

French strike wave of December 1995

Why not here?

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The strike wave that rocked France in the closing month of 1995 is yet another example of the great fighting spirit of the French working class. Yet when we look at the causes of the strike and the relative weakness of French workplace organisation the question that emerges is ‘if they can do it, why can’t we’?

The December strike wave was just the latest and largest in a series of major strikes in France aimed at preventing the implementation of cuts required under the Maastricht treaty. The underlying cause of this strike wave was the government’s attempts to reduce the budget deficit from 5% to 3%. Their method for doing this, as elsewhere in Europe, was by cutting public spending. They aimed to raise the period before you could retire in the public service from 37.5 years to 40 years and slash the health care & welfare systems.

Although only 30% of the public sector and 10% of the private sector are unionised, over 2 million workers came out on strike. High unemployment meant that the strike was mostly confined to the public sector but there were some strikes and occupations in the private sector also. Opinion polls showed that around 60% of the population supported the strike.

Millions on the move

A whole series of demonstrations took place during the strike. The biggest mobilised around 3 million people across the country. In many regional towns these demonstrations were larger than those during 1968. Anarchists played a major role in many of these events. In Nantes on December 12th, for instance, 1,000 – 2,000 of the 50,000 demonstrators were libertarians.

The French CNT (a small anarcho-syndicalist union) reported that its members were very involved in the occupations of the mail centres in Lyon, Saint-Priest, and Satolas, the occupation of the hospital in La Salpetriere and on the railways. In the private sector *in two enterprises where CNT is active, there were considerable strikes : FNAC and Cite des Sciences de la Vilette.*

A US anarchist sent the following report that nicely captures the feelings of many of those involved

I am inside the offices of Agence Nationale Pour l’Emploi (the unemployment insurance bureau of France), which is now occupied by about 40 striking students from University Francois Rabelais. Some 90% of this group describe themselves as anarchists.

At about four o’clock they entered the ANPE office and announced that they would be occupying the place in order to demand changes in the way universities are managed and funded by the French government. There was a long chat between the students and the ANPE staff. It became apparent that the two sides were in agreement with each other, and they decided to have supper together.

The scene developed in a way that would have been quite unlikely here only a few years ago, and perhaps out of the question in the US at any time. As I type this, late the following morning, I feel as though I have stepped in and out of a dream, which I only hope to see happen in my own country someday.

Solidarity is strength

In general the strength of the movement was due to solidarity and the willingness of the workers to break the law where it stood in their way. From the start, for instance, railway pickets halted trains by holding mass meetings on the rails in the major stations. The police avoided confrontation with the rail workers but locally went on the rampage. In the north-eastern town of Freyming-Merlebach some 700 riot police and paramilitary gendarmes armed with tear gas and stun grenades fought running battles with striking miners armed with crowbars, metal bolts and rocks. During these disturbances the miners built street barricades and set fire to a mine company building.

In Paris the Pompidou Centre was occupied by several hundred of the unemployed, homeless, paperless and incomeless with the aim of *launching a real and permanent forum for debate concerning exclusion and for convergence with the social movement*. Anarchist reports highlighted the great solidarity shown between workers, and with the poor and the homeless. One of the most popular slogans on demonstrations was *All together, all together*.

This was what the government and international capitalism most feared. A special feature in the bosses theoretical magazine, *The Economist*, pointed out that the danger in France was not a change in government but *the spectre..of 1968: 10 million workers out on strike, riots in the street and bourgeois society choking on its croutons*. [November 25th edition, at the start of the strike wave.]

Fear of a red planet

The government moved on December 15th to defuse the strike wave. Prime Minister Alain Juppe scrapped a plan to cut the SNCF state railways and promised not to touch public sector retirement schemes. But he did not back down on the health and welfare cuts. Despite this the union leadership called the strike off, although in several areas' workers were still refusing to go back as late as December 22nd. For now though it looks as if the government has re-gained control.

It was probably not a moment too soon for the bosses. On December 15th public sector workers in Luxembourg had a one day strike. Likewise in Belgium a public sector strike wave started to break out. Workers all over Europe are facing the same attacks for the same reasons as the French workers, the bosses' planned monetary union in 1997.

The lesson from the French strike wave is that if the bosses can combine internationally to drive down our living conditions in country after country then we can combine to beat them (and overthrow their rotten system). French workers have a powerful tradition of militancy but there is nothing they did that workers in Ireland, Britain or anywhere else cannot do. Rather than looking to sectional interests we must take up the slogan *all together* and begin to apply it not just on a national level but also on a European and international level.

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