France’s Popular Uprising: Revolution or Frozen Conflict?

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The people are angry with their government. Where? Just about everywhere. So what makes ongoing strikes in France so special? Nothing, perhaps, except a certain expectation based on history that French uprisings can produce important changes – or if not, can at least help clarify the issues in contemporary social conflicts.

The current ongoing social unrest in France appears to pit a majority of working people against President Emmanuel Macron. But since Macron is merely a technocratic tool ofglobal financial governance, the conflict is essentially an uprising against policies that put the avaricious demands of financial markets ahead of the needs of the people. This basic conflict is at the root of the weekly demonstrations of Yellow Vest protesters who have been demonstrating every Saturday for well over a year, despite brutal police repression. Now trade unionists, public sector workers and Yellow Vests demonstrate together, as partial work stoppages continue to perturb public transportation.

In the latest developments, teachers in Paris schools are joining the revolt. Even the prestigious prep school, the Lycée Louis le Grand, went on strike. This is significant because even a government that shows no qualms in smashing the heads of working class malcontents can hesitate before bashing the brains of the future elite.

However general the discontent, the direct cause for what has become the longest period of unrest in memory is a single issue: the government’s determination to overhaul the national social security pension system. This is just one aspect of Macron’s anti-social program, but no other aspect touches just about everybody’s lives as much as this one.

French retirement is financed in the same way as U.S. Social Security. Employees and employers pay a proportion of wages into a fund that pays current pensions, in the expectation that tomorrow’s workers will pay for the pensions of those working today.

The existing system is complex, with particular regimes for 42 different professions, but it works well enough. As things are, despite the growing gap between the ultra-rich and those of modest means, there is less dire poverty among the elderly in France than, for example, in Germany.

The Macron plan to unify and simplify the system by a universal point system claims to improve “equality”, but it is a downward, not an upward leveling. The general thrust of the reform is clearly to make people work longer for smaller pensions. Bit by bit, the input and output of the social security system are being squeezed. This would further reduce the percentage of GDP going into wages and pensions.

The calculated result: as people fear the prospect of a penniless old age, they will feel obliged to put their savings into private pension schemes.

International Solidarity

In a rare display of old-fashioned working-class international solidarity, Belgian trade unions have spoken out in strong support of French unions' opposition to Macron's reforms, even offering to contribute to a strike fund for French workers. Support by workers of one country for the struggle of workers in another country is what international solidarity used to mean. It is largely forgotten by the contemporary left, which tends to see it in terms of opening national borders. This perfectly reflects the aspirations of global capitalism.

The international solidarity of financial capital is structural.

Macron is an investment banker, whose campaign was financed and promoted by investment bankers, including foreign investors. These are the people who helped inspire his policies, which are all designed to strengthen the power of international finance and weaken the role of the State.

Their goal is to induce the State to surrender decision-making to the impersonal power of "the markets", whose mechanical criterion is profit rather than subjective political considerations of social welfare. This has been the trend throughout the West since the 1980s and is simply intensifying under the rule of Macron.

The European Union has become the principal watch dog of this transformation. Totally under the influence of unelected experts, every two years the EU Commission lays out "Broad Economic Policy Guidelines" – in French GOPÉ (*Grandes Orientations des Politiques Économiques),* to be followed by Member States. The May 2018 GOPÉ for France "recommended" (this is an order!) a set of "reforms", including "uniformization" of retirement schemes, ostensibly to improve "transparency", "equity", labor mobility and – last but definitely not least – "better control of public expenditures". In short, government budget cuts.

The Macron economic reform policy was essentially defined in Brussels.

But Wall Street is interested too. The team of experts assigned by Prime Minister Edouard Philippe to devise the administration's economic reforms includes Jean-François Cirelli, head of the French branch of Black Rock, the seven trillion-dollar New York-based investment manager. About two thirds of Black Rock's capital comes from pension funds all over the world.

Larry Fink, the American CEO of this monstrous heap of money, was a welcome visitor at the Elysée Palace in June 2017, shortly after Macron's election. Two weeks later, economics minister Bruno Le Maire was in New York consulting with Larry Fink. Then, in October 2017, Fink led a Wall Street delegation to Paris for a confidential meeting (leaked to *Le Canard Enchaîné*) with Macron and five top cabinet ministers to discuss how to make France especially attractive to foreign investment.

Larry Fink has an obvious interest in Macron's reforms. By gradually impoverishing social security, the new system is designed to spur a boom in private pension schemes, a field dominated by Black Rock. These schemes lack the guarantee of government social security.

Private pensions depend on stock market performance, and if there is a crash, there goes your retirement. Meanwhile, the money managers play with your savings, taking their cut whatever happens.

There is nothing conspiratorial about this. It is simply international finance at work. Macron and his cabinet ministers are eager to have Black Rock invest in France. For them, this is the way the world works.

The most cynical pretext for Macron's pension reform is that combining all the various professional regimes into a universal point system favors "equality" – even as it increases the growing gap between salaried people and the super-rich, who don't need pensions.

But professions *are* different. At Christmas, striking ballet dancers illustrated this fact by performing a portion of Swan Lake on the cold stones of the entrance to the Opera Garnier in Paris. They were calling public attention to the fact that they cannot be expected to keep working into their sixties, nor can other professions requiring extreme physical effort.

The variations in the current French pension system perform a social function. Some professions, such as teaching and nursing, are essential to society, but wages tend to be lower than in the private sector. These professions are able to renew themselves by ensuring job stability and the promise of comfortable retirement. Take away their "privileges" and recruiting competent teachers and nurses will be even harder than it is already. At present, medical personnel are threatening to resign *en masse*, because conditions in hospitals are becoming unbearable as a result of drastic cuts in budgets and personnel.

Is There an Alternative?

The real issue is a choice of systems: to be precise, economic globalization versus national sovereignty.

For historic reasons, most French people do not share the ardent faith of British and Americans in the benevolence of the invisible hand of the market. There is a national leaning toward a mixed economy, where the State plays a strong determining role. The French do not easily believe that privatization is better, least of all when they can see it doing worse.

Macron is an ardent devotee of the invisible hand. He seems to expect that by draining French savings into an international investment giant such as Black Rock, Black Rock will reciprocate by pumping investment into French technological and industrial progress.

Nothing could be less certain. In the West these days, there is lots of low interest credit, lots of debt, but investment is rarely creative. Money is used largely to buy what is already there – existing companies, mergers, stock trading (massive in the U.S.) and, for individuals, housing. Most foreign investment in France buys up things like vineyards or goes into safe infrastructure such as ports, airports and autoroutes. When General Electric bought out Alstom, it soon broke its promise to preserve jobs and began cutting back. It also is depriving France of control of an essential aspect of its national independence, its nuclear energy.

In short, foreign investment may weaken the nation in terms in crucial ways. In a mixed economy, profit-making assets such as autoroutes can increase the government's capacity to make up for periodic deficits in social security, among other things. With privatization, foreign shareholders must get their returns.

The United States, for all its ideological devotion to the invisible hand, actually has a strongly State-supported military industrial sector, dependent on Congressional appropriations, Pentagon contracts, favorable legislation and pressure on "allies" to buy U.S.-made weaponry. This is indeed a form of planned economy, one that fails utterly to meet social needs.

The rules of the European Union prohibit a Member State such as France from developing its own civil-oriented industrial policy, since everything must be open to unhindered international competition. Utilities, services and infrastructure must all be open to foreign owners. Foreign investors may feel no inhibition about taking their profits while allowing these public services to deteriorate.

The ongoing disruption of daily life seems to be forcing Macron's government to make minor concessions. But nothing can change the basic aims of this presidency.

At the same time, the arrogance and brutal repression of the Macron regime increase demands for radical political change. The Yellow Vest movement has largely adopted the demand developed by Etienne Chouard for a new Constitution empowering citizen-initiated referendums – in short, a peaceful democratic revolution.

But how to get there? Overthrowing a monarch is one thing, but overthrowing the power of international finance is another, especially in a nation bound by EU and NATO treaties. Personal animosity toward Macron tends to shelter the European Union from sharp criticism of its major responsibility.

A peaceful electoral revolution calls for popular leaders with a clear program. François Asselineau continues to spread his radical critique of the EU among the intelligentsia without his party, the *Union Populaire Républicaine,* gaining any significant electoral strength. Leftist leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon has the oratorical punch to lead a revolution, but his popularity seems to have suffered from attacks even harsher than those unleashed against Corbyn in Britain or Sanders in the USA. With Mélenchon weakened and no other strong personalities in sight, Marine Le Pen has established herself as Macron's main challenger in the 2022 presidential election, which risks presenting voters with the same choice they had in 2017.

Asselineau's analysis, Yellow Vest strategic mass, Mélenchon's oratory, Chouard's institutional reforms – these are elements that could theoretically combine (with others yet unknown) to produce a peaceful revolution. But combining political elements is hard chemistry, especially in individualistic France. Without some big surprises, France appears headed not for revolution but for a long frozen combat.

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