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An analysis of the attacks on French public sector strikes in 2007. The irony of supporters of capitalism urging a levelling down, at least for workers.

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The strikes in November, 2007, in France against Sarkozy's so-called reforms were inspiring. In Britain, we are so used to people grumbling but ultimately accepting any crap imposed by the government and bosses that it is refreshing to see so many people talking direct action and showing solidarity.

The attempt to "reform" the pension system is, of course, Sarkozy's first attempt to "do a Thatcher" and try to break French working class militancy. He has staked his self-proclaimed "reformist" credentials on facing down the protests, aiming to stand firm on an issue which created three weeks of strikes in 1995 and led to a U-turn and then collapse of Chirac's government. One of Sarkozy's top aides, Henri Guaino, warned if this reform could not be achieved, the entire Thatcherite programme was under threat – *"all the reforms will be compromised."*

We can only hope so. After the strike wave, the urge to "reform" was apparently placed on hold so, to some degree, direct action got the goods. However, there are some interesting theoretical issues at play here. Firstly, there is the hypocrisy of

the matter. During the run-up to the Iraq invasion, much was made of the necessity of resolute leaders to ignore the will of the majority and do what was best. Bowing to the majority, it was asserted, showed bad leadership and the key to good democratic government was precisely its willingness to defy the people.

Now, the fact that the majority of French citizens are, allegedly, against the strikes is being stressed. Surveys by newspapers, dutifully reported by the TV, indicate a small majority against the strikes, with a majority in favour reform of the schemes, which are seen as unfair. What can be said, beyond the obvious that what is good enough for the “leaders of the free world” should, surely, be good enough for the rest of us, including striking workers!

The hypocrisy does not stop there. Supporters of capitalism regularly attack socialism as being based on envy, hatred of those who do well and being rooted in altruism. Now, we are being subjected to attacks on “greedy” workers who have “unfair” terms and conditions and who should consider not their own interests but those of others. Apparently greed is bad – if it is working class people who are seeking better conditions. Ah, the hypocrisy of neo-liberals using pseudo-egalitarian arguments in order to level (others) downwards!

Luckily, a sizable minority of the French saw the attacks on the strikers for the hypocritical nonsense that they were. They knew that these so-called “reforms” were simply the first stage of an attack on all workers’ wages and conditions. Unions provide a floor for all workers under which wages, working conditions and terms and conditions cannot fall. Faced with the better wages and conditions unions win, other bosses have to offer more to attract staff and stop existing ones organising.

This applies to pensions as well. If the pension schemes of the so-called “privileged” workers are levelled downwards then this will allow the bosses to impose cuts on other workers. So the key is not to grumble about the “privileged” position of oth-

ers but, rather, ask why the non-“privileged” should not have the same. The French should, in other words, level up! If the majority think the pension schemes are unfair then they should join the strikes and demand that all have the same scheme. In that way, the militant minority can become the militant majority and “reforms from below” become a real possibility (and, hopefully, social revolution).

Which brings us nicely to the issue of minorities and majorities. Anyone reading Leninist critiques of anarchism will often come across the claim that we are “elitists” because we reject majority rule. American Marxists tend to point to Emma Goldman’s classic 1910 essay “**Minorities versus Majorities**” although they do not actually refute her arguments. Emma was not dismissing the masses, rather she stated the obvious – that the mass is not the source for new ideas. Rather, new, progressive, ideas are the product of minorities and which then spread to the majority by the actions of those minorities.

This applies, as Emma knew, in the class war as well, with most strikes starting with a minority taking action and the rest joining in. The action of the minority inspires the majority. The current strike wave is a classic example of this, with Sarkozy stressing his “democratic” credentials and portraying the strikes as the actions of an undemocratic minority. So the next time a Leninist proclaims anarchism as “undemocratic” remember to ask whether he supports the French strikes. If he does, then he is just as “elitist” as we are! Then point out that the Leninism is fundamentally elitist, aiming to give power to a “revolutionary” government made up of the few leaders of the “revolutionary” party. If the Bolshevik experience is anything to go by, this “revolutionary” government will then repress the working class, in its own name, to remain in power. All the while proclaiming that the “dictatorship of the proletariat” requires the “dictatorship of the party” (to use Trotsky’s frank admission).

Ultimately, the minority has the right to disobey as the majority can be wrong. This is doubly true when the majority are stupid enough to vote for a bunch of politicians who are seeking to make conditions for everyone bar the rich worse! And representative government is minority government, the rule by the many by the few. Genuine democracy is not based on grimly following the orders issued from above. It is about taking actively participating in the decisions that affect your live. As such, the minority of strikers are expressing a genuine democratic impulse which exposes the hypocrisy and limitations of representative so-called democracy and, needless to say, workplace fascism of capitalism.

Lastly, the impact of the strikes shows a striking confirmation of communist-anarchist principles. According to the marginal productivity theory of bourgeois economics, workers get paid according to their contribution to production. Yet when they go on strike, the media is full of reports of how much they are “costing” the country – and it always far exceeds the sum of their wages. Clearly, their contribution to the economy far exceeds their own wages (assuming, of course, the highly unrealistic assumptions required to prove marginal productivity theory exist – which they do, indeed can, not).

Which shows that the arguments of communist-anarchism are correct, that in modern industry there is no such thing as an individual product as all labour and its products are social. The combined productive work of a given set of workers far exceeds their wages, as shown when they collectively withdraw that labour.

And talking of marginal productivity theory, it should be noted that according to it wages should rise with productivity. Between the end of the Second World War and the mid-1970s in America, that was the case. Since then, productivity has continued to rise while medium wages have stagnated. Inequality, by some strange coincidence, has exploded. This period has

also, by coincidence, also been associated with the application of neo-liberal reforms and the breaking of the American unions and labour militancy. So 30 years of applying “reforms” to the economy to bring it more in line with economic ideology has refuted one of its key dogmas. Strangely, mainstream economics has not revised its position in light of this empirical evidence.

Perhaps, given this, the willingness of French workers to resist their Reagan clone can be understood.

Of course, there are problems. The union bureaucrats really have no idea what they are doing. The biggest rail union – the communist-dominated CGT has agreed to sector-by-sector talks between the government, unions and employers. You would expect the bosses to seek to divide and rule, but you really would expect unions to at least not to suggest it! Have they really forgotten how Thatcher went after industry after industry?

The key issue is whether there are sufficient links between the rank and file of the unions and a body of militants willing to organise independently of the bureaucracy. Without an organised rank-and-file movement, which can counteract the influence of the official leadership, it seems unlikely that the struggle will win. With a trade union bureaucracy which seems unwilling to pursue the most obvious means of success, wide-scale action, we can only hope that the French workers are as willing to defy their union leaderships as they are the Thatcher-would-be they have the misfortune to be governed by.