very modest effects because the bus depots were blocked more by “Nuit debout” sympathizers than by strikers, so the police easily stopped the blockades. The same day, there was a one-day strike in the harbors, while airports and civil aviation staff were called to strike between June 3 and June 5. Airline pilots threatened to strike after the start of the Euro Cup but gave up because they were isolated.

The energy sector joined the movement and some nuclear power plants came on strike, succeeding in reducing the production, so the EDF (national electricity company) was obliged to import electricity. Consumers did not feel the shortage, as in the case of gasoline, but the symbolic value of such an action was important. After two weeks, the strikers returned to work.

It must be said that the various categories among which the CGT is solidly rooted went on strike: some mainly against the labour law, such as harbors, chemical industry and in

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<sup>10</sup> During last trade union elections in November 2015, the CGT got 34,33 % of the votes, SUD 16,83 %, UNSA 23,86% and CFDT 15,15% (translator's note).

particular the energy sector (fuel, electricity), but also city sanitation services ; the strike was strong not so much among workers collecting garbage in the streets, although they participated in various strikes, but among those working in the incineration centers. In Paris, for example, public sanitation workers were on strike and the municipality subcontracted the waste collection to various private companies, including some which were already working in the capital. But it was above all the four incinerators around Paris which went on strike and were blocked before police intervened later to unblock them. Other categories who had specific demands took advantage of the climate of generalized struggle to enter the fight. The government tried to detach them from the general movement by answering some demands, sometimes anticipating them, and making lavishing promises. We have seen how it dealt with the truck drivers and railway workers.

The public service was also one sector which the government succeeded to detach from the movement by making some minor concessions: 1.2% increase of the wage index point; for primary school teachers, a “ monitoring and accompaniment” incentive (800 euros per year) and for all teachers a general jump in the category scale.

This extension and radicalization of the movement allowed the CGT to control the situation in some way. It was able to show that, without its participation, no movement could pressure the government. In the factories and companies (to the exception of Paris railway stations whose mobilizations were politically important but did not have a great impact), no autonomous coordination emerged, and “Nuit debout” was not powerful enough. If the government had accepted to negotiate, everything was in place for the June 14 demo to become a funeral protest movement.

But the government stiffened. Instead of offering an honorable way out to the CGT, it stubbornly defended its labor law giving the union the opportunity to show it was able to win some results. When the project was proposed to the Senate, the right-wing hardened the SP original project: the rightwing senators demanded the suppression of the 35-hour week; workers should be obliged to work 39 hours per week if the boss asked them, 48 hours in case of need, and even 60 hours in exceptional cases. In small and medium-sized enterprises it should be possible to sign individual agreements. The dismissal compensation decided by labor courts should not exceed 15 months of wage in case of a wrongful dismissal. Apprentices should be able to start working at 14 instead of 16. In such a context, after the law was modified and adopted by the Senate on June 28, the Parliament will probably vote the previous draft.

Until now, the CGT has seemed more determined than in 2010 to smash the reform. The government has been intractable and excluded the CGT from the negotiations which preceded the drafting of the text, but the CGT rank and file was more strongly mobilized than it was against the pensions reform in 2010. This is due to the attack undergone by the CGT (the labor law wants negotiations to be led at the level of each enterprise, instead of each industrial branch, a change which is more favorable to the CFDT), but also to recent internal transformations. Before, the CP tightly controlled the CGT ; today this union has become a federation of grouplets, which take autonomous decisions and decide different actions. So it has become more difficult than before to control from above the whole organization which is itself more open to centrifugal forces.

The CGT and FO proposed to organize a “citizen voting” presented as a way to get the support of a population for which it was supposedly “impossible” to strike. Such a vote only shifted the confrontation from the strikes and streets – where the movement remained in a favorable position – to the ballot boxes, where things were easier to control. On the



morning of June 28, the media announced the result of this "citizen referendum": it collected 800,000 votes, including 92% hostile to the government project. Compared to the 1.3 million signatures collected by the petition against the labor law project, this was a very relative success.

The government may soften a bit its attitude, given the gap which appeared between the SP and much of its electoral base. Several MPs and government officials are beginning to fear the harmful effects of this stiff attitude, especially as the next presidential elections are scheduled for April 2017. Blunders and contradictions are increasing, suggesting a desperate search for a solution which would allow them to save face.

Several Socialist leaders have apparently abandoned the idea of winning next presidential election and consider that, at this stage, they have nothing to lose. Such an attitude could, paradoxically, strengthen the government's intransigence. Hence the proliferation of contradictory discourses.

One conclusion is, however, certain: the movement has not managed to exceed the "classic" protesting rank and file and to involve most workers. If 75 % of French people remain opposed to the labor law and to the way the government is seeking to impose it, as all polls have shown until today, workers have not found enough courage, energy, and anger, to go on strike and take to the streets en masse.

Street demonstrations provoked a bitter discussion between the CGT (which overestimated the number of participants) and the police (which systematically underestimated it). The truth is usually halfway. But, instead of discussing these figures, we should focus on the composition of the demonstrations. The movement went through two successive stages:

– From the middle of March to the end of May, the demonstrations, except on March 31, were characterised by a low participation of the unions: union demonstrators did not have compact ranks and mainly included union officials and pensioners; and the protests were led by youth, more and more numerous and determined, unionized or not. Inside the "demonstration's head" some groups were fully equipped to fight the police, and they were more or less supported by an important fraction of the demonstrators. So when the police asked the CGT-FO stewards to cooperate, it ended up in clashes between the youth and union stewards. The demonstrators' pressure and the videos of these clashes which circulated on the Internet quickly put an end to this too obvious collaboration between the unions and cops.

– The May 26 demo marked a new turning point: if the "demonstration's head" remained remarkable, three-quarters of the protesters were now represented by the troops of the CGT which called all its factory and public sector delegates to join the protest. The ranks of FO and Solidaires, although substantial, were less numerous. The FSU, meanwhile, was barely visible.

The very lively « demonstration's head » was autonomous from the unions. It included the most dynamic people, high school or university students, union and association militants, « nuitdeboutistes », autonomous and libertarian militants. This was a brand new phenomenon. During the last thirty years, the « demonstration's head » was jealously confiscated by the trade unions and specially by the CGT. The presence of an autonomous sector of protesters at the head of the recent demonstrations revealed a visible change in the social situation and in the relation of forces inside the movement. It also transformed the style of the demonstrations, given that the « demonstration's head » chose to confront the cops. But the presence of small groups used to confront the police

(but who did not care much about the risks incurred by less experienced protestors) who smashed bank and store windows and advertising panels at the end of the protests as a form of « insurrectionism » enabled the government, with the help of the media, to present demonstrations mainly as a threat to public order.

Anyway, the government had not much choice given the fact it did not want to give a political answer which may have stopped the conflict. So it tried to make the CGT responsible for the actions of the unpredictable and uncontrollable « demonstration's head ». With June 14 demonstration CGT wanted to display all its strength and impress both the government and the movement, but a media and government manipulation took advantage of a small incident. One window of the Necker hospital for children was smashed. The son of two cops (who were murdered by a jihadist on June 13th) had been brought to the same hospital during the night, a fact unknown to everybody except the government. This incident was dramatically amplified and presented as a symbol of the rioters' irresponsibility in order to oblige the CGT to condemn the « demonstration's head ». The next demonstration (June 23) was first banned. The media recalled that the last ban on a union demonstration occurred on February 8, 1962, during the French colonial war in Algeria, and 8 people died this day at Charonne metro station. This so-called left government was obliged to back up and finally authorize the protest, but under strict police surveillance, enforcing three to four successive body searches to the demonstrators before they could even reach the departure point of the protest. On the evening, the media pretended that the incidents which occurred during the previous demonstrations had been avoided but the CFDT headquarters were attacked by hundreds of infuriated protesters and the journalists did not mention other non-authorized protests which happened at the same time. Nevertheless, the government reached at least one result : the autonomous « demonstration's head » disappeared and was replaced by a classic union march.

On June 28 the demonstration was authorized but the body searches continued around the demonstration departure point. On the same day, the police circled the Parisian Labor Exchange where militants from various social sectors were meeting and therefore impeded to join the protest. To find a historical precedent to such an event, one needs to go back to really dark periods of French history. But we had finally a nice surprise : despite the cops' numerous controls, the autonomous « demonstration's head » reappeared and ... some shop and bank windows were smashed again.

The repression against the movement has been quite heavy : in only 3 months, 1,900 people were arrested and more than one hundred immediately tried and condemned. The police have experienced new techniques against the demonstrators. These techniques were not aimed at « controlling the situation » but at provoking the protesters who were circled, blocked, divided into several chunks and... infuriated. In fact, it contributed to bringing closer the nonviolent protesters and those who were organized to confront the cops, all sharing the same rage.

The way public order has been recently managed in France contrasts with tendencies observed on the European scale and even some repression specialists have criticized French police procedures<sup>11</sup>. But the political meaning was clear : the government sent a

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<sup>11</sup> See Olivier Fillieule et Fabien Jobard, « Un splendide isolement. Les politiques françaises du maintien de l'ordre » (<http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Un-splendide-isolement.html#nh10>) and Joseph Confraveux, « Le pouvoir politique est affaibli face au

message to the movement and showed a repressive capacity superior to the means traditionally used by the rightwing.

But the repression also had a probably undesired effect, at least for those who conceived this policy. A new generation had a direct experience of the brutality of the cops and of those who give orders to the police. It was for these youth a first form of political socialization and awareness ; therefore there was no need to argue and convince them that the state is first and foremost a band of armed men who claim to have the monopoly of legitimate violence. If at the time of the COP 21 in 2015, or at the beginning of “Nuit Debout”, you could sometimes hear the slogan “The police with us”, it disappeared from the protests. As in any real movement, the motivations of the various sectors participating in it are diverse and sometimes contradictory. But the government managed to polarize all the accumulated tensions and to federate all the discontents against himself. The reactionary measures adopted by this government since 2012 have not been forgotten and the sectors which participated to the struggle will keep them in mind for a long time.

As a whole, this movement represented something more important than a simple fight against the labor law, against the state of emergency, against police violence or in favor of squares’ occupation. It highlighted the gap between the state and the population, and especially between the left in power and the section of society which is supposed to support it – this gap was confirmed by the all the critiques directed against the “representative” system which is now perceived as a fictional democracy. This process followed the many electoral defeats endured by the SP during the last two years (at municipal, departmental and regional levels) and it may amplify in the future, regardless of the ultimate fate of the labor law.

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Paris, June 28, 2016

*This text was written, in several steps, at the request of comrades outside France, and includes elements of information and reflection which were gradually added. This explains its repetitions, redundancies and contradictions. If we can, we will try to write another article to draw a more detailed balance of this movement.*

#### **TRANSLATOR’S NOTE :**

The above-quoted numbers are those given by the organizations themselves. One must keep in mind they all bluff and lie : for example, the CP claims to have 138 000 members but only 70 000 (50%) have paid their dues every month. There are 24 million waged workers in France including 6 million unemployed. All together French trade unions officially regroup :2,85 million people so a bit more than 10% of the labor force but this number includes a good part of pensioners.

**CFDT** – French Democratic Confederation of Labor : former Christian trade union, founded in 1964, which took a left turn in the 60s and 70s, inviting many leftists in, and made a U-turn to the right since then. 868 601 members. In 2013, it collected 26 % of the votes on a national scale.

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pouvoir policier », (<https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/210616/le-pouvoir-politique-est-affaibli-face-au-pouvoir-policier?onglet=full>).

**CFTC** – French Confederation of Christian Workers, founded in 1919. 142 000 members. In 2013, it collected 9,3 % of the votes on a national scale

**UNSA** – National Union of Autonomous Trade Unions, founded in 1993. 230 000 members. In 2013, it collected 4,26 % of the votes on a national scale.

**CFE-CGC** – General Confederation of executives, professional and managerial staff. 160 000 members. In 2013, it collected 9,43 % of the votes on a national scale.

**CGT** – General Confederation of Labor (founded in 1895 ; formerly controlled by the CP, now playing the same game as the CFDT in the 60s and 70s, attracting leftists and even anarchists. 680 000 members. In 2013, it collected 26,7 % of the votes on a national scale.

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**FO** – Workers Strength (split in 1947 from the CGT linked to the Cold war). 500 000 members. In 2013, it collected 15,9 % of the votes on a national scale.

**Solidaires** – (Solidarian United Democratic), founded in 1988. 110 000 members. In 2013, it collected 3,47 % of the votes on a national scale.

**FSU** – Unitarian Trade Union Federation (mainly rooted in the public sector). 165 000 members

**UNEF** – Student National Union of France, majority student in the University, but regroups only 19 000 members over 2,39 million university students...

**Fidl** – High School Independent and Democratic Federation, founded in 1987.

**UNL**- High School National Union founded in 1994 (both were created by different wings of the SP so that « extremist » groups wouldn't get too influential in the high schools, and at the same time they have a role in the internal equilibrium between the different tendencies of the SP). 7 000 members over 2 million high school students...

**UEC** –Communist Student Union founded in 1938 (it had almost disappeared but has recovered a bit during the movement)

**Front de gauche** (Left Front) : a front founded in 2008 between the Parti Communiste Français (French CP, 138 000 members), Parti de Gauche (Left Party, a split of the SP in 2009 with 9 000 members), Ensemble ! (Together, 2 500 members, regrouping former CP, ecologist, and Trotskyist militants), PCOF (Parti Communiste des Ouvriers de France, Workers Communist Party of France, maoist grouplet born in 1979), etc. The Left Front has for the moment been non existent because of the differences between its two major components (CP and Left Party)

**Mili** – Independent inter-struggles Movement, small radical youth movement regrouping high school and university students as well as precarious workers

**DAL** (Right to Housing), a organization created in 1990 and which is specialized in squats and street occupations

**LDH** (Human Rights League), created in 1898. 9 300 members.

**Gisti** – Migrant Workers Information and Support Group, created in 1972, around 200 members employs 7 persons and makes an invaluable legal work.

**COP 21** : 21st world conference about climate .

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