Rows Collection

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France’s hot December

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> December 1995 saw the biggest eruption of class struggle in France for a quarter of a century. Some 2 million public sector workers took strike action over a three and a half week period. The strikes reached a crescendo each week with one or two days of action, when demonstrations in both Paris and the provincial towns involving from 1 to 2 million people drew in not merely workers on all out industrial action, but many other groups from the public sector and substantial numbers of delegations from the private sector.

This was not a general strike, insofar as it was confined to key parts of the public sector. But it virtually paralysed communications in cities right across France. And it thrust the class struggle to the centre of political life. For a month newspapers, television and radio programmes were dominated

by discussion of ‘the social conflicts’. All this happened barely eight months after the celebration by the right wing parties of the victory of their candidate, Chirac, in the presidential election, coming on top of their massive 390 seat majority in parliament. Disillusionment with 14 years of Mitterrand as Socialist Party president had led many workers to break with their traditional allegiance to the left parties – with around a quarter voting for the fascist National Front – at the same time as union membership had suffered a very big fall.

The strikes and demonstrations inevitably evoked comparisons with two great previous upsurges of working class struggle in France – that of 1936, which led to the first introduction of paid holidays and the 40 hour week and the first spread of mass trade unionism in France, and that of 1968. But they also raise questions which go far beyond French politics. At the international level they have already helped put in question a central strategy of key sections of European capital, Economic and Monetary Union. They have also raised, right across Europe, the questions of how far ruling classes dare to go in their attempts to cut back on welfare provision. They have constituted a challenge to all those, everywhere, who want to pretend the class struggle is a thing of the past.

For these reasons, the question of the character of December’s strikes is central for socialists. Were they merely defensive or did they raise wider issues? Will they quickly be forgotten, or are they potentially a prelude to events of immense significance? And, if they are, what implications does this have for the political activity of socialists?

Causes

The immediate cause of the French strikes was prime minister Juppé’s ‘plan’ for the social security system – the

‘Sécu’. It involved a series of measures which hit all workers, but especially those in the public sector:

- An increase in the number of years public sector employers had to work before they were entitled to their retirement pensions from 37.5 to 40 – a measure already imposed on private sector workers in 1993;
- Increased hospital charges and restrictions on prescriptions;
- The freezing and taxing of family benefit paid to low income families with children and increased health insurance contributions for pensioners and the unemployed;
- A new tax of 0.5p in the pound, including on the lowest wages;
- Taking control of the health insurance system away from joint union-management bodies and putting it directly in the hands of the state, which would restrict payouts on a yearly basis.

Juppé boasted that this was the reform his predecessors had been afraid to carry through ‘for 30 years’.

Alongside the Juppé plan proper were other ‘reforms’, announced in the same few days. One was a ‘*contrat de plan*’ (draft agreement) providing for a radical rationalisation of the French railway system, with a widespread cutting of services and closing of stations and lines, similar in many respects to the Beeching Plan implemented in Britain in the 1960s. Another raised the prospect of a partial privatisation of the telephone service – and, by implication, other public sector industries. A

third proposed an overhauling of the tax system to increase the burden on wage earners while reducing that on top incomes.

The immediate motive behind these measures – as well as for a public sector wage freeze announced a month earlier – was to cut back the French state's budgetary deficit, with the aim of reducing it to the 3 percent 1999 Maastricht criteria for European Economic and Monetary Union. This led some people to see Maastricht as the only factor behind Juppé's move. Thus the French Communist Party leader denounced President Chirac's call to clamp down on the deficit as a 'lining up with Chancellor Kohl' of Germany and a 'raising of the white flag' in the face of the financial markets which 'raised decisive questions for France and its sovereignty'. [1]

The pressure for Economic and Monetary Union clearly played a role in the timing of Juppé's measures. He belongs to the wing of the French ruling class which sees such a union, involving French, German, Belgian and Dutch capitalisms, as central to building up the position of the French ruling class internationally. But, interestingly, much of the pressure for the cutbacks in the deficit comes from rival groups inside the ruling class and the conservative parties, who are resistant to Economic and Monetary Union. For them, the issue of the budget deficit is not an issue which arises out of one or other foreign policy strategy, but rather from the pressing needs of French capitalism regardless of the strategy it pursues.

Large budget deficits have been a characteristic feature of almost all capitalist economies in the crises of the last two decades. As the **Financial Times** has put it:

> The US has one. The Europeans have one, and now even Japan has one. What do they all have? A serious fiscal problem. This is the theme of the decade, one that will shape the rhythm of financial life and form the cacophonic background sound to political debate in almost every industrial country. [2]

The deficits are a product of the wider crisis of the system. Growth rates substantially lower than those of the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s mean that government revenues do not rise fast enough to meet levels of spending, even if these rise more slowly than in the past. Indeed, such revenues can stagnate, or even fall, as governments slash taxation on profits to compensate big business for the decline in long term profit rates and reduce taxation on higher range incomes. As the **Financial Times** notes:

> The overall ratio of government spending to GNP in industrial countries stabilised in the early 1980s. It did so, however, at levels that individual governments were unable, or unwilling, to cover by taxation ... The resulting fiscal deficits ...increased the ratio of gross public debt to GNP from 41 percent in 1980 to 72 percent in 1995. Unfunded pension promises ensure that there is worse to come almost everywhere. [3]

The result is what is sometimes called 'the first world debt crisis' – the fear that, at some point, government debt for one or other major industrial country will reach a level which the international money markets are no longer prepared to finance, resulting in enormous domestic instability and 'a major shock to the world's financial system'. [4] The result is that all the great industrial powers are under pressure to deal with the deficits, but do not know how to do so:

> Governments will be punished if they inflate their way out of their quandary – they will not be permitted to tax their way out – and their economies will probably not grow out of it either. What is left is just to whittle away unceasingly at the promises made in an earlier, happier era. [5]

> The situation is particularly serious for the European capitalist states, whether or not they implement the Maastricht proposals. In the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s they were all able to enjoy high rates of profits and rapidly growing economies while making substantial concessions to workers over wages, hours of work and welfare legislation – either as a response to high levels of industrial struggle (Belgium 1960-1961, France 1968, Italy 1969-1975) or in order to pre-empt any such struggles disrupting social stability (Scandinavia under a succession of Social Democrat governments, West Germany under both Christian Democrat and Social Democrat governments).

In the 1980s and early 1990s they have attempted to cut back on certain of these concessions, with a widespread 'rationalisation' of private industry leading to growing unemployment, increases in taxation at the expense of workers (under the Mitterrand governments in France and with the 'unity tax' imposed by Kohl in Germany), attempts to keep wage increases below that of the cost of living (the dismantling of the scale mobile in Italy), direct attacks on welfare provision (under both Social Democrat and right wing governments in Scandinavia, the pension reform in Italy). But this has still left the European capitalisms at a disadvantage when it comes to competition with Japanese and American capitalisms. Its productivity levels in industry are lower than in either Japan or the US, the real wages it pays are higher than in the US (although not Japan), and its employees work far fewer hours:

Average hours worked [6]
(per full time employee per year 1994)

Japan	1,964

US	1,994
Canada	1,898
Britain	1,826
Italy	1,803
Sweden	1,620
Holland	1,615
France	1,607
Denmark	1,581
Belgium	1,581
West Germany	1,527

‘Today a German works three months each year less than a Japanese and 13 weeks less than an American’. [7] Nor is that all. The average number of hours worked per year has been rising in the US, so that the average worker now works three weeks a year longer than in 1980, while average French and German employees work, respectively, two weeks and three weeks less than in 1980. No wonder spokespeople for sections of European capitalism increasingly complain about ‘Eurosclerosis’, saying that they are paying too great a price for the social component of the so called ‘social market’ economy, with Chancellor Kohl insisting West Germany must ‘adapt to profound changes in its way of life with longer working hours’.

Capitalists right across Europe are putting on pressure for ‘more flexible’ working practices, a longer working year, longer

qualification periods for pensions and a lower level of payments, a ‘rationalisation’ of health provision and increased indirect taxation. All are pushing ‘anti-inflationary’ and deregulatory policies designed to prevent firms giving in to pressure from workers for wage increases to maintain living standards. Everywhere the trend is for them to adopt the language of ‘neo-liberalism’ – of a Thatcherite attitude to welfare and public services. The Juppé plan fitted perfectly with this approach.

Juppé’s tactics

> Juppé’s strategy, then, was at one with those of the other sections of European capitalism, whether pro or anti-Maastricht. But there were peculiarities to his tactics, resulting from the political situation.

First there was the sudden, unprepared way in which he introduced the plan. During the 14 years of the Mitterrand presidency, there was a long, drip drip series of attacks on the conditions and benefits of French workers. Two attempts to speed up these attacks, during periods with Mitterrand as president and a right winger as prime minister, led to a sudden rise of sharp struggles, unpopularity for the government and a quick return to the long drawn out approach. This is what happened late in 1986 when premier Chirac retreated in the face of a series of huge student protests and a very effective rail strike, leading to a loss of momentum for his government and electoral victories for the Socialist Party a couple of years later. It happened again in 1993-1994 when, despite an enormous parliamentary majority, conservative premier Balladur had to retreat in the face of huge protests over his attempts to cut the minimum wage for young workers and a very militant strike at Air France. Chirac himself seemed to learn the lesson of these experiences when campaigning for president in the spring of

1995: he stole the election from his right wing rival, Balladur, with populist promises to tackle unemployment, to keep the welfare system intact and to raise wages. This stance won Chirac the votes of many workers who were disillusioned by the experience of the Socialist Party in office, and even gained him a near endorsement from Blondel, the leader of France's third most important union federation, Force Ouvrière.

Once the conservative majority was entrenched, with Chirac replacing Mitterrand as president and Juppé taking over the premiership, there was growing pressure from business interests to forget such talk. At first Juppé seemed to resist these pressures and sacked a key minister who pushed for harder action. But this created unease in business circles who began to feel they had a government in no fit state to push through their policies. The franc came under pressure on international money markets, Juppé was subject to repeated attacks from within the conservative parliamentary majority, and opinion poll support for both Juppé and Chirac among the small business section of the population dropped by about half. [8]

Juppé and Chirac tried, desperately, to ease the big business and political pressures on them. Juppé announced a public sector wage freeze in October, even though this led to a highly successful one day protest strike by public sector unions. Chirac made a television address in which he admitted he had 'underestimated the seriousness of the problem' of the budget deficit. [9] But still big business and the right wing parliamentarians were uneasy until, a fortnight later, he suddenly presented his 'reform' package to the National Assembly.

The attitude of big business and the parliamentary right towards the government was transformed. Suddenly it seemed to have a powerful sense of direction. This was 'the second birth of the prime minister', **Le Monde** reported.

> For the first time in six months Alain Juppé has refound his breath. In one go he has enlarged his room for manoeuvre ... He has carried through a political salvage operation. [10]

> 'Financial markets saluted the plan' [11], it was reported. It even seemed he would get support from sections of the socialist opposition. 'Juppé has hit home', admitted the one time Socialist Party prime minister, Michel Rocard, while his colleague, the former health minister, was ready 'to support the government'. [12]

Yet there was more panic than forethought to Juppé's 'coup'. In his desire to win such plaudits he failed to learn the lessons of the most successful government attacks on workers' conditions in Europe over the last two decades. They have always depended on carefully thought out strategies designed to divide workers one against another. The key to Thatcher's success in her first two terms in office was the 'Ridley plan' – a detailed strategy, drawn up while the Tories were still in opposition in the late 1970s, for taking on strong groups of workers one at a time, leaving others temporarily untouched. So when, for instance, in 1981 she faced growing unofficial strikes against pit closures, she retreated, not taking on the miners until another three years of building up coal stocks and preparing the power stations had passed. And during the course of the great miners' strike she had no hesitation in conceding wage increases to other groups like rail and postal workers so as to isolate the miners, or in holding back her appointee as coal industry boss, MacGregor, when he wanted drastic action which might lead to other sections of workers coming out in support of the miners. It was not until her third term of office that she made the fatal mistake of pushing through a measure – the poll tax – that hit virtually all workers simultaneously.

By contrast, Juppé opted for measures which hit directly at the pension rights of all groups of public sector employees, reduced health care for everyone and increase taxes – and did so at the

same time as pushing a scheme which meant a massive attack on rail workers' jobs. It was as if he was trying to do in a few weeks what it had taken Britain's Tories a decade to achieve – and this only six months after promising the opposite in an election.

He also made one other very serious error. He upset what had, historically, been the big trade union federation most amenable to the schemes of French capitalism, Force Ouvrière. The union arose from a split engineered in the Communist-led CGT union at the onset of the Cold War in 1948-1949, and in many sections of the economy FO survived because of support from the government and employers. This enabled it to be the dominant union among traditionally non-militant groups of civil servants. It also led to it being granted key positions of influence in the joint employer-union committees that administered the 300 billion franc welfare insurance system. As an article in **Le Monde** has told, the French employers' federation, the CNPF, had had an alliance 'which allowed the FO to direct the National Office of Sickness Insurance for 28 years'.

As a result of the friendly attitude shown to it by employers and the government for most of the last 48 years the FO leadership had tended to stand aside from protests organised by the other big union federations, the CGT and the CFDT, helping to ensure most strikes were minority strikes of one union or the other.

FO's secretary general, Marc Blondel – elected to office with the support of the pro-Chiracians in the unions (as well as a group of would be Trotskyists [13]) – was certainly not intent on breaking this alliance. He had taken a benevolent attitude to Chirac in the presidential elections in the spring, held two or three private meetings with him in the autumn and said in public that he had 'the ear of Chirac'. At the beginning of November he signed an agreement with the employers' federation over 'annualisation of working hours' – a measure that he had previously denounced. [14] And he sought to silence speculation about government threats to the social security system by

boasting, after a meeting with the labour minister Jacques Barrot on 11 November, that ‘the social security system is safe’. [15]

Yet part of Juppé’s coup was to pull the rug from under this traditionally close ally in the union bureaucracy. His ‘reforms’ involved not merely an attack on the welfare benefits of FO’s members, but also threatened the domination by the bureaucracy of that union over the health insurance adminstration – and the well paid appointments that went with it. Hardly surprisingly, the poodle turned bitterly on its master. ‘This is the end of the social security system, the biggest act of rape in the history of the republic,’ declared Blondel. ‘The social security system is the property of the workers and the government is stealing it.’ [16] He was soon calling for protests, including strikes, against his former friends in government.

There was just one consolation for Juppé. The leader of the second most important union federation, the CFDT [17], Nicole Notat who has been very close to the Socialist Party leadership, welcomed his ‘reform’, although saying certain apsects of it needed negotiation. A substantial minority of unions affiliated to the FO and some of the smaller union federations took a similar attitude. This led Juppé to hope that the union protests would never be more than tokens and his proposals would survive unscathed.

The reaction

He was soon proved wrong. The first day of protests on Friday 24 November involved more than half a million people – more than in the protest against the public sector wage freeze on 10 October – despite the fact that it was

not formally endorsed by the Force Ouvrière leadership.

As **Le Monde** told, ‘the country was virtually paralysed’.

What was to have been a day of protest against the increase in the number of years necessary to qualify for pensions in the public sector turned into a gigantic cry of discontent against the prime minister and his plan for social security … Rarely has a demonstration in Paris been more impressive. Behind the civil servants and local government employees there was a river of workers from the engineering and chemical industries, from textiles and the print. They came from Thomson, from Alcatel, Sextant Aviation, Dassault, Renault, Peugeot, RVI or Ford. The teachers were also there in large numbers … Although Marc Blondel of the FO had boycotted the day, a number of FO militants were present behind a coffin symbolising ‘the death sentence for pensions’.

And in the provinces the demonstrations were relatively larger even than in Paris. In Marseilles, for instance, ‘not since 1968 had such a demonstration taken place’. Tens of thousands more marched in a score of cities, from Toulouse and Lyons in the south to Lille in the north. [18] And the anger was not merely against the government, but also against any union leader who tried to justify its actions. Nicole Notat of the CFDT was forced to leave the demonstration in Paris after being subjected to violent abuse by her own members. [19]

Most significantly it soon became clear that the protests were not going to be like most days of action and ‘general strikes’ called by the unions over the last quarter of a century – one day affairs designed merely to force governments and employers to pay heed to the union bureaucrats. Not only was the railway network and public transport in the Paris region paralysed for the day, but general assemblies of workers in the big rail depots decided to continue their action, meeting each morning to decide to stay out longer. By Monday the railway network was virtually at a standstill and only 40 percent of metro trains and buses

were running in Paris. On top of this, agitation in the colleges, which had begun in Rouen more than a month before, began to increase with a day of demonstrations on the Wednesday 22 November leading to a growing wave of student strikes across the country.

The ground was ready for an even more powerful day of protests the following Tuesday, 28 November. And this time, the Force Ouvrière leadership decided their interests lay in making the protest as large as possible. As **Le Monde** put it the evening before, 'for the first time since the split of 1947, the general secretaries of the CGT and the FO will march side by side in Paris.' Against the background of another massive wave of demonstrations across the country, Paris experienced 'one of its most spectacular traffic jams.' [20]

Yet, even now, the government could hope that the strike movement would subside. The talk among many union leaders was not of spreading strike action but of putting the emphasis on a national demonstration to be called in three weeks time, on Sunday 17 December. Juppé had said in a newspaper interview in mid-November, that he would 'be forced to resign if 2 million people demonstrated' against him, and this seemed to some 'moderate' leaders an easier way to fight than launching a wider strike movement. 'You cannot make the strike of the century every month,' said Jean Paul Roux of the independent union UNSA, 'many civil servants cannot lose two days of wages at six week intervals in the run up to Christmas'. [21] The leaders of FO and the CGT had shaken hands but it was by no means clear that they would collaborate on further strikes. What is more, a substantial chunk of the Socialist Party was still offering more direct help to Juppé. More than a hundred 'experts' and 'intellectuals' associated with the party signed a statement of support for the principles of 'reform in social security', saluting Nicole Notat for her 'courage and independent spirit' in opposing the protests. [22] And while the party's recently chosen leadership under Jospin claimed they were in 'solidarity' with

the protests, they refused to take part in them, claiming they would not 'play with fire'.

But the strikes of the railway and transport workers were increasingly solid and began to spread to the postal sorting offices, which were usually located near the railway stations. A report in **Le Monde** told what happened in Paris:

> Tuesday evening, some postal workers brought together some striking railway workers they had met on the demonstration of that day. At 8pm delegates from the CGT and the [independent union] SUD called ,'To throw the Juppé plan into the dustbin of history'. The railway workers have called for solidarity. 'The railway and the Parisian transport workers are not enough. There is need for the post and the electricity and gas workers. We can win, but it needs everybody. We are going to paralyse the economy.'
>
> Within quarter of an hour the strike was voted for. The group went out and visited the different offices. There was an improvised general assembly. The same speakers took up the same arguments. 'Already ten centres in the provinces are on strike. It is necessary to do the same everywhere.' So it was, they voted to strike and then, led by railway workers, walked along the rail track to the Austerlitz sorting office on the other side of the Seine which they also pulled out. [23]

Such scenes seem to have been repeated in many other places. Thus in the sorting office at Sotteville near Rouen:

> A hundred people assembled in a semicircle under the sorting office's neon lights. Three speakers represented the two main unions – the CGT, from which a circular told of the state of the movement in the post throughout France, and SUD, whose leaflet told, 'The rail workers and the students are the example we must follow. We must not let such a chance go'. According to everybody, the strike had to extend through all of France in all sectors. You only needed to have had a visit from the Sotteville railway workers to grasp the power of the movement. 'Their general assembly,' explained a union activist, 'was a true meeting in a huge locomotive repair shop. There were a good thousand people there, solid, united, discussing with ardour, impatient to have a go and ready to

go all the way. It was extraordinary. It was such a pleasure to see.' The meeting decided to send delegations to all the big postal offices in the region, to the railway workers, to the nearby Renault factories. One activist told, 'It's necessary to mobilise, to have general assemblies everywhere, to convince the people at France Télécom to take action now rather than find themselves isolated when they face the threat of privatisation. That's how to construct a genuine national strike'. [24]

Another report from Rouen tells:

On Wednesday 29 November about 400 rail workers went to Renault-Cleon for the shift change at midday. At the main gate the mood was very dynamic. The CGT delegates at the works called on the workers to join the rail workers in struggle by stopping the next day. At the gates of the factory cordial discussions took place between the rail workers and the Cleon workers, but some recalled with bitterness that they had been isolated and let down by the union leaders during their strike in 1991.

> After the demonstration of Thursday 30 November which involved the student and workers, including 1,600 rail workers, morale improved somewhat.
>
> On Monday 4 December several hundred rail workers took part in meetings with workers at the gate or inside a number of firms: Ralston, Alsthom, CPAM, CHU, Grande Paroisse, etc. The visit to Sernam led to this centre going completely on strike. Following the example of the rail workers, 200 employees of Cheques Postaux visited the employees of CPAM who voted for the strike.
>
> The demonstration of Tuesday 5 December broke all records, with journalists talking of 20,000 demonstrators. About 3,000 rail workers were at the head of it along with 500 Cleon workers. In many private firms stoppages took place that Tuesday with considerable participation in the demonstration, especially from Legrand, Rhone Poulenc and Grand Paroisse factories. [25]

> A similar pattern was followed throughout much of the country, in large and small towns alike. [26] In Lyons rail workers went to the postal sorting offices and then the bus garages to get them out. [27] In Limoges, rail workers visited the social security office and the telecom workers before holding a joint meeting with striking electricity and gas workers. [28] In Bayonne the striking rail workers were joined by the electricity and gas workers on 28 November and the postal workers on the following day, and were soon meeting daily in front of the municipal hall to decide on actions for the day (such as cutting off electricity to the luxury hotels). [29]

By the end of November the railways, the Paris metro and buses, all the country's major sorting offices, and substantial numbers of telecom and electricity and gas workers were on strike, and were to stay out for the next three weeks. As the strike went on they were joined by growing numbers of teachers, until the majority were on strike. Even in sectors where management claimed only a minority were actually striking – as in the post, the telecom, electricity and gas – the strike was made effective by, for instance, the occupation of premises. In certain regions, electricity workers who were unable to close down much generating capacity, seized control of offices and put the mass of consumers onto the reduced night time tariffs during the day.

In other parts of the public sector a pattern emerged in which people would work nominally for part of the week, but then vote at general assemblies for a total stoppage on the twice a week days of action. On such days the core sectors on strike would be joined by much wider numbers of civil servants, dockers, airport workers, hospital workers and delegations from the private sector – even enjoying support from traffic police who refused to hand out parking tickets. On some of the days the newspapers

were shut down by strikes of the CGT in the print. Sit-ins in local government buildings, the blockading of the channel tunnel rail route, demonstrations across airport runways, occupations of motorway pay booths (with collections from motorists for strike funds) – all highly ‘illegal’ actions which the police did not dare resist – added to the effectiveness of the strikes.

No one knows exactly how many strikers there were at any point in time. The occupation and blocking of premises in the core striking sectors meant that neither the management nor the union knew for certain whether those not working were on strike or simply not able to get to work. The paralysis of the transport system and the huge traffic jams further complicated the picture. So too did fluctuating numbers on strike on ‘normal’ days and demonstration days. All that is certain is that the strikes did paralyse key parts of the country’s infrastructure and that as the days passed growing numbers of workers were involved in the strikes. And all the way through well over half the population expressed sympathy with the strikes in opinion poll surveys.

The strike was never a general strike, in that it never involved more than delegations on demonstrations from the great part of the private sector. But it did paralyse much of the economic life of the country and create a situation which the government could not resolve without making important concessions.

This was shown by what happened to the government’s own strike breaking plans. It announced it was going to break the transport strike in Paris by putting on a fleet of scab buses. In reality it could never provide transport for more than a small minority of commuters and the traffic jams meant that journeys which might have taken 40 minutes now took three or four hours. The ruling RPR party issued a call to its activists on Friday 1 December to form ‘transport users committees to organise a demonstration against the strike, probably next Thursday’. [30] Its model was supposed to be the half million strong demonstration De Gaulle’s supporters had been able to mobilise in the last week of May 1968. In fact, the most it could

achieve was a couple of hundred people marching in Paris and local RPR deputies were soon abandoning any attempt to get committees off the ground. Similarly, 'threats' by government deputies to 'resolve the crisis' through a referendum or general election came to nothing as it became clear the government would lose either – by-elections in December led to large swings to the left. In the end, Juppé had to abandon his talk of 'standing firm', give notice that he was prepared to negotiate with the unions, 'put on ice' the plan to rationalise the railway system, drop his insistence on increasing the number of years public sector employees had to work to earn their pensions, and announce a 'social summit' with the union leaders for 22 December.

Different sorts of mass strikes

Rosa Luxemburg's classic work **The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions**, which was based on the experience of the events of 1905 in the Russian empire (including her native Poland), told how a spontaneous strike movement can erupt, moving from economic to political and back to economic demands. She emphasised the spontaneity of the process, which escaped any attempt to control it by labour movement bureaucrats and which even revolutionary socialists could have problems keeping abreast of. She showed how what began as a movement in one sector could spread until it presented a general political challenge to the state and, in doing so, could raise the most despondent and unorganised sections of workers to begin to present their own economic and then political demands.

But not all great mass strikes of the last century have moved in the way described by Rosa Luxemburg. We have also had repeated experiences of what has been called 'the bureaucratic mass strike' – a strike movement carefully organised from above by trade union officialdom so as to assert its bargaining power with the employers and government and to maintain its influence over the mass of workers. Tony Cliff, for instance, described some 35 years ago how Belgian labour leaders organised strikes on these lines at the beginning of the century in the battle for the suffrage – and to gain access for themselves to the Belgian parliament. He tells how they nominated from above strike leaders in each industry and locality to make sure not only that strikes started as instructed, but were also brought to an end the moment the bureaucrats wanted them to. [31] Tony Cliff and Donny Gluckstein pointed out ten years ago how a great defensive struggle, the British General Strike of 1926, fell into very much the same pattern:

> It had very little in common with the sort of mass strike described by Rosa Luxemburg. From the very beginning the TUC leaders made it clear they intended to keep a tight grip on the strike. They took it upon themselves to decide who would stop work and who would not. [32]

> The ability of the union leadership to keep control in this way (aided by terrible mistakes made by the British Communist Party under the influence of the Stalinised Communist International) meant that, although the strikers showed enormous unity and solidarity, the return to work on TUC instructions nine days later resulted in a devastating defeat for the movement.

Such 'bureaucratic mass strikes' became a feature of the working class movement in a number of advanced industrial countries in the 1980s. Employers and governments were determined to take back from workers some of the things they had conceded in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Union leaders felt

they had no choice but to show governments they mattered as ‘negotiating partners’ and allow the anger among the workers they represented some expression. They did so by calling for widespread industrial action, but attempting to make sure they kept control over its tempo, its militancy and its duration. As I wrote nine years ago:

There have been a succession of big public sector strikes on this model in recent years in: Holland, Belgium, Sweden, Finland and Denmark. In each case a right wing social democrat trade union bureaucracy suddenly felt compelled to call for a short lived spell of industrial action from a working class movement that had been previously relatively passive. The weakness of traditions of struggle has usually allowed the union bureaucracies to keep control of these strikes. For a few days an industry or a country is virtually paralysed then the union leaders reach a deal, everything returns to normal and stability returns. [33]

But even in the 1980s, I noted, ‘there have been cases of bureaucratic strikes partially escaping the control of the union bureaucracy’. For instance, in Denmark in 1985 a million workers out of a population of five million voted at thousands of meetings to prolong a mass strike after the union leaders advised them to go back to work. They did return to work a couple of days later, but their action was enough to force the Schluter government to abandon its attempts to emulate what Thatcher had done in Britain. [34]

It is very important for socialists faced with mass strikes to be clear into which category they fall. A strike which spontaneously unleashes the militancy, combativity and growing class consciousness of the mass of workers opens up enormous prospects of both a challenge to existing society and the building of socialist organisation. By contrast, a mass strike which remains tightly in the hands of the trade union bureaucracy arouses enormous hopes among the mass of workers, only to dash them in way that can lead to years of demoralisation.

Most living struggles escape any watertight compartmentalisation. Trade union bureaucrats may initiate action from above, with the clear intention of keeping it under their own control and ending it on their own terms. But this does not mean they are always able to impose their own will on the mass of workers who respond to their call. Once workers move into action they begin to discover their own capacity to fight and to control things – and there is always at least the beginnings of a threat to the trade union bureaucracy in this. Indeed, this is one powerful reason why trade union leaders call off struggles just as the employers begin to fear the power displayed by the working class movement.

The unions, rank and file activism and the dynamic of the French strikes

> The French strikes began in a way very similar to the 'bureaucratic' mass strikes typical of the 1980s. The trade union bureaucracy pushed the struggle forward because it wanted to prove itself to be the essential 'mediator' between the government and the working class. All the unions opted for a return to work once the government had shown it was prepared to negotiate with them and had made concessions short of the complete repeal of the Juppé plan. And although many rank and file activists were unhappy about this, nowhere were they confident enough either in their own views or in their own strength to continue the struggle despite the bureaucracy.

But from a very early point on the movement began to break out of the usual bureaucratic confines. It displayed the spontaneous militancy, combativity and growing class

consciousness which Rosa Luxemburg emphasised. It did so because it gave expression to the enormous bitterness towards existing rulers, bosses and institutions that is characteristic of the popular mood in the 1990s right across the advanced countries. In a very real sense it was a product of those features that differentiate the 1990s from the 1980s.

Typically, in the 1980s, some sections of workers displayed enormous bitterness which exploded into very angry struggles – as with the steel workers, the miners and then the national newspaper workers in Britain. But other sections felt that, somehow, provided they made limited concessions to the employers, they would be protected from the worst aspects of the crisis – and, indeed, with the boom of the late 1980s even felt they might be able to benefit individually from ‘people’s capitalism’. By contrast, the effect of the recession of the early 1990s has been to destroy such illusions and to create a very widespread feeling that the system offers people little, even if there seems to be no alternative to it.

This has found expression in deep disillusionment with existing political systems and politicians, and in sudden swings of opinion. So in France, very large numbers of workers who had voted for the left in the two presidential elections of the 1980s voted for the right in the parliamentary elections of 1993. This did not stop them expressing support for the struggles against the new prime minister, Balladur, by Air France workers and by young people resisting a reduction in the minimum wage. Nor did it stop many who abstained or voted with the right wing parties in the first round of last spring’s presidential election (an exit poll suggests that manual workers [‘*ouvriers*’] gave only 42 percent of their votes to the parties of the left [35] and as many as 27 percent to the fascist Le Pen) swinging back behind the Socialist Party candidate, Jospin, who got an unexpected 47.4 percent in the second round.

Such bitterness and volatility meant that the moment serious action began in defence of working class interests, very large

numbers of people identified with it, seeing it as offering a solution to their own problems.

A second important feature of the French events was that although they came after a long period of defeats and retreats by organised workers – especially during the years in which the Socialist Party controlled both the presidency and the parliamentary majority and in which the union bureaucracy held struggles back in the hope of maintaining influence with ministers – this was interspersed with certain spectacular victories or near victories, like the 1986 students' and rail workers' actions and the 1993 Air France strikes.

Finally, the French union bureaucracy entered the struggle in a particularly fragmented condition, only able to exert a direct influence over workers insofar as it could persuade rank and file activists to follow its lead.

As we have seen, the French trade unions have been divided into rival federations since the beginning of the Cold War, nearly half a century ago. This has had great advantages for French capitalism. It has meant that militant strikes, even when successful, have rarely given birth to the sort of powerful shop floor organisation that existed, for instance, in Britain in the 1960s and early 1970s. The union federations all too often ended up putting more stress on poaching members and influence from each other than on fighting the employers. The result was that even after the general strike of 1968 union membership only grew a little, and then went into decline in the 1980s, with the CGT membership in 1994 only a third of the 1977 figure [36] and combined union membership less than 10 percent of the workforce.

The influence of the unions over the workforce is much greater than the figures for union membership alone suggest. France has long had a state organised system of works councils. Under this different unions compete in annual elections in each workplace to determine who will be paid part of the time to represent the

workers and run facilities such as factory canteens. And even if, say, the CGT only has 6 percent of the workers in a workplace as members, it might still win 60 percent of the places in such elections. Hence the paradox, inconceivable in Britain, that non-union members in a unionised workplace can show a high degree of support for the principles of trade unionism and even, on occasions, be the most militant when strikes break out. Hence also, however, an often ferocious level of competition between militants belonging to different unions as each tries to oust the other from works council positions. When it comes to such competitive situations, not only the FO and the CFDT, but also the CGT will disown militancy to win votes.

Historically the CGT has never hesitated to expel those who are too militant for the confederation's line. This was one of the factors that allowed the CFDT to pick up many people who regarded themselves as on 'the left' in 1968 and after. It has also, on occasions, allowed sections of FO to give themselves a left cover by accepting those who were too radical for the CGT. More recently, the CFDT has also expelled those it sees as too militant, leading to the creation of the SUD union by its expelled ex-postal service members.

The decline in union membership in the 1980s and 1990s has accentuated the fragmentation of the union structure still more, leading to fighting within as well as between union federations. Both the FO and the CFDT leaderships face internal opposition – in FO from those who believe it must not at any cost give up its old strategy of boosting its influence by doing favours for the employers, in the CFDT from those who believe it is losing influence because it has abandoned militancy for the policies of the right wing of the Socialist Party.

There are also less clear cut splits inside the CGT, to some extent reflecting divisions inside the Communist Party leadership on how to adapt to the situation since the collapse of the USSR and the failure of the Socialist Party governments (brought to power in the first place by the 'Union of the Left'

between the Socialist Party and the CP). In the case of the CGT, the central argument is how it can break out of its 'marginalisation' – of a situation where its weakness and the influence of rival federations means it has little influence over the behaviour of either the employers or the government. The arguments over this issue have forced it to abandon the monolithic rigidity that characterised it in the past, with the union's leader Viannet now admitting it made mistakes in 1968 – not, of course, by failing to follow a revolutionary path, but by cutting itself off from forces that could have built the union's membership and influence and instead, to some extent, driving those forces in the direction of the CFDT.

The announcement of the Juppé plan was both a challenge to and an opportunity for the fragmented union bureaucracies. Juppé was, in fact, saying that he did not take them seriously, yet the anger he was creating provided them with a chance to enormously increase their support among workers. They could only do so, however, if they encouraged their activists in the workplaces to agitate in a way that were bound to go well beyond the normal bureaucratic channels.

The challenge, as we have seen, was very serious for FO, with the majority of its members in the public sector and its privileged position in the social security administration. At the same time, when Nicole Notat of the CFDT came out in support of the Juppé plan, the FO leadership also saw an opportunity – that of detaching those CFDT members who were in the public sector away from Notat's union. Meanwhile, the CGT leadership saw a massive opportunity for itself. The anger produced by the Juppé plan among the mass of workers provided it with an opportunity to show how important it was as, historically, the union to which the most militant activists looked. Its mobilisations, it believed, could put the other union federations in the shade: something it showed clearly on Friday 24 November, when it turned what was meant by other unions as simply a protest over particular demands into a much more

general revolt against the Juppé plan – for instance, using coaches provided by Communist Party-run municipalities to bus very large numbers of people from the suburbs to the central Paris demonstration. And its opportunities were even greater when Blondel was forced to embrace the CGT leaders on 28 November. In every workplace, FO activists who for decades had been resistant to CGT mobilisations now had no argument against taking part in protests in which the CGT activists were the driving force.

The radicalisation of workers

> There is no doubt that a key role in getting the strikes off the ground was played by union activists from the CGT. Nor is there any doubt that these activists were encouraged to move in the first days of the strike by the union's full time officials. It was CGT militants in the railways who took the initiative in calling for general assemblies and strike votes, and then in arguing to pull out postal, telephone, electricity and gas workers. And they were not doing so just as individuals, but in accord with the desires of their union leaders. However, once the movement took off the CGT leaders began to lose direct control over events. At the general assemblies workers from all unions, and from none, expressed their views. And these views often became increasingly radical as the movement grew. [37]

The unions all refused to raise the demand for the resignation of the Juppé government, but when individuals started chanting the slogan on demonstrations, thousands of others would take it up. Placards would declare, '2 million and one' – meaning Juppé

should keep his promise to resign if the demonstrations were more than 2 million strong. Typically, nurses in Paris sang, 'Juppé we're going to kick your arse' [38], while in Clermont Ferrand the 15,000 to 20,000 workers who paraded for hours through the centre of the town chanted, 'Down with the Juppé plan, Juppé must resign'. [39]

Along with the radicalisation of the demands went a radicalisation in political attitudes – often from workers who would say they were 'nonpolitical'. A report about the central bus and tube workshop in Paris could tell:

> A red flag flies over the front wall. A young non-union worker put it there as a symbol for the workplaces occupied since 28 November. He said to himself, 'there, the Paris Commune, that's French enough'. The union delegate of the CGT, somewhat annoyed, rushed to surround it with tricolours.' [40]

One report of interviews with strikers says:

> They no longer believe in politics, in 'the left and the right'. They no longer believe in journalists either. 'They're like the politicians, distant from us, and their papers are not reality. They never let us speak on the TV.' And when the machinists talk about democracy in France, they say it is 'totalitarian', like in the RATP. It's a false consensus, they go through the form of having a dialogue, and after that the employers do what they want. [41]

A senior official of the FO metal workers' federation – which did not call for an all out strike – told journalists that he was worried about a social crisis which he judged to be 'very grave'.

> Wage earners no longer believe in the ballot box. The strike is the only way left to them to change things. [42]

The demand for a wider generalisation of the struggle even found expression at the Congress of the CGT which took place in the second week of the strike. In the past such congresses had always been sewn up in advance by

> the federation's leadership. But its central leadership was divided over the long term strategy to increase the union's influence, between 'traditionalists' and 'renovators'. That split allowed other voices, not falling into either camp, to get a hearing.

Already on Monday [the first day of the congress] some delegates protested at the general secretary's appeal for negotiations, demanding he insist on the immediate withdrawal of the Juppé plan and call for a general strike. This issue, which was not on the agenda of the congress, caused lively exchanges between delegates. Half the interventions called for the general strike, some saying that the absence of this slogan blurred and made ambiguous the position of the CGT. 'The general strike is the only way to make the government give in', a rail worker thought. 'Congress must show the determination of the CGT to go right to the end.'

The level of generalisation of these struggles is shown by the way in which workers from one industry went to pull out workers from other industries. It is shown too by the way workers intermingled with each other on demonstrations, without any concern for which union or which sector people were from. [43]

The symbols of the struggle were, everywhere, from France's revolutionary traditions, even though many of the strikers and demonstrators had clearly not voted for the left in last spring's elections and a substantial minority of workers had voted for the National Front. The strike was often strongest in towns and cities in the south of the country where the Front does particularly well electorally. In Toulon, where the Front runs the council, 25,000 demonstrated in support of the strike in a city of 100,000; in Marseilles, where the Front has long had a strong base, there were three demonstrations in less than a fortnight of 160,000 to 200,000 people in a city whose population is around 800,000. Everywhere there were red flags, and a marked feature

of all the demonstrations was the singing by thousands of people of the *Internationale* – something that has taken place so rarely in the last 25 years that most workers did not know the words!

Embryos of rank and file control

> The level of involvement of the mass of workers in the strikes was much greater than has usually been the case in French strikes. Even in the general strike of 1968, the usual pattern was for the minority of active union members to get the other workers out on strike, send them home, and then occupy the workplaces by themselves for the duration of the struggle. And even the occupying minority were often not very actively involved in the movement, playing cards or table tennis to pass the time, rather than debating and demonstrating. In contrast, the December strikes were characterised by a very high level of activity, with the union activists calling daily 'general assemblies' where members and non-members alike voted on whether to keep the strike going for another 24 hours and, in many cases, discussed what to do to draw new sectors of workers into the struggle.

This meant there was an enormous potential for the development of new forms of organisation from below, based upon workers' democracy rather than bureaucratic manoeuvring. Workers were on strike together, with some groups pulling others out and helping to sustain their struggle. It was only a small step further to turn general assemblies of one sector into joint general assemblies of the whole class in a locality, and to fuse individual strike committees into

coordinating committees for a whole town or a whole locality's workers.

This certainly began to happen in a number of cases. Thus a teacher from the 20th *arrondissement* of Paris tells how, after his school voted to strike:

> We went down to the local postal depot which was out on strike. There were about 100 of them having a meeting in the canteen. It was amazing, everyone was applauding us, just a little school! They proposed a local demonstration on Thursday morning, before the national march, to go around local workplaces. Everyone thought that was a great idea and it was decided straight away to contact other local strikers. Armed with leaflets we set off on a tour of local workplaces – the office of the Paris water company, where a delegation walked straight in while the rest chanted outside, a large residential nursing home, where a group of the home's workers comes to the door – nearly all low paid, women and black – the big Monoprix supermarket, into which about 20 striking teachers, postal workers, bus workers and school students marched straight.

The fruits of this kind of local contact and initiative were seen a few days later. Some 500 strikers from workplaces across the district met together to plan joint activity across the *arrondissement*, agreeing to establish a regular coordinating committee between the striking workplaces in the *arrondissement*. Similar moves were reported from several other Paris districts. And in some places outside Paris, the level of coordinated organisation seems to have gone further. A CGT militant has told how they created a strike organising committee in Rouen:

First we put forward the appeal at a general assembly of the SNCF workers. The text proposed the withdrawal of the Juppé plan as the axis around which to build for a general strike. Once the general assembly had approved the text, we worked on it in a committee that had representatives from all the trade unions present among the workers. We were unanimous in our

conviction that we had to spread the movement across all the categories of railway workers. So we visited the SNCF repair workshops at Quatre Mares (with 800 workers, one of the region's largest workplaces).

> When we explain the SNCF rationalisation plan, the workers got very excited. All this at 5 o'clock in the morning. Some of the Quatre Mares workers came to strengthen the picket lines ...

>> That afternoon we found ourselves in an all-plant general assembly. The atmosphere was crazy. People were drumming, trumpeting, whistling. Nothing had been organised apart from speeches by representatives of the trade union federations. We tried to 'regularise' the situation by creating a strike committee ... with five or six representatives mandated by the general assembly of each sector, plus the regular representatives of each union.
>>
>> And so it was from day three of the strike onwards. Each morning the unitary organising committee in each sector, together with the shop stewards, organised the general assembly. At the beginning of the afternoon, the central committee planned that afternoon's joint meeting ...
>>
>> The afternoon meeting was held in a yard where we normally park trains awaiting repairs. The atmosphere was incredible. The big assemblies were like rallies. But they did represent the heart of the strike, the heart of working class democracy.
>>
>> It was through this daily meeting that all the workplaces and all the trade union bodies were gradually infected with the spirit of the strike. At the beginning you had two or three workers coming from a particular firm or depot. Then they started bringing their workmates! And for three weeks this railway yard was THE meeting place for all the sectors in struggle. The Rouen post sorting centre was the first to join the strike, Then there was électricité de France. The

> Renault auto plant at Cleon decided to join us after 800 of us went to talk to them ...
>
> You can't say it became a general strike committee. It wasn't thought of in that way. But it certainly did represent a meeting place, a forum for initiatives for all the sections involved in the struggle.
>
> Together we drafted a leaflet which we distributed on 11 December when we blocked all the roads into Rouen. More than 1,000 workers from all sectors met at the SNCF depot at 4am – teachers, postal workers, Renault workers, we blocked the town that day. The next day we organised a 'forum of struggle' just in front of the town hall. An experience like that changes your way of thinking. [44]

There is a very similar report about the organisation of the strike in Dreux – the town of 35,000 people some 60 miles from Paris where the National Front made its first electoral breakthrough:

The rail workers pushed forward a new, open form of struggle against the Juppé plan and the rationalisation of the railways by making their general assemblies wide open to all the other sections in struggle, to the press and to democratic organisations. Discussions took place in front of comrades from other parts of the public and private sector.

> The small premises by the railway line, close to the workshops, became a humming beehive where everything was debated – how to carry the movement forward, the preparation of the demonstrations, providing daily meals, the organisation of the *creche* for strikers' children ...and making links with other sectors. The railways workers went to meet the postal workers, the hospital workers, the gasworkers, the teachers, the council workers. And then everyone often found themselves together in front of private factories with loudhailers, songs, red flags, leaflets with the call for the general strike in the public and private sectors.

> The movement allowed the strikers – railway workers, public sector and private, to come together. This was no longer a movement of 'everyone for themselves', but one of 'all together'. [45]

In bringing together 'native' French, Turkish, North African and other workers from the rail, the post and the manufacturing plants in the region, together with unemployed youth from the high rise estates, the movement must have had a huge political impact on a town where the growth of the National Front has been described as 'irresistible' [46] and where the fear of the Front winning control of the council led all the Communist and Socialist candidates in the local elections last year to withdraw in favour of the non-fascist right, leaving what was once a left wing council without a single left wing member!

The union leaders apply the brakes

The radicalisation and politicisation of the movement was bound, eventually, to clash with the conservatism of the union bureaucracies. This did not merely apply to the union leaders like Notat who opposed the movement from its inception. It also applied to the CGT and FO leaders who had initially pushed their activists to initiate strikes.

They wanted to increase the prestige and negotiating power of the union they controlled, not to unleash some general confrontation with the government, still less with the capitalist class as a whole. And they certainly did not want to see coordinating committees which were not under the control of

the union take command of the struggle. They turned their attention from pressing down on the accelerator to making sure they controlled the steering wheel and then, a few days later, to applying the brakes.

What mattered to them was asserting their power to mediate between the government and the working class. For Blondel that meant putting on pressure for a restoration of the FO's privileged position in the public sector and, if possible, in the administration of the social insurance funds. For the CGT it meant reasserting its traditional position as the most powerful union, the key organisation that any government that wanted to restore 'social peace' had to take into account. For both federations that meant spreading the movement within the public sector and getting token action in the private sector, but then ending the movement through negotiations. A perceptive article in **Le Monde** spelt out the CGT's position:

> The CGT has the advantage over the other federations of being everywhere at the head of the movement, playing a determining role in the SNCF [rail], the EDF-GDF [electricity and gas], the post and the RATP [Parisian metro and buses]. It does not face any competition in the rail, unlike in the strike at the end of 1986, when it was pushed aside, like the other unions, by two [unofficial] rail workers' co-ordinations. It multiplies its calls for strikes so as not to be overtaken by more or less spontaneous movements. It thus seems to control the majority of the strikes and appears indispensable, especially on the rail, when it comes to finding a way out of the conflict.' [47]

Viannet spelt his aims out in a newspaper interview. The concessions the government were making over public sector pensions, he said, 'are the result of the strong mobilisation'. He continued, in the

> days to come, we will obtain other concessions, but for that we need to maintain the mobilisation ... The accusation of a 'political strike' makes no sense. Recently I was demonstrating in front a small group of lads – I don't know who they were – who were

shouting, 'Juppé, Get Out!' I turned to them and said, 'Who do you intend to put in his place?' They were silent after that, because the question is not whether its Juppé, Tom, Dick or Harry, but what politics they put forward and how they respond to the issues raised by the social movement. [48]

At the CGT Congress the leadership could not prevent calls from the floor for a general strike. But it could ensure they came to nothing. One speaker described them as 'schemes from the past'. Others made great play of the difficulty of extending the strike from the public sector to private industry workers, 'not directly affected by the Juppé plan'. And, in the end, the leadership pushed through a resolution calling for a 'generalisation' of the struggle, with a view to achieving 'genuine negotiations based on the demands of the strikers'. [49]

The private sector

One proof of the 'prudence' of the CGT leadership is shown by what happened in the private sector. The failure of significant sections of the private sector to join in the strike wave was, people recognised at its conclusion, its weakest feature. The union leaders put forward an argument to the effect that there was no real possibility of the private sector joining in the strikes. The private sector workers, it was said, did not have the same immediate interest in the defeat of the Juppé reforms as the public sector, where the eligibility for pensions was under attack. The years of large scale redundancies had created an atmosphere in the private sector, people added, which

made its workers frightened to strike. Finally, the anti-strike laws made it difficult to get legal strikes at short notice.

These arguments were not only heard from union leaders. They were also repeated at the daily general assemblies of strikers, where people who wanted the private sector to come out would explain how difficult it was. And, as a French revolutionary explains, 'much of the left accepted the same argument'. [50] But there is some evidence that the arguments were wrong.

There was the same general feeling in the private sector as in the public sector – that the strike wave was necessary. This is shown by opinion polls, by the way in which private sector workers would crowd the pavements to clap and cheer the demonstrations, and by the huge private as well as public sector participation on the last great day of demonstrations, Saturday 16 December. The bitterness was certainly there among private sector workers, waiting to be tapped.

What is more, fear of victimisation certainly did not prevent a few parts of the private sector joining the struggle. In some parts of France lorry drivers took action of their own around their unions' demand for retirement at the age of 55, blocking the roads. [51] At Caen 'wage earners participated on mass in the demonstrations, with several thousand workers from Renault Vehicles from the Blainvile-sur-Orne factory, from the Moulinex works, from Citroen, from Crédit Lyonnais, Crédit Agricole and Kodak. [52] In Clermont Ferrand, thousands of Michelin workers regularly joined in the twice a week demonstrations, taking time off work to do so. And miners in Lorraine and the south fought a bitter battle for wages, including running battles with police.

There was certainly a hesitancy among private sector workers about throwing themselves into the struggle. [53] But the same hesitancy was also there, at first, among some of the public

sector workers who eventually struck and held out to the end. [54] What was needed, a French revolutionary argues, 'was not a question of the union leaders just issuing a General Strike call and doing nothing else. It was a question of laying the ground for such action with appropriate demands.' [55] The most appropriate demand was the one which some groups of workers and some local union federations began to raise anyway – to return to private sector workers the pension entitlement after 37.5 years which the government was now threatening to take away from public sector workers. In fact, although the CGT and FO leaders engaged in rhetoric about 'generalising' the struggle to the private sector, they made virtually no practical efforts to get more than token support for demonstrations. [56]

At Renault, the CGT's strongest single base in the engineering and motor industry, the federation did start discussions on pushing the demand for pension rights after 37.5 years. But, a report tells,

Daniel Sanchez, the central delegate of the CGT for the Renault group, put forward this objective without making it into a real slogan. 'We are ready to go all the way', he said, 'even up to a general strike'. But Renault could not simply dissolve itself in a movement with themes that were too general. 'We must conserve our own dynamic'. [57]

In practice, this meant the union behaved 'prudently'. [58] Only at Cleon, where as we have seen the initiative of the Rouen rail workers was decisive, does it seem that substantial numbers of Renault workers threw themselves into the movement. Elsewhere the CGT leadership seem to have been happy for relatively small groups of workers to join demonstrations, with no action at all occurring in some plants.

As an FO delegate at the Gare Saint Lazare confided to a newspaper reporter at the end of the strike:

> The leaderships of the CGT and FO never wanted to go to a general strike. Viannet and Blondel would shit in their pants at the idea.

The movement was becoming too spontaneous, too autonomous. You could see it on the ground. They applied all the brakes to prevent the organising of general strike committees in the localities. [59]

The paper **Socialisme Internationale** spelt out the lessons of the strike:

All the potential that found expression in the December strikes remained in an embryonic state. The union leaders never called for a general strike nor sought to build it. Viannet and Blondel said often enough that they wanted negotiations for one to accept their word for it.

> What the workers themselves wanted more and more and what could have been won was the fall of the government ... The attempts to create structures linking up different section of workers remained isolated and localised. These initiatives were not encouraged by the union leaders. These had too great a fear that they would give rise to co-ordinations controlled by the workers themselves and which could begin to elect their own representatives raised up by the struggle and not professional negotiators like Viannet and Blondel ...
>
> The initiatives which were taken depended in general on whether there was one or more militants ready to organise the movement and enlarge the mobilisation. It is this which explains the enormous heterogeneity of situations. Where militants were present to propose initiatives and establish connections between workers from different sections, the dynamic developed very quickly. In other cases, the strike lost a lot of its dynamism and left the strikers isolated ...
>
> To organise that required a political leadership determined to bring down the government. Neither the Communist Party nor, even less, the Socialist Party, wanted to give such leadership. Hiding behind the excuse of not 'taking over' the movement, they left their militants without leadership and did not offer

any way forward for the workers in struggle. [60]

The student movement

> One feature of the December movement that seemed reminiscent of 1968 was the involvement of students. While public sector workers were paralysing the transport system, France experienced its biggest wave of student struggles since 1986 – a wave which began several weeks before the public sector strikes. The involvement of the students proved how wrong are those journalists and others that repeat, year after year, that students have changed since the 1960s and can never be involved in struggle again or show a widespread interest in politics.

At the same time, however, the dynamic of the student struggle and its relationship to the workers' movement was different in a number of important respects to 1968. In 1968 the student movement began in humanities faculties in Paris and grew within the space of a few days into a huge confrontation with the French state involving many tens of thousands of students, raising demands about not merely their own conditions but the nature of society. The students were very quickly talking about 'revolution' and trying to win workers to the same notion.

In 1995, the movement began with the particular demands raised by certain groups of students in provincial towns over conditions, only slowly spreading to the rest of the country. It never reached the level of political generalisation of 1968. It was thousands of railway workers who led the demonstrations singing the *Internationale*, not thousands of students.

The first struggle began when science and technology students in Rouen went on strike on 9 October in protest at cutbacks in funding which meant an acute shortage of teachers and equipment. They demonstrated through the streets of the city, raising the demand for an increase of 12 million francs (about £1.75 million) in the university budget and staged a spectacular occupation of the rectorate. After police threw them out the struggle escalated to involve the humanities students and, by the first week in November the government felt under enough pressure to concede three-quarters of their demands, promising the creation of 188 new teaching posts.

The government clearly hoped to contain the student revolt within the one university by its concession. It was probably encouraged in this by press reports of students' attitudes, which seemed to show them far from the revolutionary ideas of 1968. Many expressed complete indifference to official politics, saying that the 'socialism' of the 14 years with Mitterrand as president had done nothing for them. But, at the same time, their anger was about more than particular questions of university teaching and resources. They expressed deep resentment at what society offered them: they spoke of a future of low salaries and job insecurity. And this discontent existed in many other places besides Rouen.

Far from ending the movement the government's concession to Rouen encouraged its spread. In the fortnight that followed the Rouen settlement, Metz, Toulouse, Tours, Orleans, Caen, Nice, Montpellier, Perpignan and many other universities staged strikes and demonstrations, each raising its own demands for additional funding, and the first universities in the Paris area finally joined in the struggle on 16 November. Demonstrations across the country on Tuesday 21 November involved more than a 100,000 students. When the first big protests against the Juppé plan took place three days later, a contingent of some 3,000 students behind a banner calling for 'student/worker unity' received massive applause from other participants. When

a further national student demonstration was called for 30 November, it turned in many provincial cities into a joint demonstration of rail workers, students and others against the government – in Marseilles, ‘two thousand students and rail workers marched behind a common banner,’ [61] while, as we have seen, students were among those who joined the rail and postal workers in the delegations to the factories in places like Rouen.

But although the feeling that the students were in struggle alongside them gave an impetus to the spread of the public sector strikes over the following week, the students never played anything like the central role of 1968. And there are indications that the student moment began to subside just as the workers’ movement was reaching its peak. By the first week in December, with demonstrations bigger than in 1968 in many provincial cities, the role of the students in them declined, while in Paris students usually went on the demonstrations as individuals, not in university contingents.

A national co-ordination was set up for striking students from across the country and it played a role in calling the demonstration on 30 November. But reports suggest that it was much more representative of wide numbers of students in some of the provincial centres than it was in Paris, where it was very much dominated by old established activists from one of the rival national student unions, UNEF. As a French revolutionary tells:

> The student movement was big in Toulouse and perhaps a few other places. Elsewhere there were three days of mass mobilisation, which were bigger than anything since 1986, but in reality not that huge. So in Nanterre, in the Paris suburbs (the epicentre of the 1968 revolt) 3,000 were involved out of 30,000. And after the three days, the movement began to go into decline. The rival student unions, one led by the Socialist Party and one by the CP, who only organise 1 percent of the students between them, fought with each other, and in addition there were groups of

anarchists and so on involved. This could give the false impression the whole movement was more radical than it was. [62]

The revolutionary paper **Socialisme Internationale** reports:

This infighting considerably harmed the student movement, so that even where it had not yet attained much support on the ground the fighting between the two principal unions and the tendencies within them still went on. To gain control of the national student co-ordination, the delegates, who were often union activists, outbid each other in immediately putting forward national demands without trying to root their movement in each college by raising concrete issues. This led the student strikers to marginalise themselves rather than involve the students not yet on strike in the movement.

> This led the students' movement to decline very quickly, leaving isolated the universities, such as Toulouse, where the struggle was more solidly organised. [63]

This picture seems to be confirmed by a report in **Le Monde**, which explains that: 'The student coordination seems virtually to have disintegrated before it was born after 21 November. While some students are representative, others have not been chosen by general assemblies at all ...' [64]

These weaknesses did not stop the student movement increasing the disarray of the government. Nor did it stop many, many thousands of students getting involved in demonstrations and actions in support of the public sector strike. And, in all likelihood, it will not stop many students from learning very important lessons in practice about their ability to struggle alongside workers in future. But it did mean the students could not play the role they played, to some extent, in 1968 of injecting a ferment of revolutionary ideas, however inchoate, into the

workers' movement.

Negotiations

> In the very week Viannet was arguing vehemently at the CGT congress against calls for a general strike and the bringing down of the government, he was also, in private, doing something else. 'Viannet's telephone was working a great deal on Thursday – between Viannet and Blondel of the Force Ouvrière in order to prepare a day of action, but also between Viannet and Jean-Pierre Denis, the assistant secretary general at the Elysée [i.e. to Chirac] …' [65] On that day Juppé had told his ministers to open negotiations, especially over the issues in dispute on the railways. That Sunday (10 December), 'contacts of a discreet and secret nature multiplied between the government and the unions.' [66]

The following Tuesday and Thursday saw the biggest demonstrations yet – in many provincial cities up to twice the size of those the week before – despite continual predictions from the government and a section of the media that the movement would enter into decline. The question now facing the union leaders was whether to keep the movement going – in particular by keeping the rail workers on strike – until the whole Juppé plan was withdrawn and so deal the government a mortal blow, or to accept piecemeal concessions that put the railway rationalisation plan 'on ice' and withdrew the increase in the qualification period for public sector pensions.

The CGT faxed a circular to all its railway branches on the Friday morning after the biggest demonstration and the most widespread strike action yet, as workers were boasting they had

topped the 2 million figure which Juppé had said would cause him to resign. It urged them to call off the strikes and 'continue the struggle by other means'. It claimed it wanted the movement to keep going, so as to put pressure on the government to make more concessions – calling a very large demonstration in Paris on Saturday 16 December and a smaller day of action the following week. But effectively it was winding down the movement.

Very large numbers of individual strikers were not happy when they received the rail union's fax. At first, one report tells, 'many CGT branch officials were convinced it was a forgery'. [67] At the Gare du Nord in Paris the general assembly decided by 200 votes to one, with a few abstentions, to remain on strike [68]. The South West Paris rail depot voted by 102 votes to one, with 12 abstentions, to stay out. In Lyon the vote to continue was 637 to 190. In Rouen, the CGT officials were careful not to take the initiative in suggesting a return to work, leaving that to a CFDT official; on the Sunday the vote was still 138 to 2 to continue the strike. [69] Newspaper reports of general assemblies in the post, the electricity and gas and, especially, in the large rail depots told of furious discussions, with workers saying that more was involved in the struggle than just a strike over particular demands. The return to work on the railways was not complete for two or three days, and some of the Paris transport workers held out even longer. Some groups, like the Caen postal workers and the Marseilles transport workers were still on strike over their own specific demands a fortnight later. But the movement as a whole was at an end by the time Juppé's 'social summit' took place.

Politics

> The behaviour of the unions in winding down a movement they had previously encouraged should not, really, surprise anyone. Unions are bureaucratic structures that balance between the organised workers and the employing class, seeking to use their influence over one in order to be accepted as 'partners' by the other. And French unions are no different. The CGT was quite happy in 1968 to negotiate the Grenelle agreement with the Gaullist prime minister Pompidou. The leaders attempted to bring the strike to an end on terms which were much worse than large sections of workers wanted – and paid the price when a huge mass meeting at Renault Billancourt broke out into chants of 'Don't sign, don't sign'. [70]

Union bureaucracies always try to end mass strike movements when they go beyond a certain point. For they begin to go beyond the issue of this or that negotiation with the powers that be to a complete challenge to their authority. Political issues are raised – and that requires the sort of political response that the trade union bureaucracy is incapable of making. Even those in the bureaucratic structure who personally would identify with a political response are constrained from providing it by the requirements of operating through the structure. What matters then is political organisation, not simply trade union organisation. A CGT activist at the Gare du Nord told one newspaper reporter:

> The union federations followed their old reflexes about the need to end a strike. But this movement was more than just an industrial conflict. It became a critique of the elites, of the neoliberalism imposed by truncheons and cutbacks, of wealth kept in a few hands, of a society that no longer concerns itself with people. The movement arrived at a point where it had to become political. It

> created a new consciousness, and no one has the right to betray it. [71]
>
> The main political organisations of the left were as incapable of rising to the level of the movement as the union leaders. The party that gets most electoral support from French workers is the Socialist Party. It was completely incapable of offering a political alternative in December 1995. During the 14 years of Mitterrand's presidency its leaders had accepted exactly the same economic logic that led Juppé to push his 'reforms'. So it was hardly surprising that about half the Socialist Party leadership agreed with those reforms while the other half refused to turn verbal opposition to those reforms into any practical agitation.

The second major political organisation of the left in France is the Communist Party, which historically has had more influence with militant sections of workers. It took a stance which, on the face of it, was much more outspoken than that of the Socialist Party. On 20 November, before the strikes had even begun, its national secretary, Robert Hue, judged anger against the Juppé plan to be 'legitimate'. And, as we have seen, the CGT, over which the party exercises a great deal of influence, played an active role in initiating the strikes. But it soon became clear that the party was no more prepared to agitate in the workplaces and streets than was the Socialist Party. The party leadership insisted that the question of bringing down the government was not on the agenda since 'the Communist Party was not ready for the dissolution of the National Assembly'. [72] Hue insisted the rest of the left was 'not ready for the progressive alternative' [73] and that 'you must not say to the movement what it's not saying itself. The movement today is not ready for a political change'. [74] Not only did this mean that Hue insisted, 'the idea of a general strike is not on the order of the day', [75] it even meant

that the CP leadership hesitated before supporting a Socialist Party motion of censure on the Juppé government in the national assembly! [76] No wonder there was considerable criticism at a meeting of the party's national committee in the first week in December:

> There were several questions about and criticisms of the party's prudent conduct. Several federation secretaries brought up the feeble 'visibility' of the Communists in the actions and demonstrations, some wanting more common actions with the CGT, some wanting the party to act in another way. [77]

The main aim of the party's leadership in the last few years has been to regain some of the strength in lost in the 1970s and 1980s. Until then, not only did it attract many of the most militant French workers, it was also the biggest voting force on the left, receiving 5 million votes. This enabled it to combine a Stalinist dedication to the foreign policy of the USSR with an essentially parliamentary approach at home. What this meant was shown in May 1968, when it played a key role in persuading workers to end their strikes in return for wage increases and the calling of a general election by president De Gaulle. But both its Stalinism and its parliamentarianism backfired on it from then on.

Support for the USSR became increasingly unpopular and risked isolating the party both from many militant workers and from other parliamentary forces. At the same time its electoralism led it into an uncritical alliance with Francois Mitterrand's refounded Socialist Party, which carefully manoeuvred to win over millions of former Communist voters. Yet the party stuck to the alliance, with ministers inside Mitterrand's first government even as that government turned against the workers who had voted for it – until Mitterrand

booted them out. The result was that after losing votes to the Socialist Party, it suffered in the mid-1980s from a further loss of support as disillusionment with the Socialist Party governments set in. Then the party leader, Marchais, reacted with an increasingly sectarian, Stalinist response, seeking to hold on to the party's diminishing membership by driving out anyone trying to open up a debate on what had gone wrong. The only result was to make things go from bad to worse for the party, until it risked electoral annihilation, getting considerably fewer votes than the fascist NF and only twice those of the Trotskyist candidate, Arlette Laguiller.

Hue, who took over as party leader in 1994, has sought to escape from this increasing marginalisation by a double strategy. On the one hand he has called for the final jettisoning of Stalinism, saying that this led to missed opportunities, especially in 1968 when it 'viewed the movement with the eyes of the 1950s', and opening up discussion with others on the left – even going so far as to send a representative to the funeral of the Belgian Trotskyist Ernest Mandel and organising an official meeting between representatives of the Communist Party and the Trotskyist LCR as the strike wave was rising on 29 November. [78] On the other, Hue has made it clear that the key to overcoming the 'marginalisation' of his party is by making an opening to the right. He talks of basing the party on 'the great French traditions of humanism' and he has followed a strategy since the victory of the right in last spring's elections of 'constructive' opposition. This has involved attacking the government for forgetting its electoral promises as it subordinates 'French' interests to it search for European unity, with the Communist Party issuing a call for a referendum on European Economic and Monetary Union on the 25th anniversary of De Gaulle's death – a clear attempt to appeal to sections of the nationalist right.

From this perspective, the movement against the Juppé plan provided the party with an opportunity to pick up support. It

could only rejoice at the embarrassing situation in which a Socialist Party which had won so many votes from it in the past now found itself. But the CP was also desperate to avoid the movement making more difficult the alliances it sought with ‘anti-European’ forces to the right of it. Hence its insistence that building the movement was the task of the CGT and not of the party, and its opposition to calls for a general strike and its resistance to any notion of overthrowing the Juppé government.

There have been two significant Trotskyist organisations to the left of the Communist Party since 1968 – Lutte Ouvrière and the Ligue Communiste Revolutionaire (LCR). Lutte Ouvrière combines a stress on the production of regular bulletins around workplaces with relatively successful electoral interventions – especially the repeated presidential campaigns of Arlette Laguiller. In the 1970s Lutte Ouvrière was both smaller and less visible than the LCR. But it picked up support in the early and mid-1980s as the only left organisation to insist, from the beginning, that Mitterrand and the Socialist Party would betray their supporters. Some of its members played a key role in one of the coordinations that led the 1986 railway strike, and Arlette Laguiller made a considerable impact in last year’s presidential elections, getting 1.5 million votes, including those of one in 14 manual workers. [79]

But these successes have been accompanied by enormous weaknesses in theory and practice. The theory has always been mechanical and dogmatic – repeating over and over again a few basic points. Some of these points have been correct, like its stress on the central role of the working class and workplace struggles. Others have been wrong, like its contention that the USSR remained a degenerated workers’ state to the end, while oddly, China, Cuba and the Eastern Europe were said always to have been capitalist, or its belief that Islamic fundamentalism is qualitatively worse than any other form of petty bourgeois politics. In neither case has it been able to use its theory to develop ‘a concrete analysis of concrete situations’, as Lenin once

put it. And parallel with this mechanical theory has gone a similarly mechanical view of revolutionary politics. For Lutte Ouvrière there are only two tasks – to raise concrete economic questions in particular workplaces, and to make general propaganda through election campaigns and workplace bulletins. It has lacked any notion of using a revolutionary paper as an ‘organiser’, drawing people around it as its takes up particular agitational issues and generalises from them. Nor has it had any notion that politicisation does not only take place in the workplace, but also in struggles outside the workplace, particularly against oppression. So, for instance, it has repeatedly refused to agitate against the growing influence of the Nazi National Front on the grounds that ‘the NF does not exist in the workplaces’. [80]

All these faults came together during the December strike wave to stop Lutte Ouvrière in any way meeting the need for revolutionary leadership. Individual members of Lutte Ouvrière clearly played a leading role in particular workplaces – just as particular members of the Communist Party did. But the organisation as a whole made no concerted attempt to provide a political lead. Its members put little effort into selling its paper during the demonstrations, there was no attempt to put up posters or to put out leaflets attempting to give some direction to the movement, and Arlette Laguiller did little to provide any guidance to the people who had voted for her in the spring.

These were not accidental failings. They rested on a complete inability to understand the potential of the movement, which in turn was a product of mechanical theory. This holds that world wide there is a general ‘reactionary evolution’ connected with ‘the counter-revolution’ in the former USSR. In France itself, it has claimed (in an article dated 31 October and published in January, after the strike wave), ‘the present period is dominated by a demoralisation of the working class’. [81]

Lutte Ouvrière interpreted the spread of the strikes in the last week of November as simply a manoeuvre by the union

bureaucracies. Their paper said, in an article headed *After Two Weeks*, that 'the strike is the product of a process launched from above only. It is in fact because the will of the trade union centres, the FO and the CGT, that the movement broke out, hardened and spread'. [82]

Such an analysis led Lutte Ouvrière to take a very passive attitude to the movement until its third week. And even then they did not agitate either for a general strike or for political demands like the overthrow of the Juppé government. Their paper talked about raising the question of qualifying for pensions in the public sector after 37.5 years, but never campaigned for the demands. And there was no sense in the paper that militants should be preparing to counter the union leaders' attempts to sell the movement out. The first direct criticism of the CGT leadership over its role in the strike did not appear in Lutte Ouvrière's paper until after the return to work by the rail workers! And even then, its press could, on occasion, justify the union leaders' call for the return to work, claiming 'the climate was shifting towards a return to work and the CGT leaders were kept informed almost by the hour of the mood among the strikers ...' [83] The approach recalls nothing so much as the attitude the British Communist Party took in the 1926 General Strike when, despite its intense political disagreements with the union leaders, it issued the call, 'All power to the general council!' [84]

What is more, Lutte Ouvrière made no attempt to turn its paper and its meetings into a focus for drawing together those who wanted the strike to go further and to turn it into a total challenge to the politics of the government.

The LCR was just as incapable as Lutte Ouvrière of beginning to provide any leadership in the struggle. In formal terms it had a better grasp of what the movement was about. It could recognise the massive, spontaneous rebuff to the political establishment. Its paper attempted to relate to the upsurge of the movement. It did raise the question of the general strike and

spreading the movement to the private sector. And its activists in certain unions – for instance the SUD union, composed of people expelled from the CFDT – and localities clearly played a role in spreading the struggle. But in reality it was just as invisible as a political organisation trying to pose a political alternative as Lutte Ouvrière. And it suffered the further fault of having less influence among workers. As one revolutionary socialist tells, 'The paper may seem to relate to the movement, but the language it is written in is remote and abstract'. [85] In fact, many years ago, the paper gave up any attempt to be a vehicle for political organisation and instead turned into a collection of articles on different social movements and intellectual currents. It could not transform itself into a fighting organ in December just because some of its writers recognised the scale of what was happening. The members of the LCR put as little effort into selling the paper on demonstrations or at meetings and general assemblies as the members of Lutte Ouvrière – being content to come across as good student activists or trade unionists rather than as revolutionary socialists. And so they were unlikely to turn into a magnet for workers or students newly politicised by the movement.

As with Lutte Ouvrière, the fault lies in the organisation's theoretical and practical traditions. Historically the LCR leadership held that the regimes of the USSR, Eastern Europe, China, Vietnam and Cuba were degenerated or deformed workers' states which, despite their bureaucratic leaders, played a progressive role in 'the class struggle on a world scale'. This lead to deep demoralisation when the reality of what life was really like in 'workers' state' came to light – and then the regimes themselves collapsed in 1989-91.

At the same time, the belief that there could be possible substitutes for the working class in the struggle for socialism led, in France itself, to an enormous softness on Mitterrand and the Socialist Party in the early 1980s. Instead of warning of what Mitterrand had in store for workers, the LCR gave the

impression that with a little shoving from below the Mitterrand government could open the door to fundamental social change. It was hardly surprising that the LCR lost a considerable number of members to the Socialist Party and then suffered from the general demoralisation of the left as the true nature of the Mitterrand government became apparent. In fact it survived as an organisation only by dropping in practice the notion of building a centralised party around a coherent set of politics and instead degenerated into a federation of rival, warring factions, each with its own analysis of events and each doing what it wanted in its own area of struggle. Such an organisation was quite incapable of playing a genuinely independent role in the December movement and of attracting to it the many thousands of workers who began to see the need for a politics that went beyond that of the Socialist Party and the Communist Party.

Between them Lutte Ouvrière and the LCR had won over many of the best activists from struggles going right back to 1968. But their politics demoralised some in the 1970s and 1980s and left those that remained unable to act as a focus for those looking for leadership in December 1995. There could hardly be better proof of the need for French revolutionary socialists to create a new organisation.

Socialisme International has been attempting to do just this. Its problem is that, born in the 1980s when the old organisations still dominated the field, it finds itself still very small as it faces the struggles of the late 1990s. With barely 200 members it could not even begin to give leadership to a movement of 2 million workers. The best it could do was to ensure its members were active in their own workplaces and colleges, attempting to provide a focus for people who were looking for a new sort of leadership by openly selling their paper. The fact that they were as visible when it came to selling their paper on some demonstrations as organisations five or ten times their size and often the only people in meetings prepared to announce their own politics openly is testimony to the scale of the vacuum on

the left during the December strikes.

Aftermath

> There was much debate in the days immediately after the return to work about whether the outcome of the movement was a victory or a defeat. On the one hand, the government had made considerable concessions. On the other, it remained in office, able to prepare new offensives for the future, replacing its disastrous ‘all at once’ strategy with a piecemeal approach of divide and rule.

In the weeks since, it has become clear that the government made many more concessions than it wanted to, clearly frightened by the degree of support for continuing the strike among the rail workers in particular, and further pushed into a corner by the way groups like the Caen postal workers and the Marseilles transport workers held out over Christmas until their demands were met. Faced with such a level of resilience it was terrified of provoking any sort of new movement.

But the workers’ victory over the immediate issues still raises the question as to the long term significance of the struggle.

One of the major arguments within the left internationally over the last two decades, since the post-1968 left began to go into decline after the defeat of the Portuguese Revolution at the end of the 1975 and the Italian revolutionary left began to disintegrate a few months later, has been over whether the working class can once against play an active role as the agent of history. Many of the 1968-1975 generation concluded it could not. This led them, typically, to a political trajectory through feminism and left social democracy to right wing social democracy. Intellectually they moved on from Marxism to structuralism and from structuralism to postmodernism.

Predictably, there have already been attempts by such people to explain away the French events as, at best, a merely defensive protest by members of a relatively privileged social stratum.

For instance, the sociologists Pascal Perrineau and Michel Wiviorla have argued it would be 'a mistake' to see the movement as involving 'politicisation and generalisation'. The movement involved 'sectional conflict', confined to 'the defence of the acquired interests of public sector employees. At no point, except in a sloganising way, did it seek to take up and articulate the demands of the excluded, the unemployed, the students, or those in rundown estates.' It lacked a 'globalising dimension'. 'It would be a mistake to fall back into leftism', into the belief that the state functionaries or the personnel of the big public enterprises are 'the salt of the earth', 'and that their struggle represents a resurgence of class struggle'. It would even be wrong to see the struggle as a 'constructive response after 12 years of the most liberal [ie free market] capitalism'. For, 'the strike has hardly involved looking to the future, but has been defensive'. The key slogans have been 'maintain', 'reaffirm', 'defend'. The strikes fell away 'the moment their immediate demands were met'. They 'counterposed social justice to modernisation, rather than seeking to combine the two.'

The conclusion of this line of argument was that, in reality, the strikes were backward looking, and to have been otherwise they would have had to embrace a 'modernising', social democratic perspective, of the sort allegedly put forward by Nicole Notat, the CFDT union leader who opposed the movement. [86]

But it is not only on the social democratic right that you find a tendency to dismiss struggles like that in France as of only transitory importance. There is a left version in 'downturn determinism' – the belief that the impact of past defeats has produced a situation in which defensive struggles can never lead to victory and to a revival of class confidence and consciousness. It is a view that all too easily ends in apologetics for sections of the trade union bureaucracy, with claims that they have pushed

the struggle as far as it was possible to go. It is also a gospel of sheer despair, since it implies that there can be no real revival of working class struggle until some magical return to full employment alters the balance of forces in the everyday economic struggle.

In fact, the French movement was a living refutation of such an approach. Of course, it began as a defensive struggle and bore within it the imprint of two decades of defeat. But as it gathered momentum it became more than defensive and began to challenge the whole way society is run. It was a prime example of how sudden leaps can take place in confidence and consciousness.

For very few of those involved was the strike simply about their pensions or their social security payments. It was about what they felt had been happening to them for some 20 years. The Sécu attack was simply the last straw. Only this can explain the level of activism in the strikes, the way in which it only required a small lead from a couple of activists for hundreds to go from one workplace to another, to gather daily to organise activities, to reach back to all but forgotten memories of class struggle, of the Commune and the *Internationale*. Only that can explain the way in which rail and postal workers lined up to applaud students and went out to meet with civil servants and teachers, car workers and nurses. Only that, too, can explain the welcome on the demonstrations given to the groups of the unemployed and homeless who joined in.

It was as if anger that had been simmering for 20 years suddenly boiled over and then rejected attempts to confine it within narrow channels. But the pressure which led it to boil over – the 'last straw' – was not just some accidental mistake by the government. It was an integral part of the attempt to allow French capitalism to maintain its competitiveness in the face of recurrent world economic crises. Eight years ago, in my book **The Fire Last Time** I argued that the economic instability of

the world system necessarily leads to sudden changes in the political situation:

> We cannot take for granted the political stability that the Western countries have known for the last 10 years. Even the strongest political structures can be like castles built on ice of unknown thickness. Economic pressures can lead rulers or ruled suddenly to break, at least partially, with the framework within which their relations with each other have previously been organised. [87]

> Since this was written, the long recession of the first half of the 1990s has everywhere served on the one hand to increase the pressure on governments and employing classes to attack conditions which workers have taken for granted in the past, and on the other to intensify the feelings of bitterness at the base of society, among both the traditional working class and increasingly proletarianised groups who used to regard themselves as 'middle class'.

The French strikes show how, under such conditions, immense social struggle can suddenly erupt – and how, when they do so, previously 'non-political' workers can begin to organise themselves and to generalise politically. They also show how such a general upsurge in struggle can produce a sudden shift in the balance of class forces despite the willingness of the trade union bureaucracy to halt the movement at the first hint of concessions. There seems little doubt that the December 1995 strikes have dented the French government's confidence in its ability to proceed with its offensive against workers' conditions. There also seems little doubt that the new confidence felt by many sections of workers will find expression in new struggles in the months ahead.

That, however, is not the end of the story. The international competitive pressures on French capitalism which produced the Juppé plan will not go away. It may have made concessions to

end the strikes, just as De Gaulle did in 1968 or Denmark's government did in 1985, but the overall context in which it operates is different. The French events of 1968 occurred while the great boom of the 1950s and 1960s still had some life left in it and ruling classes could afford, when pushed, to grant long terms reforms. The Danish strike took place just as ruling classes were beginning to convince themselves the nightmare recession of the early 1980s was giving way to a new period of unstoppable boom. The French ruling class certainly do not believe that today. They feel the only way they can guarantee future profitability is by clamping down hard on workers' conditions. That, in itself, ensures that the concessions will not be followed by a new period of class peace. Rather we can expect a desperate ruling class to return to the offensive and a rejuvenated working class to fight back.

But more will be involved in the period ahead than just economic pressures on both sides. Two decades of economic crisis have not just led to workplace struggles. They have also torn apart many of the certainties by which millions of people used to lead their lives, leaving bitterness and frustration that expresses itself in many different ways: protests by sections of the petty bourgeoisie that recall the 'Poujade' movement of 1950s; a wave of mini-riots on suburban housing estates originally built to house the burgeoning industrial labour force of the 1960s and plagued by 40 or 50 percent levels of unemployment; a growth of popular racism among some layers of the population; a willingness of some sections of the government and the police to exploit this with an increased level of harassment of ethnic minorities; a tendency for some ethnic minority youth to react by an enhanced identification with Islam; the growth of the fascist National Front until it regularly achieves around 15 percent of votes and enters into the political calculations of all the main parties.

The December strikes temporarily overshadowed all these other expressions of the crisis by acting as a focus for the

bitterness of huge numbers of people besides those directly involved in the stoppages and demonstrations. Thus the strikes posed considerable difficulties for the National Front leadership. Its position was that it was hostile to the strikes and believed that there should be no right to strike in the public sector. But it was also aware than many of the people who voted for it in the spring were now enthusiastic supporters of the strikes. So in a radio interview, 'Le Pen was involved in a difficult exercise, which consisted in expressing his hostility to the unions, his animosity to the civil servants, his opposition to the Juppé plan and his understanding as to why some sympathisers of the National Front supported the strikes'. [88] But this does not mean that the strike movement will have destroyed the National Front's influence or any other forms by which the deeper social crisis expresses itself. They can re-emerge in the aftermath of the strikes just as a wreck rises above the water as the tide falls. And the French ruling class will take them into consideration, seeking to manipulate them for its own ends, as it prepares to the next round of confrontation.

Sections of the governing majority will step up their efforts to build up the forces behind them by combining anti-Maastricht rhetoric with encouragement of police attacks on ethnic minorities and calls for ever more stringent action against 'illegal' immigrants. The Socialist Party will continue to make concessions to them. The Communist Party will still be torn between sharing a common anti-European language with them and disliking their racism. The National Front can still have leeway, not merely to hold on to its votes but also to build a cadre as it attempts to turn the 'soft racism' of its sympathisers into the hardened Nazi ideology of activists.

This means the question of politics will become ever more important. The lack of a revolutionary alternative to the misleadership of the CGT, FO, CFDT, Communist Party and Socialist Party meant, in December, that the movement did not achieve the great victory that was open to it. It could,

nevertheless, make gains. The next time it probably will not be so easy. The government will try to be more prepared and will seek to divide as a precondition for ruling. Beating it will be difficult without a network of revolutionary socialists with a presence in the workplace, capable not only of taking up the easy arguments about cuts in pension rights or wages, but also 'difficult' ones over immigration, the awful record of the Socialist Party governments or the behaviour of the trade union bureaucracies.

Notes

1. Quoted in **Le Monde**, 11 November 1995.

2. **Financial Times** editorial, 6 January 1995.

3. **Ibid.**

4. For discussions on this, see, for example, E. Ball, *Lurking Threat of First World Debt Crisis*, **Financial Times**, 27 October 1993; M. Wolf, *The Looming Crisis of Industrial Country Public Debt*, **Financial Times**, 12 July 1993; editorial, **Financial Times**, 3 January 1995.

5. **Financial Times** editorial, 6 January 1996.

6. Figures from Institut der Deutschen Wirtschaft, reproduced in **Le Monde**, 21 December 1995.

7. **Le Monde**, 21 December 1995.

8. Opinion poll figures given in **Le Monde**, 21 October 1995.

9. Quoted, **Le Monde**, 28 October 1995.

10. **Le Monde**, 17 November 1995.

11. **Le Monde**, 21 December 1995.

12. Quoted in **Le Monde**, 21 December 1995.

13. Le Parti des Traveilleurs, formerly the Parti Communiste Internationale, of Pierre Lambert, which controls the leadership of a couple of federations within Force Ouvrière.

14. See the lengthy report on Blondel's somersaults in **Le Monde**, 23 November 1995.

15. Quoted in **Le Monde**, 21 December 1995.

16. Quoted in **Le Monde**, 18 November 1995.

17. The CFDT is a little smaller in terms of membership than the CGT, sometimes doing better sometimes worse than it in elections for works councils. But historically it has been less important when it comes to beginning – and ending – struggles.

18. Account of protests in **Le Monde**, 26 November 1995, see also **Socialist Worker**, 2 December 1995.

19. For accounts of this incident, see **Le Monde**, 26 November 1995 and 21 December 1995.

20. **Le Monde**, 21 December 1995.

21. Quoted in **Le Monde**, 29 November 1995.

22. **Le Monde**, 30 November 1995.

23. **Le Monde**, 30 November 1995.

24. **Ibid.**

25. Report in **Lutte Ouvrière**, 8 December 1995.

26. An analysis in **Le Monde** suggested that only in the east of the country was the movement relatively weak, and that in the provinces it grew in magnitude until it surpassed that in Paris. **Le Monde**, 8 December 1995 and 27 December 1995.

27. Report in **Lutte Ouvrière**, 8 December 1995.

28. **Ibid.**

29. **Ibid.**

30. Main front page story, **Le Monde**, 2 December 1995, and the report inside on the same day of the meeting of 500 RPR supporters held in Saint-Jean-de-Luz to create such committees.

31. See T. Cliff, *The Belgian General Strike*, **International Socialism** (old series) No.4, Spring 1961.

32. T. Cliff and D. Gluckstein, **Marxism and Trade Union Struggle, the General Strike of 1926** (London 1986), p.189.

33. C. Harman, **The Fire Last Time: 1968 and After** (London 1988), p.36.

34. **Ibid.**, p.369. The reports of the Danish strike are from **Socialist Worker Review**, May 1985, and from **Socialist Worker**, 13 April

1985.

35. The Communist Party, the Socialist Party, and the Lutte Ouvrière candidate, Arlette Laguiller.

36. According to **Le Monde**, 3 December 1995.

37. **Le Monde**, 3 December 1995.

38. Report by Paul McGarr in **Socialist Worker**, 2 December 1995.

39. Report in **Lutte Ouvrière**, 8 December 1995.

40. **Le Monde**, 21 December 1995.

41. Interviews with workers in **Le Monde**, 21 December 1995.

42. Quoted in **Le Monde**, 3 December 1995.

43. Report in **Lutte Ouvrière**, 8 December 1995.

44. Interview with J. Perez, in **International Viewpoint**, January 1966.

45. Account contained in **Rouge**, 4 January 1996.

46. This is the term used by the former Socialist Party mayor of the town in her interesting study of the rise of the Nazis. See F. Gaspard, **A Small City in France** (Harvard, 1995).

47. **Le Monde**, 4 December 1995.

48. Interview in **Le Monde**, 19 December 1995.

49. **Le Monde**, 6 December 1995.

50. Interview with Denis Godard 3 January 1995.

51. See the reports in **Le Monde**, 5 and 6 December 1995

52. **Le Monde**, 7 December 1995

53. *Postal workers hesitate to strike*, **Le Monde**, 3 December 1995

54. Interview, as above. Another report tells very much the same story, see *A la Poste*, **Lutte Ouvrière**, 8 December 1995

55. Interview, as above, fn50.

56. **Le Monde**, 17 December 1995.

57. **Le Monde**, 3 December 1995.

58. **Le Monde**'s expression.

59. Quoted in **Le Monde**, 17 December 1995.

60. **Socialisme Internationale**, 20 December 1995.

61. See the description of mobilisations in **Le Monde**, 2 December 1995

62. Interview, as above, fn50.

63. **Socialisme Internationale**, 20 December 1995

64. **Le Monde**, 24 December 1995.

65. Report in **Le Monde**, 9 December 1995.

66. **Le Monde**, 12 December 1995.

67. *The Union Machines in the Strike*, **Class Struggle**, January 1996, p.13.

68. Account of meeting in **Le Monde**, 17 December 1995.

69. Reports in **Lutte Ouvrière**, 22 December 1995.

70. See the account in my book **The Fire Last Time**, **op. cit.**, pp.101 and 108.

71. Quoted in **Le Monde**, 17 December 1995.

72. Report of speech of a member of the party secretariat, Jean-Claude Gayssot, opening a debate at the party's national committee, in **Le Monde**, 8 December 1995.

73. **L'Humanité**, 7 December 1995, quoted in **International Viewpoint**, January 1996.

74. **Le Monde**, 8 December 1995.

75. Report of Hue's views in **Le Monde**, 6 December 1995 and **Rouge**, 14 December 1995.

76. **Le Monde**, 8 December 1995.

77. **Ibid.**

78. Report in **Le Monde**, 26 November 1995.

79. According to exit polls for the first round of last spring's presidential election.

80. For more details about Lutte Ouvrière's politics, see, *Lutte Ouvrière and SWP Debate the French Railway Workers' Strike*, in **International Socialism 26**, April 1987.

81. *La situation interieure*, **Lutte de Classe**, No.17, January-February 1996.

82. Roger Girardot, **Lutte Ouvrière**, 8 December 1995. This argument is repeated in article, *The Union Machines in the Strike* – much of which is simply a translation of Girardot's piece – in **Lutte Ouvrière**'s English language publication, **Class Struggle**, January/February 1996. But the other article on the strikes, *The Class Struggle with a Vengeance*, provides a quite different account, in which the initial push from above by the union bureaucracies gave rise below, to 'workers' democracy in practice, something very few workers had ever experienced before.'

83. *The Union Machines in the Strike*, **op. cit.**

84. See the account in Cliff and Gluckstein, **op. cit.**

85. Interview, as above, fn 50.

86. **Le Monde**, 20 December 1995.

87. C. Harman, **The Fire Last Time**, **op. cit.**, p.367.

88. Report in **Le Monde**, 22 December 1995.