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The French Connection

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Unrest In France

David Van Deusen/Xavier Massot/Green
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In 2006 Xavier Massot, author of the Black Bloc Papers, predicted the rise of the communist and fascist factions in France, as well as the fall of the traditional moderate left & right parties. A decade+ later France continues to grapple with many of the issues outlined in this interview.

Paris, France & Brattleboro, Vermont March 31, 2006 –Over the course of the last 30 days France has been rocked by a series of escalating demonstrations and mass labor strikes. The unrest is by and large a reaction to a new law passed by the center-right government that repeals job security guarantees for young workers. Where previously all French workers were protected against unjust firings, now many people, mainly those 28 and younger, can be fired at any time during a two year probationary period. The French working class and student population has outright rejected the new measures and have demanded their immediate repeal. While the government has thus far refused to rescind the law, millions of students and workers have repeatedly marched in the streets of every major French city and have crippled capitalist institutions by walking off their jobs by the hundreds of thousands. Many of these demonstrations have turned violent, with workers and students fighting police with stones and makeshift batons. As of writing, no compromise is in sight. While the government has offered to negotiate with the unions, organized labor has refused to come to the table until the law is first repealed.

Catamount Tavern News interviewed Xavier Massot, who currently resides in Paris, about the situation. Mr. Massot, 29, a long-time Brattleboro resident and former Mike's bartender (on Elliot Street) is an artist and co-author of the Black Bloc Papers. He is also a self-described anarchist and former guitar player for the Putnigs (a southern Vermont rock & roll band). He holds dual citizenship in France (where he was born) and the U.S. He is an ethnic Breton. Xavier has been living in Paris for the last six months and is due to return to the Green Mountains later this spring. We talked to him by phone.

David Van Deusen: Mr. Massot, what can you tell us about the situation on the ground in Paris?

Xavier Massot: There are thousands of demonstrators in the streets nearly every day. Most are students and workers. A few hundred [a very small minority] appear to be fascists who are not out to protest the law, but to physically attack the left. They [the fascists] are also being counter attacked by the anarchists... But mostly people are angry about the government...

While I am generally in agreement with the students and striking workers... it should be understood that the law itself is not necessarily all *that* bad. It is just what has been picked up as the topic. The greater thing [motivating people] is a general sense of being a *pissed off society*.

Van Deusen: Workers and students are by far the largest segment of protesters. Besides the obvious issue of 'workers rights' what is bringing these people in the streets by the millions?

Xavier Massot: Young people in France, much like in America, are realizing that for the first time in a long time that they are in the frontline of a new generation that is not going to do as well as the generations before them. This tends to motivate people... [Also] France has a culture of protest. It's not as alien or as shocking for people to go out in the street and complain out loud about what they are pissed about as it is in the U.S. [Protest] is a custom, you know? In fact, when you are trying to get somewhere by subway in Paris, depending on the day and if you didn't see the news the night before, there is a good chance the trains aren't going to be running [because of a strike].

Van Deusen: What can you tell us about the law itself?

Xavier Massot: The thing that stinks about it is that it amounts to a two year contract, so you basically are on a two year probation with your employer [during which you can be fired at any time and for any reason]... If you switch to another company during those two years then you have to start all over again... [the law is also] misleading. In its official title it includes the term "First

tourism for its profit and take the profits from it. The people who live there should reap the benefits.

Van Deusen: In France many aspects of different industries are owned by the state. Do you advocate that portions of Vermont's economy, such as ski resorts, be owned by the state and/or be run cooperatively by the workers?

Xavier Massot: Ideally [the tourist industry in Vermont] should be owned by Vermonters... Seeing the way the state is economically set up it would be really sane and a nice thing if a large part of the revenue of the industry was something that went back to *all* Vermonters.

Van Deusen: Finally, to get back on point, so you have any last thoughts on the situation in France?

Xavier Massot: Again, if France needs anything right now it is not more laws. There is already such a bureaucracy here and this law is just adding to it, which is exactly what people don't want... If [the Prime Minister] had made a law that was a blank piece of paper it couldn't have been any stupider.

Van Deusen: Mr. Massot, thank you for your time, and good luck in the streets.

Fighting with cops [alone] isn't going to do that much. The politicians are still going to be behind their walls. But when their wallets really start hurting, that is when decisions are going to be made... That is already happening. A lot of [politicians] are pretty worried right now about the reaction of foreign investors because at the moment most of these politicians are ruled by the economy, and that is what they base their decisions on... If the people take back their economy, then those who are presently keeping them from it will definitely be out the window.

Van Deusen: What lessons could groups in Vermont, such as the Vermont Workers' Center and/or the AFL-CIO learn from the streets of France?

Xavier Massot: Number one, that there is no harm in getting out there and telling people that you're displeased about shit. Although compared to most of America I'd say Vermont is pretty good as far as that goes... Having been to enough states in the union, as far as the political consciousness of the average worker, its higher [in Vermont] than a lot of the rest of the country... As far as attitude goes... Vermonters have quite a bit in common with French workers.

Van Deusen: Could you expand upon these commonalities?

Xavier Massot: They both share a sense of solidarity. Of course other people have this too, but with Vermonters it goes very deep because they tend to know each other personally... Maybe it's because of the small population.

You know I was just in Brittany [a rural ethnically Gaelic province in the northwest], and Brittany is a lot like Vermont, both good and bad. It's a place where many of the age-old industries, things like farming, are dying. The region is surviving because of its reputation... Like other small rural regions in France, Brittany is increasingly getting by, in part, through a growing tourism industry. But unlike Vermont, this industry is owned by local people. What Vermont can take from France is that they should be careful to not have out-of-staters run [or own] its

Employment" in the name, but it has nothing to do with whether or not you're at your first job because you could be 26 and by the time you get out from under it your 28... or even older... The thing is [the law] was poorly delivered, it was hastily written, and nobody important was first consulted... It was a totally botched, hurried job.

Van Deusen: In the face of growing public pressure, will the government repeal the law?

Xavier Massot: I'm not sure. If I had to guess I would say either the Prime Minister will resign and the law will stay, or the law will go and the Prime Minister will stay.

Van Deusen: Right now France provides people with many social benefits such as universal healthcare, 6 week paid vacations, subsidized higher education, a thirty-five hour work week, etc.. Do you see this law as the first step in an attempt to dismantle the French social system? Are their parallels between what is going on in France today, and Margaret Thatcher's dismantling of the British welfare state in the 1980s?

Xavier Massot: No. No I don't think that [the French social system] is something anyone wants to lose.

Van Deusen: What was the government's intention with the law? What did they hope to get out of it?

Xavier Massot: The notion was, I think, that it was going to be a quick fix –a way to satisfy the immigrant underclass which is mostly North African and Arabs. [As far as the government was concerned] the thought was that if you make it easier to fire people, then employers would be quicker to hire people, especially those from the immigrant minority who suffer high unemployment. But [the law] was poorly written, and ultimately a waste of time... It was a clumsy attempt at something, and it shows the bad faith of the politicians who put it together.

Van Deusen: So the government's idea was that they would create more jobs, especially for minorities, by allowing the bosses to fire people more freely, and now, of course, the young people

and workers (immigrants included) are rejecting the plan as no more than a weakening of workers' rights. With that being said, could you elaborate on the situation regarding the Arabs and North African population in France?

Xavier Massot: [in the 1980s] French President Francois Mitterrand [a Socialist] said that 'France is a land of asylum', which is true but... [that statement] brought a lot more immigrants than I think *he* was arguing for. [Eds: *The North African and Arab population in France accounts for 10% of the total population.*] That has become a problem because on the one hand a lot of French people are resentful of the immigrants when they really shouldn't be. On the other hand a lot of immigrants are angry because they think they got sold onto the wrong deal. So that is going to have to be figured out... Everybody is pissed off. That is the problem.

Van Deusen: Of course late last year much of France was ablaze with riots emanating from immigrant ghettos. The rioters claimed that they were reacting to institutional racism of the French State. How deep does racism against Arabs and North Africans go in France? Have you personally witness such racism?

Xavier Massot: In certain housing projects, in some of the newer nicer ones, there is a quota on apartments based on last names. So if you have a foreign sounding last name there will be something like only three slots open. So they will only have something like two Arabs out of every fifty people... Speaking personally, my sister and her fiancé were trying to get an apartment, and his last name is a Greek name... And if my parents [who are from France and have French sounding names] hadn't interceded on his behalf they wouldn't have been allowed to move in because the owner didn't want a foreigner in the building.

Van Deusen: I would like to get back to the current situation with the strikes and demonstrations. What do you see being the short and long term effects of this upheaval?

Xavier Massot: The one group who may experience a lasting change from all this is the unions. They are really pissed and

they've been waiting for something like this for a while now. The [center-right] Prime Minister slapped them around for a little but when they've wanted to talk to him, so they are pretty outraged... [The unions] have handled these protests really well. They've gone out and really talked to people. They're the once who have made the politicians move the most... I think a lot of people who are protesting students right now will have more of an affinity for the unions when they get into the workplace.

As far as the electoral tide goes [in the upcoming national elections], I'd say of the young vote... maybe 70%... will go overwhelmingly to the left [Socialist Party] but not the hard left... [However] the syndrome of the [moderate] left and [moderate] right seeming very much the same, as in the U.S., is very much a tendency in France... Therefore, I think French politics will begin to change... In the next couple of years someone may get elected who is not from the middle-left or middle-right [i.e. someone from the neo-Trotskyite Parties or the far right National Front]. That is very possible.

Van Deusen: Is the popular uprising dynamic enough to affect change in the short term which transcends electoral politics? Can a socialist direct democracy emerge from this struggle?

Xavier Massot: The protests have created a sense of unity among a large chunk of society, but at the same time there is not going to be a French Revolution over this... I think France is going to remain a parliamentary system for a long time. But I think that increasingly the people who are in the parliament are going to become a lot more representative of the people who would want a direct democracy. Either that or the shit is going to hit the fan more and more... [Already] the country is averaging two major riots a year... If the government does not become more responsive, the nature of the strikes and protests are definitely going to become more still. I think people are going to get to the point where they are really willing to let society grind to a halt.