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Hot Autumn – France shows the way!

Anarchist Communist Federation

1995

The new government in power in France led by Chirac and Juppe decided that the time was ripe to institute massive attacks on welfare benefits, the transport system and jobs and conditions. Their precipitate attack after just barely 6 months in power was sparked by their need to prepare for European Monetary Union-single currency – by the end of 1997. There was a massive budget deficit of 63 billion francs, which Juppe wanted to cut by 10%. At the same time he wanted to halve the huge social security debt. This was in the context of a sluggish economy, where the magic phrase “economic recovery” was a non-starter. The tightness of the time scale in which to accomplish these cuts, plus a gross underestimation of the combativity of French workers, which the new regime felt had been thoroughly demoralised and demobilised by years of Socialist government, made the Chirac-Juppe administration make a full frontal attack. This should be compared to the attacks on the British working class, where different sections were taken on one at a time and where cuts to benefits, transport, the health service etc, were taken over a protracted period of time.

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The Juppe Plan 's main core was an attack on social security. A new 1% tax on wages would pay the social security debts, there would be a freeze in child benefit, there would be an increased contribution to social security out of wages, as well as workers having to work 2 1/2 years before they were entitled to pension rights. In addition there would be £400 million cut from health spending, huge rail cuts (in a country well serviced by both national regional and local lines) as well as further attacks on railworkers through cuts in pension and retirement payments and conditions.,

The explosion of working class anger was almost immediate. In France only about 5% of the workforce is in unions, the main three being the union centrals of the CFDT, the CGT, and FO. The CFDT is controlled by Socialists, the CGT by the Stalinist of the Communist Party, and FO by socialists, Gaullists and the Trotskyist organisation of Pierre Lambert, with links to Freemasonry ! The FO has a stake in Social Security as this is run by boards in which the unions, but in particular FO, have a dominating influence.

So the power of the unions to control the mass of the working class is much more limited than in Britain. And many members of unions have few illusions in the union leaders.

The agitation in the working class was preceded by agitation among the students in September and October. the condition of student life has deteriorated more and more over the last few years, with rising rents and a decreasing number of teachers. The number of working class youth among the students has increased considerably over the last few years. Occupations spread through the country, set off by a 3 week strike of students at Rouen, and demonstrations of in total more than 100,000 took place on 21 November all over France. Among demands put forward were equal rights of foreign students, and there was a call to participate in the demonstration of 24 November of strikers in the public sector. Radical slogans began to emerge among 400

“ordinary” students who attended this demonstration, with “Police everywhere, Justice nowhere!” and “The sole solution, revolution!” Faced with growing radicalisation the different student unions of UNEF and UNEF-ID made common cause to maintain their control, radicalising their own slogans with calls for “Universities open to workers’ children, university closed to private interests”. Other signs of radicalisation on 21 November were when 300 Quimperle students boarded a train for the Paris demo, refusing to pay their fares. Thrown off the train, they blocked the track, and the authorities were forced to let them ride.

The strength of this movement, forced university authorities and student union bureaucrats to make local deals. All of this was to be eclipsed by the movement of the working class. Already on 10 October a general strike in the public sector had pulled out 500,000 demonstrators throughout France.

The CFDT and other smaller unions accepted the attacks on pensions. In the talks that the government had with its “social partners”, the unions, on social security, only the CGT was opposed. The FO was promised that it would retain control of the boards, and so maintain one of its chief power bases. On 15 November the Juppe Plan was unveiled in Parliament, and was hailed by Nicole Notat, a CFDT leader. The following day a section of the Socialist Party led by Rocard and Lang voiced their approval of the Plan. The anger of the workers forced an about face in the FO, and the CGT to call for the day of action on the 24th. This pulled out between 500,000 and 1 million people all over France- in particular in Toulouse, Bordeaux, Marseille, Nantes and Rennes. In Paris Notat’s limousine was attacked by members of her own union. The unions continued to sabotage the movement by their old trick of calling demonstrations on different days or in different parts of town from each other. the railworkers called for a continuance of the strike, and universities at Nantes and Tours were occupied.

On the 5th day of the railstrike, which was almost total, more demos took place. 50,000 came out in Paris. The government said it was not backing down.

By 30 November the strikes had spread. The bus and tube workers were out in Paris, and bus workers struck in other parts of France. In the Post half the sorting offices were closed down, with 60% on strike. There was strong support for a strike among power workers. The day of action on this date mobilised 300,000 in the streets. In Nantes, Paris and Montpellier there were clashes with the police. In Marseilles, several thousand unemployed headed the demo, followed by a joint railworker-student banner. By the 3rd December 80 out of 130 sorting offices were out on strike.

At the Renault car factories, the CGT sabotaged action by arguing against "premature action". Several hundred railworkers from Sotteville-les -Rouen had marched to the Renault factory at Cleon to argue for the carworkers to join the strike movement. If movement had taken place in these symbolic large factories, this could have pulled out large sections of workers in the private sector.

A call for unlimited strike action was raised in telecommunications on the 4th December, and workers prepared to strike in the tax offices and in education. On the following day, a million people demonstrated in the streets country-wide. The striking power workers put many towns on "night supply" (Brest, Grenoble, Clermont, Carcassone, Mulhouse, Bayonne, Charleville) in other words a much limited supply of electricity.

By now the Juppe administration is beginning to make "concessions" agreeing to meet the union leaders. Notat accepts, the others under massive pressure from the base are forced to refuse. Again on 7 December 1 million demonstrated. Huge demos in places that had never seen the like took place- like Caen, Rouen Bayonne and Limoges.

In Toulouse the demos took on the atmosphere of a festival- on 12 December after 2 demos that had taken place that day, the main railway station was turned into a huge stage by the occupying railworkers in alliance with students and teachers. More than 2,000 participated with free music concerts and drink supplied. The same day a "festival of the oppressed" took place in a "popular" neighbourhood, where all those in struggle were invited, on the initiative of a squatters group. The firefighters were called out to put out a bonfire there, and refused to act. The police then attacked the festival viciously. On the 15th a hundred homeless occupied a large building in the city. The following day the riot police attacked a demo outside the town hall. Two hours of fighting took place in which the police bombarded the crowd with tear gas canisters, breaking windows and setting fire to a flat.