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# France’s Strikes Show the Unions Are Alive

By

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On the eve of the financial crisis, Nicolas Sarkozy boasted that “when there is a strike, nobody even notices anymore.” But as France mounts its longest strike in decades, organized labor is once again showing its power — and its limits.




French fireman and members of the CGT union march through the streets of Paris chanting against President Macron as thousands take to the streets in support of the national strike on a crucial day between the government and the unions over pension reforms on December 17, 2019 in Paris, France. Kiran Ridley / Getty

On November 17, 2018, France saw the birth of a movement unprecedented since May 1968, as hundreds of thousands of people mobilized against the fuel-tax hike announced by Emmanuel Macron’s government. While France has historically been a country of protest, this mobilization appeared as something novel, unusual in both its sociological composition and its means of action. The protestors donning their yellow vests — the famous *gilets jaunes*, which all motorists have to keep in their cars — came from sections of the population rarely mobilized in social movements. They ranged from poor workers to women from working-class households and rural youngsters.

There was a paradox, here. Although the gilets jaunes centrally focused on material concerns — at first glance similar to those raised by trade unions — they were distrustful of traditional labor movement organizations, or even repudiated them outright. Despite lukewarm efforts to establish closer ties, a month after the first protests, and the personal involvement of many individual union activists, the hoped-for convergence never really took place. Today, the gilets jaunes continue to stage fresh "*actes*" (days of action). But their roundabout occupations have been cleared and their protests each Saturday now rally only a few hundreds of demonstrators here and there across France.

For some, the gilets jaunes movement provided further cause to highlight the weakening and isolation of France's trade unions. In winning almost €10 billion in indirect wage rises as concessions from Macron's government, the gilets jaunes made gains that the union confederations have not been capable of for some thirty years. These latter's sense of humiliation was all the more palpable because it came at the end of a decade of defeats for their own mobilizations. Indeed, the unions' strategies have invariably seemed ineffective, faced with the neoliberal agenda enforced by a series of different governments, of both Left and Right. In 2008, right-wing president Nicolas Sarkozy could gleefully claim that "when there is a strike in France, nobody even notices anymore."

Yet today, France certainly is taking notice. For since December 5, 2019 the country has been gripped by strikes against a planned reform of the pensions system — and it's the longest wave of continuous strikes in contemporary French history. Launched by the main unions, with the CGT confederation in the lead, this movement is already historic for its level of support, its composition and its duration. While this strike has all the classic characteristics of a French social mobilization, it is also taking place in a context of social crisis. And it is drawing in a variety of new actors — even ones emerging from the gilets jaunes movement itself.

# Pensions Reform

The pensions system workers are fighting to defend is deep-rooted indeed. The current social-insurance-based system was founded in the aftermath of World War II by Ambroise Croizat, a Communist minister and former Resistance militant who also established the country's social-security system.

For seventy years, pensions have operated on the principle of intergenerational solidarity, as active workers finance payouts to their elders. Some groups of workers benefit from "special regimes" allowing them to retire early, on account of the more difficult conditions in which they work — from rail workers to sewage-facility operatives and opera dancers.

The rise in the French population's life expectancy has, however, offered various governments cause to transform this system. Since the early 1990s several measures have been introduced to extend the period over which workers make contributions. Yet they have also faced resistance.

In 1995, the announcement that the "special regimes" would be abolished set the country ablaze: for three weeks, strikes in the public administration and transport as well as mass mobilizations (involving two million people, according to the CGT union) brought France to a standstill. This reform was ultimately abandoned.

Over the 2000s, other plans were implemented, even in the teeth of major opposition. Yet these measures only concerned technical issues — particularly concerning the period over which workers had to make contributions — and not the principles of the pension system as such.

This is changing with the plan now promoted by Prime Minister Édouard Philippe, largely inspired by the active lobbying of international financial actors and aimed at radically transforming the way the system operates. Workers in all sectors will now have to pay in for the same period, and their pension calculation will now be based on their whole working life, including periods of unemployment (as opposed to the current calculation, based on their twenty-five best-paid years, in the private sector, or their final six months, in the public sector). And they will have to continue working till at least sixty-four years of age in order to receive a full pension.

In July 2019, following the first announcements on this bill by the High Commissioner for Pensions Jean-Paul Delevoye — forced to resign on December 16 after he was exposed for conflicts of interest regarding his ties to insurance firms — a first strike day was organized on September 13 on Paris's public-transport network. Ten of the metro's twelve driver-dependent lines were shut down.

# Joining the Strike

Despite this warning, the government ploughed on with its plans. The main union confederations decided to call for a "renewable" national strike — a continuous strike mandate that can be used over time, without all the strike dates being declared in advance.

The exception was the CFDT — France's single largest union confederation. Since the 1980s, it has taken a sharply reformist turn, defending "social dialogue" as its dominant form of engagement with both companies and the state and rarely calling strikes. It has signed up to controversial legislation in the past, provoking deep internal crises and the departure of thousands of members (as in 1995, for example).

The CFDT has for years defended a "universal" system as proposed by the government, though disagrees on some details of Macron's plan, regarding workers with tougher working conditions and the "pivot age" for the payment of a full pensions. The confederation has joined in only one day of mobilization, and not the inter-union call for action.

The first strike day on December 5 nonetheless saw a powerful strike mobilization. It included the unions covering the RATP (Paris bus and metro), the SNCF (national rail), state schools, Air France, air traffic controllers, electricians and gas fitters, oil refineries, justice system, and the police — but also private-sector workers and professionals such as lawyers. Ninety percent of trains were cancelled and eleven metro lines shut, while 70 percent of school staff also struck.

Added to this were mass demonstrations: on the days of action on December 5 and 17, between 615,000 and 1.8 million people demonstrated, including in many small and middle-sized towns. This, even in a context where recent police violence had discouraged many potential participants from joining the marches.

Even into the second week of January, the strike is still ongoing. Doubtless, one month on the mobilization has dimmed, given the costs that a long-term strike can bring. But it remains at a high level — almost half of all rail workers were on strike on December 31 and metro lines faced heavy disruption.

It should be pointed out, here, that the "renewal" of the strike mainly concerns the Paris transport system: while other sectors are affected by the strikes — such as schools, for example — the follow-up to the strike has proven much more uncertain and mainly concerns the days when demonstrations are also called. In the private sector, strikes are rarer and are mainly concentrated in the very largest companies.

Most importantly, despite the considerable media offensive and the bother it is causing for millions of workers, the strikes continue to enjoy unfailing public support. Since the outset, politicians and media have tried to pass off the strike as a corporatist movement, while also making concessions to many individual groups (policemen, air traffic controllers, firemen, care assistants, opera dancers, etc.).

If public opinion seems to favor abolishing the special regimes, the government is simply unable to explain how come the reforms are meant to benefit benefits the rest of the population. One month since it began, 63 percent of the population still back the movement and 75 percent want the pensions reform plan to be partly or fully abandoned.

# Strike Culture?

In one of the countries in Europe with the most conflict-ridden labor relations, perhaps the French have just got used to strikes troubling their everyday lives? Is what anti-strike pundits name a "strike culture" enrolling the service users, too — even as media insist on presenting them as being "taken hostage" by the strikers?

Of course, not everyone participates in strikes equally. Since the late 1970s, with the gradual extinction of the so-called "workers' fortresses" like Renault's Billancourt auto plant, strikes have above all been a force in public-sector workplaces. In a context in which employment conditions have been made more precarious and the economy tertiarized, French workers mobilize little — and the smaller the company they work for, the less prone they are to strike.

Today, indeed, only 8 percent of private-sector French workers are unionized; according to sociologist Jean-Michel Denis, the number of strike days in the private sector fell from over 3 million in the 1970s to between 250,000 and 500,000 in the 1990s and 2000s. Strike actions have also lost their momentum: stoppages of less than two days are increasing while those of more than two days are decreasing. Employees increasingly favor shorter or more indirect forms of struggle, such as walkouts, petitions, slowdowns, or work-to-rule.

Yet while strike activity has become marginal to labor conflicts as a whole, workers remain attached to this form of collective action and, more broadly, to the trade unionists who organize them. It's also worth noting that public opinion today is similar to what it was during the last great conflict that brought France to a standstill — the strike movement in 1995, which forced planned pensions reforms to be scrapped.

Back then, there was much talk of "strike by proxy" — a strike by certain workers supported by other, non-striking workers who are themselves less able to stop work. In the current dispute, this action by proxy seems to have assumed wider proportions, as social media–fueled online strike funds reach unprecedented sums. The biggest has so far collected over €2 million in a month.

This practice has sparked some controversy — especially insofar as it serves as a means of "easing the consciences" of some workers who donate money but might themselves have participated more directly in the conflict. But it nonetheless bears witness to how multiple different grievances have cohered around the pensions question.

# Point of Convergence

Even if the "reform" plan does not manage to put all pensions on the same footing, it is serving as a point of convergence for the grievances which various groups of workers have expressed in recent months.

One leading example are the emergency-room workers, who have been waging strongly supported strikes since mid-March 2019. Their actions have been backed, rarely enough, by both a cross-service collective and various strata of the hospital hierarchy.

There have also been two major school disputes in recent months: after the rejection of a new university-access plan penalizing the least-resourced school students, secondary-school teachers fought a very tough battle — refusing to mark exam papers — in opposition to a new teaching system which would have broken up the common standards for the baccalauréat (high-school leaving exam) across France.

More recently, France's schools were traumatized by the workplace suicide of a primary school headteacher. In a lucid letter, she justified her action by emphasizing how she had been worn down by the explosion in her number of tasks and the school's lack of resources.

These conflicts seem like the expression of a wider social crisis, characterized by a spectacular rise in poverty in France. In this context, it is no surprise that a reform affecting wage-earners as a whole would produce widespread solidarity with the strikers, whether in terms of public opinion or on the picket lines themselves. Indeed, there are many cases of teachers, hospital staff, and students joining the dawn blockades at bus garages. Faced with this generalized mobilization, the gilets jaunes themselves rapidly joined in. But what exactly allowed them to join together with organized labor?

# In Search of New Energy?

With this strike, France's unions have achieved one success already. For in launching a popular, cross-sectoral strike movement with widespread support, the confederations — especially the CGT and Sud — have clearly shown that this form of social struggle remains relevant in France.

This does not alone reverse the powerful tendencies toward crisis in the unions. It is, however, a major fly in the ointment for prophesies condemning them to an early death — and also

questions the government's disdainful approach, denying the unions' "partnership" role in workplace and social regulation through the 2017 labor code reform.

But does this sign of the unions' relevance show that they have now become part of a common mobilizing space — the broader movements created outside of union ranks, notably by the gilets jaunes but also by the alter-globalization movement, environmental activists, or community organizations?

The answer to this question remains far from clear. While part of the gilets jaunes did publicly call on supporters to join the unions' action, the "convergence" between the different dynamics of mobilization and struggle does not seem to be a priority for the unions.

On November 3, 2019, gilets jaunes from across France meeting in an "assembly of assemblies" passed a resolution calling for participation in the December 5 cross-sectoral strike. This appeal was not entirely surprising: over the last year, many gilets jaunes have adopted trade-union slogans, from wage rises to anti-privatization stances. Indeed, they have also faced workplace repression by bosses threatening to fire them from their jobs because of their support for the movement.

But if CGT general secretary Philippe Martinez considered this appeal "good news," this did not lead to any real expression of interest in a dialogue between the unions and the gilets jaunes. Closer ties were established at the local level, notably in middle-sized towns, on the December 28 day of action. But there does not seem to be any fundamental shift at the national level. Two complementary factors may go some way to explaining this.

At one level, the gilets jaunes movement has fragmented into multiple activist forces. Some have ventured into a "communalist" project of libertarian inspiration, driven by the group in the town of Commercy. Others have announced the creation of a "citizens' lobby" coordinating the local struggles waged by independent citizens' collectives. Still others are keeping up the coordination framework known as the "assembly of assemblies," continuing more tried-and-tested forms of engagement (demonstrations, roundabout occupations).

Many of them have also stopped wearing their yellow vests, even though they are participating in the current mobilization. It is thus unsurprising that the coalitions between unions and gilets jaunes are more visible and coherent in some towns than others. After all, the movement that started in November 2018 has itself fragmented, both politically and in territorial terms.

At another level, the union confederations still seem ill at ease with the widened range of causes and groups that have mobilized in the struggle. If the unions happily call on others to join them on the big days of action, they remain divided (not least given the CFDT's failure to get stuck in) and in general they are little active in bringing different struggles together. The confederations do not themselves finance strike funds, do not especially invite their own activists to get involved in other battles, and stick to the demands that they have themselves defined.

The current period is thus rich in questions. If, after more than a month of conflict over pensions, the movement seems to be slowing, there are also other signs of renewed mobilization, with oil refinery workers and professionals like lawyers announcing that they

will join the movement. Two big demonstrations called for January 9 and 11 should again rally large numbers.

At a time when syndicalist aspirations for a general strike are again on the rise, France's different social mobilizations seem to be "coexisting" more than truly federating together. Yet they are confronting one same authoritarian neoliberal force — a government unwilling to make any social concessions. Faced with this common offensive, we can only hope that the unions will prove able to reinvent their own role.