CrimethInc.
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A Retrospective on Social Upheaval in France, 2015–2017
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The least we can say is that, on the eve of the Presidential election, the supreme example of political spectacle, the climate in France is tenser than ever. During the last presidency and especially since the *Loi Travail,* part of the population has lost faith in the prevailing political system. Others see in the Alternative Left an option that will deliver us from our miseries. Still others, reinforced by the xenophobic discourses of the "migrant crisis," the election of Donald Trump, and the Brexit success, seek a solution in the *Front National,* which promises to defend a supposed "French identity" and national interest against globalization.

On account of its dangerous agenda and its popularity, activists have disrupted some of the electoral meetings of the*Front National,* including one in Nantes and another more recently in Paris. Moreover, for the first time in the history of the 5th Republic, the two traditional parties might not see one of their leaders elected as President. The outcome of the upcoming election remains more uncertain than ever; it is possible that a fascist, populist, and xenophobic government will come to power on May 7, 2017.

Yet in the face of all these uncertainties, one thing remains certain: whoever is elected, we will remain ungovernable!

As the French elections loom, threatening to elevate ultranationalist Marine le Pen to power alongside Donald Trump, the eyes of the world are turned to France. In this situation, we don't look to other French politicians for salvation, but to the ungovernable social movements that have rocked France over the past several years. The only surefire way to block neoliberal austerity measures, nationalist violence, and state repression is by building grassroots networks powerful enough to put a stop to them directly. In vivid firsthand accounts, the following retrospective traces social unrest in France from the declaration of the state of emergency in 2015 through the street riots and plaza occupations of 2016 up to the present moment. This is the first installment of a two-part series on the situation in France we are publishing in the lead-up to this weekend's elections; the second will follow tomorrow.

After the attacks claimed by ISIS in January and November 2015 and the declaration of a state of emergency, no one could have predicted that France was about to experience several months of upheaval. This is an attempt to offer an overview and analysis of the disruptions that followed the El Khomri work reform proposal (known as the *"Loi Travail"*). It is neither a comprehensive account nor a universal perspective, but a true story from the perspective of some who joined in the clashes. Although the events took place all over France—in Nantes, Rennes, Lille, Toulouse, Lyon, and elsewhere—we will focus on some of the actions in Paris in which we actively participated.

On the Eve of the Work Reform Proposal

At the end of February 2016, France was a powder keg. In retrospect, it's not surprising that the political instability of the preceding years, coupled with deepening distrust of the government, gave

anarchists the opportunity to play a leading role in the movement against the *Loi Travail.*

The ISIS attacks of 2015 offered the French government an excuse to intensify control of the entire population. Taking advantage of the shock that followed each attack and the fear of future attacks, the authorities passed a new surveillance law and declared a state of emergency. This enabled them to apply new "temporary" and "exceptional" laws, such as forbidding demonstrations in the name of national security, regulating people's movements and residence, and carrying out house searches without a judge's authorization. This state of emergency was only supposed to last three months; in fact, it is still in effect as of April 2017. For more information about the state of emergency, consult the 2015 dialogue between *CrimethInc.* and *Lundimatin.*

Meanwhile, the situation of migrants in France had been worsening since September 2015. The local authorities intensified their strategy of daily harassment, sending police forces to expel and dismantle several makeshift camps in Paris. The idea was clearly to ensure that groups of refugees would not be able to gather or organize effectively. Near Calais, the French government took drastic steps to reduce the number of people living in the "Jungle," the refugee camp near the border crossing to the UK. They stepped up violent policing, created a militarized and highly secured "humanitarian camp," and evicted the southern part of the Jungle on the morning of February 29, 2016. For more information on the plight of refugees in Calais, consult Calais Migrant Solidarity, which is close to the European No Border movement.

Moreover, in the course of the preceding years, political discontent had crystalized around a few specific environmental issues, also known as *"projets inutiles"* (useless projects), and the resulting ZADs ("zones to be defended"). These include a new train line between Lyon and Turin (the notorious TAV), the dam project in Sivens where police brutally murdered the young activist Rémi Fraisse in November 2014, and the new airport at Notre-Dame-Des-

media coverage, revealing once more how the authorities try to cover up evidence and deny obvious facts.

Politicians saw this event as an opportunity to reinforce their positions in view of the upcoming elections. For example, reaffirming once more her commitment to authority and law enforcement, Marine Le Pen gave all her support to the police officers involved in the case.

However, despite promises to solve the case and uncover the truth behind this so-called "police burr," the French government did not succeed in containing popular anger and thirst for vengeance. Riots and clashes with police immediately broke out in the suburbs. At *Aulnay-sous-Bois,* the police shot live rounds to disperse rioters. These events remind us of 2005, when the deaths of Zyed and Bouna—two teenagers who were chased by the police—moved part of the population living in these territories called "suburbs" to revolt. On February 11, 2017 thousands of people gathered in front of the Bobigny Court to show their solidarity with Théo and his family. The massive presence of police forces near the Court and in nearby streets exacerbated the frustration of the crowd, who chose to attack and confront them until late that night..

Numerous protests against police violence and in solidarity with Théo were also organized in Paris, Rennes, and Nantes, which brought back some of the atmosphere we had experienced a year before during the *Loi Travail:* uncontrollable demonstrations, property destruction, confrontations with police.

Then, on March 26, 2017, members of the anti-criminality brigade (BAC) killed Liu Shaoyo while he was preparing dinner for his family. As always, the authorities tried to explain away this "accidental" death by giving their own version of the event. The Shaoyo family itself contests this version, as they were present during the police raid. Again, this murder led to several gatherings and protests in front of police stations.

treatment site near *Bure,* a small village located in the *Meuse* region of France. The purpose of the ANDRA is to study the soil in the region to find the perfect location for burying high-level nuclear waste. There is no need to explain the environmental consequences of such a project. This is why, for several years now, activists have been organizing resistance in the region through legal objections, protests, occupations, direct action, and sabotage. Last February, activists succeeded in tearing down the fences surrounding the ANDRA laboratory.

In order to weaken the resistance against this project, French authorities employed the tools offered by the "state of emergency," issuing numerous "inadmissibility" documents that forbid activists to be physically present in the region of *Bure* However, these threats did not have the expected effect, as some activists publicly expressed their will to continue the struggle in the field.

Finally, during the last months, some tragic events involving police violence and murders have led to several protests and riots.

Last summer, on July 19, 2016, 24-year-old Adama Traoré was found dead after being arrested by the police. Quickly, authorities decided to cover the incident by providing the result of an autopsy, explaining that the death of the young man was not related to the conditions of his arrest but due to personal health problems. However, further autopsies and testimony revealed new information and a whole different story than the one presented by official authorities. After Adama's death, his family organized numerous protests and gatherings, alongside other organizations, to denounce police violence and impunity.

More recently, on February 2, 2017, after a police control, 22-year-old Théo was hospitalized on account of a long wound inside the anal canal and a lesion of the sphincter muscle. Théo explained that during the police control, one officer penetrated him with his telescopic baton. The first official statement made by authorities did not mention any of this. This tragic event received widespread

Landes, regarding which the French government gave authorization to begin construction October 2016.

In this context, it was not surprising that when the government invoked the state of emergency to shut down the official demonstrations during the international summit on climate change (COP 21) in Paris beginning on November 30, 2015, we decided to take the streets to defy them. The clashes with the police that took place at Place de la République the day before the opening of the COP 21 were a foretaste of what was to occur regularly on those streets few months later.

All this explains why the French government faced an impasse at the beginning of 2016. Its popularity was low; people criticized its decisions, feeling betrayed by the openly neoliberal and repressive agenda of the traditional "Parti Socialiste." However, desiring to continue the economic restructuring that followed the international financial crisis of 2008 and to keep presidential promises such as reducing unemployment rates, President François Hollande sought to revitalize his presidency by reshuffling his cabinet on February 2016. A few days later, Myriam El Khomri, the newly appointed Minister of Labor, presented the government's new work reform as a way to facilitate employment and boost economic recovery. Despite this framing, it was easy to see that the primary objective of the law was to facilitate corporate flexibility at the expense of workers' rights. In a nutshell, this law would make working conditions more precarious than they already are.

Soon after the reform was announced, some people started mobilizing via online videos asking viewers to sign a petition against the law. Meanwhile, some radical groups appealed to people to take the streets and go on strike. Little by little, other organizations joined these calls until a national day of action against the *Loi Travail* was planned for Wednesday, March 9. Trade union leaders did not want to take part in this day of action, as they were not behind the call. However, after realizing that they were losing

authority among their ranks as numerous trade unionists decided to attend the national demonstration as individuals, some major trade unions (including the CGT, FO, Solidaires, and FSU) decided at the last minute to join the festivities.

We, too, decided to participate in the action. But we did not take the streets because we were opposed to this specific law or wanted a better one. Rather, we went because we consider capitalism and work itself to be illegitimate, alienating, and obstructive to our research and emancipation. On the eve of the first national mobilization, we had no idea that these calls would lead to four continuous months of mobilization.

Sowing the Seeds of Revolt

March 9, 2016 – Early in the morning, students decided to block access to their high schools. Meanwhile, in several universities, students were gathering to prepare their banners for the afternoon march. Later that morning, hundreds of students and activists converged at *Place de la Nation* to demonstrate without any political affiliations, official organizations, or trade unions. Taking advantage of a surprisingly low police presence, this large group of people took the streets, blocking traffic and throwing projectiles and paint bombs at a McDonald's restaurant. This inspired some participants to begin tagging billboards and walls and smashing the windows of cell phone stores, real estate and insurance agencies, and banks, not to mention ATMs and cameras.

This continued without interruption for more than 30 minutes until we reached *Place de la Bastille*. There, several brigades of riot police (*CRS* and/or *Gardes Mobiles*) were blocking the most direct access to the touristic sites and stores of downtown Paris. Some people threw projectiles at the police as a distraction so the rest of us could continue our march along another unblocked boulevard. Nevertheless, just before we reached a bridge that would have lead

affinity groups, people are still organizing, attacking, and resisting the old world and the pawns that serve it.

Since the end of the mobilization against the *Loi Travail et son monde,* the French government has intensified its investigations of those identified as "threats." This is why, while several comrades were already in custody for taking part of some of the events described above, the authorities arrested another comrade in early December 2016. Since then, Damien has been accused of taking part in several attacks during the night of April 14, 2016, when an autonomous march resulted in thousand of euros in property destruction. After going to trial on January 19, 2017, he has been sentenced to 10 months in prison and 14,000€ of restitution.

However, several solidarity actions took place since Damien's arrest: in mid-December, several bank ATMs were destroyed in Besançon and Marseilles; on December 26 (Damien's birthday), a luxury car was set on fire in an upper-class district of Paris; finally, at the end of December, in Brussels, several billboards and a security car were destroyed, while on New Year's Eve a Vinci car and a Bam car—both companies known for building prisons—were set on fire.. Several actions also took place in front of the *Fleury Mérogis* prison, where some people who actively took part of the mobilization against the *Loi Travail* are detained.

Meanwhile, at the end of March 2017, Antonin, a member of the Paris and Suburbs Antifascist Action, was released from prison after spending 10 months in custody on account of the police car set on fire on May 18, 2016. Unfortunately, some other comrades remain incarcerated: Kara, Nico, Krème, and Damien.

In the meantime, actions of resistance have intensified throughout France in the different ZADs against the several useless projects. While *Notre-Dame-des-Landes* remains the best known example of activist resistance in the name of environment preservation in France, another conflict is gaining in importance. For about 20 years, the ANDRA (the National Agency for the Treatment of Radioactive Waste) has intended to establish its new

This tendency to focus on confrontation alone is interrelated with the problem of becoming integrated into the same spectacle that we criticize. We all know that media outlets are partial to sensational and spectacular images of "rioters" attacking police forces. Nowadays, we are not only under the cameras of mainstream media and police officers, but also of other activists who are documenting every moment of our actions. Like it or not, we too are becoming prisoners of our image. By actively participating in reinforcing the culture of the spectacle, we feed and reinforce our own obsession with rioting and insurrection. Even if we criticize this trend, we also acknowledge that such footage might have some utility for presenting events to other activists.

Finally, we believe that we should distance ourselves from the current obsession with insurrection and its rhetoric. If we do not do so, we may end up distracting ourselves from our true objectives. Instead, we should keep our minds clear, work together on new projects, and find new and subversive ways to liberate ourselves from the old world. Several months ago, *appelistes* claimed that there will be no presidential election in 2017; with the benefit of hindsight, this strikes us as a bit optimistic. All the same, it is time to learn from our mistakes, but also from our victories, to acknowledge our limits and our capacities to exceed some of them. All this, in order to advance upon the future and prepare ourselves for new horizons.

Postscript: On the Eve of the Presidential election

We will conclude with a brief overview of several events that took place in France since we drafted this article at the end of 2016. We hope that it will give a clearer picture of the situation in France before the upcoming elections, but also demonstrate that, alone or in

to another district of Paris, several riot police squads and their vehicles blocked our path. This successfully reduced our numbers, as some students left the action in order to avoid confrontation. The morning ended in a cat and mouse game, as small groups of protesters walked through the narrow streets of the *Saint Paul* district to avoid police control and arrest.

That afternoon, people converged at *Place de la République* for the official demonstration. When we arrived on site, it was a great pleasure to see the square and its surroundings full of people. We were surprised to see so many people gathering in the streets under the state of emergency, considering that few months before, during the COP 21, only a few thousand people had gathered at *Place de la République.*

At the beginning of the protest, information started to circulate that an autonomous group would form somewhere in the middle of the trade unions and official organizations. This marked the emergence of a large group of individuals from different backgrounds (anarchists, *appelistes/tiqqunistes,* insurrectionists, antifascists, etc.) that later came to be known as the *"cortège autonome"* ("autonomous procession") or *"cortège de tête"* ("leading procession").

As during the morning action, people within the autonomous group started targeting major symbols of capitalism; this continued from *République* to *Nation.* Again, every single bus station, bank, and real estate or insurance agency saw its façade smashed and tagged. Although the autonomous group welcomed such actions with cheers and anti-capitalist chants, other demonstrators criticised them, and some even tried to personally interpose themselves to obstruct these actions. Surprisingly, during the hours that the demonstration lasted, the police made very few appearances.

March 17, 2016 – Only a week after the first demonstration against the *Loi Travail,* we had another appointment to continue the struggle on Thursday, March 17. That same day, the *Conseil d'Etat*—an institution responsible for advising the French govern-

ment on the lawfulness of law projects—was due to present an opinion on the proposed law. Once again, we decided to join hundreds of students at *Place de la Nation* for another morning action.

That day, more people attended the morning action, probably due to the increase of blockades at high schools and general assemblies in universities. The atmosphere among the crowd that rushed into the main boulevard was a pleasant mix of joy, friendship, and determination. Nevertheless, it was immediately clear that events wouldn't play out the way they had the previous week. After only ten minutes in the streets, we saw the first riot police show up in force. As soon as we saw their vehicles passing in front of us, we knew that confrontations would be inevitable. Their orders were probably to avoid any kind of public loss of control, and to make specific and targeted arrests.

The first projectiles were thrown at the police vehicles; some of us picked up tools from a nearby construction site to attack them. Others took up stones and barriers to create a more offensive bloc to confront the police. The police eventually blocked the boulevard in front of us. The confrontation escalated for several long minutes as we tried to press forward and create a breach in their lines. People threw stones, glass bottles, and all kinds of projectiles at riot police, who answered with tear gas canisters, flash-bang grenades, and rubber bullets.

Recognizing that we could not maintain the pressure any longer, we retreated in hopes of finding another route to our intended destination. After running through narrow streets, we arrived at another boulevard, only to see police trucks blocking our path once again. Taking advantage of the fact that we could not advance, police officers in plain clothes who had been following us throughout the action carried out several violent arrests. Many of us left the action as soon as we saw the first arrests, recognizing the police trap slowly closing on us.

A couple hours later, we attended the afternoon protest organized by student unions and organizations. As soon as we found

The truth is that, for some of them, the journey ended in French detention centers. A week later, the dismantlement of the "Jungle" concluded as the last shelters were destroyed on the afternoon of October 31. More than 6000 migrants and refugees were evicted during this operation. On Monday, November 14, the Administrative Court of Appeal of Nantes rendered its decision, authorizing the construction of the Notre-Dame-Des-Landes airport, ignoring the proofs of potential environmental impact presented a week before by its own public rapporteur.

In view of the overall political and social situation in France, we can see that the upcoming months will be crucial in shaping our future. This is why we took the time to analyze what happened during the months of social upheaval against the *Loi Travail et son monde,* to make a self-criticism and raise questions. Such reflections should be made collectively, so that they benefit from many different experiences and analyses.

To offer our own contribution to this process, we would like to discuss how the glorification of "insurrection" in our circles could end up alienating us. Of course, we have all shared this dream at least once—that people would suddenly rise up to overthrow the government together. Unfortunately, it seems to us that during the events related to the *Loi Travail,* this obsession mostly resulted in concentrating our efforts on directly confronting police forces. These confrontations became a kind of routine—for some of us, they became the only reason to participate in a demonstration.

Over time, this approach showed its limits, as police squads ceased to be surprised by our attacks. Several times, it was obvious that they were expecting us to attack, that they actually wanted us to. Those were the moments when we missed important opportunities to diversify our tactics and implement new strategies in order to continue taking them by surprise. Once again, we are convinced that spontaneity, mobility, and the element of surprise are the key elements that can give us a clear advantage.

iste, the government decided to simply cancel the event. On August 31, *Nuit Debout* gathered several hundred people at *Place de la République* for their first general assembly since summer break. Then, to celebrate students going back to school, there was another national demonstration against the *Loi Travail et son monde* on September 15. As usual, there were intense confrontations with the police; several petrol bombs were thrown at the riot squads. Unfortunately, since then, no more major demonstrations against the *Loi Travail* have occurred.

In the meantime, fascists, religious traditionalists, conservatives, and police forces have also been mobilizing. The *Manif Pour Tous,* an organization gathering religious traditionalists, homophobes, and fascists that became notorious after demonstrating against same-sex marriage in late 2012–2013, took the streets again in October 2016 to denounce gender theory, Medically Assisted Procreation, and third-party reproduction. The demonstration gathered tens of thousands of people, far exceeding their earlier numbers. Moreover, in Paris, an accommodation center for homeless people has been attacked several times since its construction. The last attack occurred on November 5, at night, when someone tried to set the center on fire while 27 adults and 24 children were inside it. Finally, in late October, police officers took the streets after one of them was injured by a petrol bomb while on duty in a case not related to the movement against the *Loi Travail.* They were demanding more equipment and assistance from the government, but also that the conditions justifying self-defense should be reviewed.

As the next Presidential elections were to take place in spring 2017, the government decided to accelerate its pace of decision-making by authorizing the complete destruction and eviction of the "Jungle," the migrant camp in Calais on the way to Britain. The operation began on October 24. While bulldozers and excavators protected by police were destroying tents and other hand-made habitations, migrants were forcibly sent to other accommodations.

the *"cortège autonome,"* we realized that this was not a good idea. Indeed, to our surprise, this segment of the march was small and isolated from other groups of people. Moreover, on each side of the boulevard, police officers in plain clothes and members of the anti-criminality brigade (BAC) were following us.

The first part of the demonstration was quiet and passive, as we were all concerned about the police observing us. Nevertheless, we managed to outwit police vigilance by dividing the "autonomous procession," joining the mass of students within their organization- and union-free procession. Being among students allowed several of us to take action, especially against the main police station of the 13th district. Several arrests were made just before we arrived at *Place d'Italie,* the end of the demonstration. The square was completely surrounded by police forces; luckily for us, we entered the metro without being searched or controlled.

Earlier in the afternoon, an invitation spread by word of mouth suggested that an occupation and a general assembly to discuss the perspectives of this emerging movement would take place at the university of *Tolbiac* later that night. Several activists and students sneaked into the closed university and started the occupation. Unfortunately, members of the university administration called the police. After only several minutes, hundreds of CRS and BAC members entered the university, charging and expelling the occupants.

The events that took place on Thursday, March 17 represent a key moment in the mobilization against the *Loi Travail.* The violent interventions made by law enforcement authorities showed that the government was determined to suppress the budding youth movement by any means necessary. With hindsight, this strategy was a mistake—for the stronger the repression, the more people joined the "autonomous" group, chanting "everyone hates the police" and confronting them. From a more positive point of view, these first two days of action and mobilization showed some of our potential to go on the offensive—prepared to fight back, to improvise, to organize, and to take initiatives collectively.

During the last two weeks of March, the mobilization against the work reform intensified. Several general assemblies took place in universities and among radical circles. This is where the first disagreements about strategy, objectives, and "agenda" emerged. For some of us, the priority was to take the lead during protests and confront police forces, while others thought we should also take advantage of this new social movement to diversify our strategies by sharing our ideals with others. The difficulty of finding common ground we experienced during our first general assemblies was not an isolated case. In Paris, some radical groups always try to defend their own image and interests by imposing their point of view on others. We often face this problem in autonomous circles: the challenge of dealing with power dynamics and the hegemony of certain groups or individuals.

On March 24, students and workers took the streets again. Despite the fact that numerous high schools and universities were blocked during the day, the afternoon demonstration gathered fewer people than before, as most of the official calls had been made by student organizations. The lower number of participants did not affect the determination of some of us, as evidenced by several offensive initiatives, confrontations with the police, and attempts to rescue arrestees. The official march ended with a spontaneous uncontrolled protest in the district of the Eiffel Tower, leading to a game of hide-and-seek with riot police in the *Champs de Mars.*

Earlier that day, video footage of police officers surrounding and punching a teenager had spread across the internet. This had occurred that morning near the Bergson high school in the 19th *Arrondissement* while students were blocking their school. The following day, students organized a wild demonstration leaving from Bergson high school in response to the numerous cases of police violence since the beginning of the movement. While wandering in the streets, some of them sought revenge by attacking several police stations.

barbecue organized by some people close to the *appelistes,* about a hundred people left the party to enjoy a nice walk in the warm summer night. People left *Ménilmontant* and took the *Boulevard de Belleville.* We reached the *Belleville* metro station after several detours through adjacent streets where people destroyed trashcans, wrote on walls, and chanted joyfully. There, some of us attacked the CFDT headquarters, destroying all its front windows. Several minutes after, as police forces were finally showing up, we left the boulevard and disappeared into adjoining streets.

It was not the first time that trade union buildings were targeted during the movement against the *Loi Travail.* The CFDT (*Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail,* French Democratic Confederation of Work) was regularly targeted for refusing to take a stand against the law.

Time to Learn from Our Mistakes and Move toward the Future

What happened next was predictable. As always occurs during confrontational social movements, the government contained popular discontent as much as it could while playing for time. This strategy seems to have been fruitful: as the summer holidays were approaching, officials knew that the movement against the *Loi Travail et son monde* would die down. France has a regrettable tendency to give up struggles as soon as the summer holidays are in sight. Naturally, politicians are aware of this and take advantage of it by passing "sensitive" laws when no one is around to resist.

As expected, after two more applications of article 49:3 of the Constitution, the *Assemblée Nationale* adopted the *Loi Travail* despite the months of mobilization against it.

Since the law was adopted, more events have occurred in France. First, frightened by the appeals that insurrectionists and anarchists made to prevent the traditional summer meeting of the *Parti Social-*

security car on fire. Police squads rapidly arrived at the square. The tension was palpable. We knew that more confrontations were going to occur. Then about a thousand people decided to leave the square for a wild march, followed close behind by police vehicles. That was when we decided to leave the action and *République.*

After that day, the government changed its strategy regarding demonstrations. First, the authorities canceled a major demonstration that was planned for June 23. Their justification for doing so was that, due to the past events during the previous demonstration, they were not able to ensure the safety of property or individuals anymore. What an interesting statement, the government acknowledging its complete loss of power! However, due to the objections of trade unions, the authorities reconsidered their decision. Finally, the demonstration was authorized for June 23, on two conditions: the authorities would impose its route, and police would intensify their control of demonstrators.

Naturally, trade union leaders accepted these conditions. We decided not to take part in this demonstration. There was no reason for us to rush straight into a trap.

Shortly before June 23, we learned that the march would make a mile-long loop around the Parisian marina, leaving *Place de la Bastille* to finally reach… *Place de la Bastille.* To prevent property destruction or confrontations, the authorities covered every potential target with wooden planks, established a large number of security checkpoints, and carefully positioned their troops all around the route, so that wherever you went during the demonstration, police squads would be facing you. Despite all these measures, the demonstration gathered more than 30,000 participants; it seems that some people really love walking in circles and being monitored. On June 28, another demonstration was organized between *Place de la Bastille* and *Place d'Italie,* but as the authorities were once again imposing the rules, we decided to stay home.

However, we continued taking part in less official initiatives at night at *République.* On the evening of July 2, after attending a

Finally, another national call against the *Loi Travail* was made on March 31. This demonstration was one of the largest that took place in Paris that whole spring. Despite the heavy rain, hundreds of thousands people marched on the streets of the French capital city. That day, the *"cortège autonome"* took the lead, and kept its position to the end of the event. For the first time since the beginning of the movement, a kind of cohesion appeared among the autonomous groups: a solid black bloc asserted itself as a single force despite being composed of many different affinity groups. At the end of the protest, responding to a call made earlier that week, hundreds of people converged at *Place de la République* with a specific goal and lots of ambitions.

Nuit Debout—A Failed Attempt to Build a French Occupy Movement?

Nuit Debout began the evening of Thursday, March 31, when, following that afternoon's demonstration, activists from a variety of political and social backgrounds gathered at *Place de la République* with the idea of occupying the square. That night, the first tents and plastic tarps appeared—things we had not seen since refugees were occupying the square in November 2015. Numerous people attended the first general assembly of what was intended to be the French Occupy movement. In fact, *Nuit Debout* and the occupation of the *République* had been planned carefully in advance by people close to the French alternative Left. This movement was not as spontaneous as it was intended to appear.

Over the following days, new initiatives and collectives joined *Nuit Debout.* During the day, workshops (woodworking, gardening, etc.) and discussions on various subjects (direct democracy, environmental issues, anti-speciesism, police violence, etc.) took place. People were regularly invited to form small groups, sit down, and start to exchange their opinions and views on a selected topic.

Activists and anarchist publishers set up their tables to provide radical literature, raising money to cover the lawyers' fees of comrades. At night, *Place de la République* was filled up with people attending the daily general assembly and related activities such as documentary projections, outdoor shows, and artistic projects. A do-it-yourself restaurant offered food in exchange for donations, and people stayed out until really late at night. *Nuit Debout* became a logical rendezvous point for radical activists and anarchists to exchange, debate, organize, and take action.

At first, *Nuit Debout* brought a new dynamic to the movement against the *Loi Travail* and to activism in general. During its first month of existence, the occupation at *Place de la République* was essential in enabling us to meet new people, extend our relationships, develop our capacities, and take more initiatives. Some people were curious to learn about new political theories; others finally felt the need to get involved and organize. Every night of April, we could feel this mix of joy, love, excitement, effervescence, and power emanating from each one of us while we waited for the next opportunity to take action. There was a naïve feeling in the air that something new and radically different was at hand.

Nuit Debout provided us with a fixed location, which enabled us to initiate both spontaneous and planned actions. If you were at *Place de la République* at night during April or May, you could be sure that several times a week you would participate in wild demonstrations and confrontations with riot police. However, this occupation movement that had initially gathered thousands of people progressively lost attendance throughout May. The various efforts to evict the *Place de la République* initiated by local authorities in the name of maintaining social order succeeded in discouraging some of the occupants of the square. By the end of June, the movement and its daily general assembly only gathered a maximum of a hundred people.

ment against the *Loi Travail et son monde,* the authorities used a water cannon to disperse the crowd. Police violence also intensified. During the hour we spent in the demonstration, we saw about ten people injured or laying on the ground receiving assistance from demonstrators, street medics, or emergency personnel.

As planned, the demonstration ended at the *Esplanade des Invalides.* While the march was slowly entering the esplanade, the classic closing confrontations began. Protesters started attacking the water cannon and the closest police lines. Riot police responded, covering the esplanade with tear gas. Coming from the sides, groups from the anti-criminality brigade (BAC) in plainclothes approached the confrontation zones. Police forces were progressively gaining control of the entire zone. After more than half an hour of chaos, after witnessing a distress flare from police lines, we decided that it was time to leave the esplanade before the authorities managed to close all the exits.

While withdrawing from *Invalides,* we learned that some people were gathering near the Senate in the Sorbonne district for a "picnic and soccer" party. Curious to know what it was about, we decided to go there. About a hundred people were there, holding a discussion in some kind of assembly. After minutes of waiting, doing absolutely nothing as the access to the Senate was heavily guarded, we finally decided to continue the day of protest against the *Loi Travail* by stopping traffic and taking the streets for a nice walk. We first took the direction of the *Panthéon,* going up the *rue Soufflot.* Then, as police vehicles were following us, we accelerated our pace and took the *rue Saint Jacques.* We turned in front of the prestigious *Collège de France,* took the first narrow street, and climbed up the hill as police vehicles were really close to us. Unfortunately, as soon as we reached the *Panthéon* again from another side, we had to disperse as police were exiting their vehicles.

After this quick but fun wild action, we went to *Place de la République.* The square was surprisingly crowded, and a bit after 9 pm some of us decided to improve the setting by setting a metro

some people responded by attacking them. Unfortunately, after a while, police squads succeeded in surrounding what remained of the march.

June 14, 2016 – There were nationwide appeals to join the afternoon demonstration in Paris on this special day. We heard that for the occasion, several hundred buses were supposed to converge in the capital city. It seemed that people were more determined than ever to confront the government. The demonstration was supposed to start from the *Place d'Italie* and take main boulevards to the *Esplanade des Invalides.* Choosing that location as the point of arrival brought back good memories of riots during a demonstration against the CPE law in March 2006—for some of us, our first experiences of rioting. Could we consider this some kind of sign?

Unfortunately, some of us joined the demonstration pretty late. As a result, we missed some really intense confrontations with police, especially the one at the metro station *Duroc,* near the children's hospital *Necker.* While moving through the crowd to get closer to the head of the march, we realized a few things. First, an impressive number of people were in Paris to demonstrate; it was impossible to see both ends of the protest at once. It has been said that about one million people walked in the streets of Paris that day. Second, we experienced real cohesion, solidarity, and trust among the people who formed the now classic non-affiliated autonomous procession. Whether a trade unionist, a student, or an anarchist, everyone was free to act as she or he wanted, and everyone was taking care of each other. For example, we saw groups of trade unionists confronting police lines, and some of them even helped us to de-arrest comrades.

The intensity of confrontations peaked during this demonstration. The streets were covered with projectiles of all kinds: stones, broken glass bottles, torches, empty tear gas canisters, rubber bullets, flash-bang grenades. The walls were covered with painted messages; the symbols of the old world were destroyed, the windows smashed. For the first time since the beginning of the move-

The Strengths and Limits of *Nuit Debout*

From an interview conducted with anarchist participants:

Why did "Nuit Debout" take place in 2016, rather than 2011?

After the 2008 international financial crisis, several European countries, such as Greece and Spain, saw their economies faltering or collapsing. In order to recover from the crisis and to maintain its economic and geographic power, the European Union and the governments that compose it began to impose austerity measures. Three years later, in 2011, the situation remained precarious. Countries such as Greece and Spain were still experiencing increasing poverty and astronomical unemployment rates. The global context at that time, but also the fact that these governments made the population "pay" for their crisis, generated defiance against politicians and the global economic system, producing movements such as the *15 de Mayo* in Spain and the anti-austerity movement in Greece, not to mention Occupy Wall Street in the US.

However, as Pierre Haski explains, the context in France was different. Compared to Greece and Spain, France was still in better "health," maintaining its leading influence in Europe alongside Germany. In the collective imagination, the Greek and Spanish situations were unthinkable in France. But the main reason an Occupy movement did not emerge in France then, despite several attempts, was due to the French electoral calendar: 2011 marked the last year of Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency. Consequently, most public attention was turned to the upcoming 2012 presidential election and the hopes represented by the socialist François Hollande.

Of course, once elected, he did not create the improvements people wanted to see in their lives.

So France followed a different trajectory than Greece and Spain. While the fierce movements in those countries were ultimately, albeit temporarily, pacified by the ascension of "alternative" political parties such as *Podemos* and *Syriza,* part of the French population

gave the Socialist party a chance before becoming absolutely disillusioned by François Hollande and government in general.

It was strange for us in the US to witness French people employing a strategy and rhetoric that we imagined had been thoroughly exhausted four years earlier, when many people in the US tend to think of France as the avant-garde of radical theory and practice. How were the idea of occupying public space and the rhetoric of democracy and demands able to gain so much traction on the popular imagination in France?

First, concerning the image some people in the US have of France, we have to say that unfortunately it is related to some kind of romanticism. Yes, in the past, France had its avant-garde moments in radical theory and practice; but like in every country, radical theory and practice face moments of inefficiency and failure. Living in France, we have a more critical opinion of radicalism and its capacity to change things here. Luckily, events like the ones during the first half of 2016 revitalize our circles and create new momentum.

Now to answer your question: we can trace the popularity of democratic rhetoric and the idea of occupying public space in France to multiple origins. For one thing, France has a longstanding connection with the concept of democracy itself. A significant part of the population believes that we should not criticize the democratic system, as it is supposedly the only alternative to fascism or dictatorship. This notion is so deeply rooted that even leftist protesters criticize democracy only to reform and improve and thus reinforce it.

Another source of enthusiasm for building an Occupy movement could be the popularity of concepts such as "civil disobedience," "non-violence," and "participatory democracy" among the French alternative Left. Mainstream activism has an unfortunate tendency to imitate what has already been done rather than learning from past mistakes to create something new. Of course, the people who initiated *Nuit Debout* might have had a complete dif-

tacked the police car had masked their faces. Under the pressure of the police unions, the judges incarcerated four of our comrades under the following charges: attempted voluntary manslaughter of a person holding public office, destruction of property, group violence, and participating in a masked armed group. Some of them are members or sympathizers of the Paris and suburbs Antifascist Action; another is Kara Wild, an anarchist comrade and trans person from the United States.

June 4, 2016 – While the French government and much of the population were waiting for the opening of the European Football Cup tournament in France on June 10, we were all focused on keeping the movement against the *Loi Travail et son monde* alive. On June 4, as every year since 2013, an antifascist demonstration took place to commemorate the death of the young activist Clément Méric, who was murdered by neo-Nazis on June 5, 2013.

Hundreds of people gathered at *Place de la Bataille de Stalingrad,* some German comrades joined us for the occasion, and after a long wait, the crowd started leaving the square. We heard that the police had made it clear that as soon as any property destruction or confrontations took place, they would immediately stop and disperse the procession—as if we cared about their threats!

The antifascist and autonomous crowd crossed the *Boulevard de la Villette* and took the *Quai de Valmy.* It was not a coincidence that authorities changed our route at the last minute to redirect us onto the same street where the police car had been set on fire a couple weeks before. However, as soon as we entered the street, the black wave got to work. Windows were smashed, walls were spray-painted, and torches were lit as people chanted anti-capitalist and antifascist slogans. Every single symbol of gentrification on our path was redecorated to our liking.

After a little less than a mile, some of us decided to leave the action, while the rest of the march found itself face to face with police forces at precisely the location where the police car had been set on fire. Considering their presence a deliberate provocation,

lice officers joining the demonstration would not be at work, and therefore even more free from regulations than police officers usually are. Early in the morning, some us met away from the square, with the intention of approaching it casually in groups of two or three.

Unfortunately, this strategy didn't work at all. As we headed towards *République,* two of us passed by two unmarked police vehicles that we had previously spotted, and as soon as we crossed the next street, officers in plain clothes stopped us to search and interrogate us. After several failed attempts to learn what we were doing in the area and whether we were involved with the "autonomous left-wing movement," the leader of the squad lost his patience and started to threaten us. They had nothing they could use against us, so we left them.

In the meantime, at *République,* a few hundred people were gathering for the "anti-cop hatred" protest. Some politicians showed up to support the angry crowd of police officers and sympathizers. The crowd warmly welcomed several members of the *Front National* who joined the protest. Some of us succeeded in gathering not to far from the square, but as all the entrances were heavily guarded, we decided to start our own action near the police gathering. While walking on the *Quai de Valmy,* demonstrators fortuitously encountered a police patrol. Without a second thought, they attacked the police car stuck in traffic, smashing its windows and throwing a lit torch in the back seat. The police officers exited their vehicle and impotently watched it go up in flames.

Whether or not we agree with the way the events unfolded, setting a police car on fire—while only half a mile away, police officers were protesting against "anti-police hatred"—is a beautiful political act, full of poetry and symbolism. However, after this event, the authorities carried out witch-hunts, arresting six people altogether. During the subsequent trials, judges said that some of those charged had been identified by an undercover police officer—which is quite surprising, considering that the protesters who at-

ferent vision of the effectiveness of such a movement, and fewer criticisms regarding the limits and failures of the Occupy movements than we do as anarchists.

In other words, French activists also fall into the trap of romanticism regarding foreign actions, and this admiration towards Occupy movements could be an example of it.

What is the significance of the *Place de la République,* where the first clashes took place after the declaration of the State of Emergency and the Nuit Debout occupations later began?

The decision to occupy the *Place de la République* likely had more to do with geographical convenience and traditional political symbolism than revolutionary history, imagery, or strategy. The square is served by five major metro lines, easily accessible by foot, and at the junction of three of the 20 districts of Paris. All these criteria make *Place de la République* one of the most important central places of the French capital city. Moreover, since its renovation in 2013, the square includes a large pedestrian space, which enables crowds to gather for all kinds of occasions: outdoor shows, demonstrations, gatherings, and the like. However, the new setup of the *Place de la République* also serves those who aim to maintain social order. As people are concentrated in the center of the square, police forces can be strategically positioned in every single adjacent street and boulevard, easily surrounding, controlling, and containing the crowd.

Nevertheless, there is much to say regarding the history and symbolism of *Place de la République.* First, as its name suggests, the Parisian square pays tribute to the political regime under which we are living—the Fifth Republic. However, the origin of its name dates back to the end of the 19th century. The Second Empire ended on September 2, 1870 after the defeat of the French army in Sedan and the capture of emperor Napoleon III by Prussia. On September 4, the Third Republic was proclaimed as a desperate attempt to reestablish political stability within the country. Contrary to the

French government's hopes, the first years of the Third Republic included the events of the Paris Commune, a failed attempt to restore the Monarchy, and numerous political crises. Political stability did not return to France until Jules Grevy was elected President in1879. In 1883, a large statue to the glory of the Republic was inaugurated at the center of the square, then called the *Place du Chateau d'Eau,* renamed *Place de la République* in 1889.

As for other symbolism, the traditional Left is also historically associated with the *Place de la République.* When the traditional Left or trade unions take the streets for demonstrations, the *République* square is usually a central location on their route. For example, every year, the May Day protest starts from *Place de la République.* More recently, just after the Paris attacks in 2015, politicians and part of the population used the square as a mourning site.

Finally, if the square has significance for anarchists, it is because since September 2015, *Place de la République* has been the site of many struggles, including refugees' camps, defying the "state of emergency" by demonstrating against the COP 21, and more.

How did the situation in Paris compare with those in other regions? What kinds of coordination existed, formal or informal?

At some point, the situation in Paris felt really good, as more and more people were attending the general assembly and activities. However, to be realistic, the number of people who took part in *Nuit Debout,* even if they were several thousand at its climax, represents only a small proportion of the population of the Paris region. International media coverage of *Nuit Debout* made the movement seem bigger than it actually was. We were far short of the massive occupations seen at the *Puerta del Sol* (Madrid), *Tahrir Square* (Cairo), or *Taksim Square* and *Gezi Park* (Istanbul).

What is certain is that, like other Occupy movements, *Nuit Debout* gained power and popularity via the internet. Using the tools offered by social media, *Nuit Debout* was able to multiply its initiatives and communicate widely about its aspirations. Social media

march stopped. Suddenly, the trade union members in charge of security opened the trunk of a car and armed themselves with baseball bats, iron bars, and pickaxe handles, forming a line in front of us, closing the only safe exit from the square and helping the police to accomplish their goal of controlling the crowd. After long minutes of bitter arguments during which demonstrators and trade union security members exchanged threats, they finally opened their lines so that people could leave the square.

This event illustrates the tensions that exist between the trade unions and the non-affiliated part of the movement. It is not easy to identify the reasons some trade unionists decided to arm themselves to assist the police that day. We can only assume that they were exasperated from having no legitimacy in the social movement and no control over it, and expressed their frustration against those they accused of ruining their political image.

May 18, 2016 – On Wednesday, May 18, the conservative and reactionary police union *Alliance* organized a protest at *Place de la République* to denounce the "anti-cop hatred" that had been increasing during the movement. Of course, everyone understood that this victim rhetoric was purely strategic. Having such a meeting for police unionists and officers to speak about the difficulty of their work was a way to divert attention from the daily violence perpetrated by the men in blue. Concerning the *Loi Travail,* it would be impossible to count how many people had been beaten, injured, or arrested since the beginning of the movement. Finally, the fact that the gathering was organized at *République,* where the French occupy movement started and where people had confronted the police together many times, represented an open provocation from the police. The police were engaging in a territorial war in order to reassert dominance.

As soon as we heard about the police gathering, we decided that we would also converge at *Place de la République* to disrupt their protest. Due to the nature of this event, we knew that reaching the square would be difficult—and perhaps dangerous, as the po-

May 17, 2016 – Desperate to finally muzzle the social movement against the *Loi Travail,* the authorities decided to make use of the "state of emergency." Several persons received official documents prohibiting them from taking part in the major demonstration scheduled for May 17. However, these bans were cancelled after that an administrative judge declared that such documents represented a violation of the freedom to demonstrate.

The least we can say is that the entire march, from *Ecole Militaire* to the *Place Denfert-Rochereau,* was odd. First, to reach the demonstration itself, we had to cross several security cordons, where police officers carefully searched our bags to confiscate all types of equipment that could be useful during confrontations. For the first time, we felt like all this was some kind of a trap. However, some of us managed to join the march without being searched, finding opportunities to get around several security checkpoints.

Another strange aspect was the fact that the police were leading the procession, which did not bother trade unions and demonstrators at all. Looking at the crowd of demonstrators, it really seemed like we were nothing but a flock quietly following its shepherd, emptied of any passion. Luckily for us, the wind finally turned once we entered the *Boulevard du Montparnasse.* Groups of people dressed in black began to appear among the crowd of students; shortly after, the first provocations against police lines occurred. The autonomous group was back, ready and determined to interrupt the lethargy of this protest.

Long confrontations took place until the end of the demonstration. At some points, the streets were literally full of tear gas. Nevertheless, we managed to reach our destination, *Place Denfert-Rochereau.* Once on the square, we saw that most of the exits were closed and controlled by police. Our best chance to avoid being trapped was to exit the square the same way we had come in. This meant making our way out through the various trade unions represented in the march. While we were heading towards the entrance of *Boulevard Raspail* to exit the square, the closest trade union

and new technologies also enabled people to coordinate general assemblies in their own cities and regions.

How much influence did the discourse of democracy really have in *Nuit Debout*? How did that discourse and the practices associated with it interact with more traditional French Ultraleft practices and values? Did the visits paid by David Graeber and other Occupy Wall Street participants to Nuit Debout make any impact?

As we mentioned previously, the discourse of democracy was central to *Nuit Debout.* The French Occupy movement was hard-pressed to detach itself from traditional democratic discourse and practices. From the beginning, *Nuit Debout* stood for a reformist leftist alternative to the system and traditional parties rather than a strong revolutionary movement. Some participants in *Nuit Debout* were more passive, asking for change rather that acting to bring it about. The most commonly heard demands included a better and fairer democracy in France; less corrupt politicians; and ending the 5^{th} Republic and starting a 6^{th} Republic, an idea already defended by the *Front de Gauche* political party.

In its practices, *Nuit Debout* reproduced systems that already exist in our society such as making decisions by majority vote of the people attending the general assemblies and establishing security groups in charge of maintaining "order" at *Place de la République.* Among the numerous workshops and activities offered at *Nuit Debout,* the discourse of democracy was omnipresent—for example, people asking you to sign petitions for specific issues, or, more surprisingly, a workshop about writing a new Constitution.

However, the interaction between *Nuit Debout* participants and the Ultraleft generally went well, in the sense that everyone was free to organize, participate, or not participate in any action or general assembly according to their personal values and beliefs. If you did not agree with a decision, you could simply leave the assembly or not take part in the action. All the same, tensions repeatedly appeared between reformists and radicals. As always, the issue of

pacifism divided us, as some reformists were obsessed with creating a "legitimate," "likeable," and "righteous" image for the movement. Once, some *Nuit Debout* security members tried to extinguish a bonfire that some of us had started, on the grounds that they had decided that bonfires were forbidden—but above all because they wanted to avoid any trouble with police. Yet despite these few moments of tension, participants in *Nuit Debout* generally did well in respecting a diversity of actions and values.

Finally, we have no idea if advice from Occupy Wall Street participants made an impact on *Nuit Debout,* as we were not present during these discussions. However, unfortunately, it is certain that *Nuit Debout* was not able to distance itself from the traditional political masquerade, as evidenced by the warm welcome addressed to Miguel Urban Crespo (the European Deputy of *Podemos*), and the former finance minister of Greece, Yanis Varoufakis, when they made their speech at *Place de la République.* Once again, we see how "romanticism," denial, or simply a lack of understanding of foreign social and political contexts can impact a social movement. It is still surprising for us that these international figures from the so-called "alternative left" were taken seriously rather than openly confronted or criticized by the crowd at the general assembly—especially considering the social and political situation of their respective countries.

What limits did *Nuit Debout* reach, and why?

The main limit that *Nuit Debout* encountered was its failure to continue expanding. By the end of June, the movement was only drawing a few dozen people to its daily general assemblies. How can we explain this phenomenon?

First, it seems that *Nuit Debout* did not succeed in reaching many people from outside the Alternative Left or Ultraleft circles. This represents a major problem, especially when the movement claimed to embody a "convergence of struggles." Many people who experience the violence of our system at a higher level due to their social background must not have felt any interest in the

the *Concorde* Bridge. Frustrated by such inaction, and knowing that sooner or later police reinforcements would show up to secure the entire area, some of us decided to pay a visit to the *Parti Socialiste* headquarters located a couple streets away. When our group finally decided to join them, it was already too late, as police were coming our way. To avoid being surrounded, we went down to the docks and ran the opposite way until we reached a safe location. After this short jog, we decided to cross the Seine River and relocated to the *Quai des Tuileries.* From where we were standing, we saw a large group of demonstrators leaving the site of the *Assemblée Nationale* and heading towards the *Orsay* Museum. Instantly, tear gas canisters were shot at the crowd.

At the same time, on our side of the river, police started evicting groups of demonstrators from the *Concorde* Bridge. As it was obvious that police were becoming distracted dealing with all these different situations, we decided to take the opportunity to start our own action. We shouted for demonstrators to join us and began walking rapidly towards the *Louvre.* As expected, the spontaneity of our action and our mobility rapidly gave us precious advantages against our pursuers. Near the *Pont Royal* Bridge, as police vehicles were gaining ground, we threw barriers and construction equipment into the middle of the road. We crossed the *Jardin des Tuileries* and the *Louvre,* and then found ourselves face to face with the statue of Joan of Arc, freshly decorated with wreaths of flowers. It took us only few seconds to profane and vandalize this place of worship so dear to the National Front, fascists of all kinds, and other traditionalists. As soon as police vehicles showed up, we rushed into the narrow streets of the wealthy districts of Paris. We continued our pleasant night stroll by passing near the Opera, then headed towards the old *Bourse du Commerce,* our equivalent of the US Stock Exchange, leaving sporadic marks of our passage before finally vanishing into the silence of the night. Later that evening, we learned with enthusiasm that several similar actions had taken place in other parts of the city.

confrontations, they experienced mutual aid and solidarity, as the "rioters" were there to provide assistance wherever it was needed, to reassure people who were scared about the situation, to protect others during police charges, and to throw tear gas canisters back at the police who shot them. After experiencing disproportional police oppression on May Day, more and more people became critical of the police as an institution.

May 10, 2016 – Due to the increasing unpopularity of the *Loi Travail* among part of the French population, but also as a consequence of the difficulty the government had in containing the anger of the social movement, Prime Minister Manuel Valls announced that after consulting his ministers he had decided to invoke article 49:3 of the Constitution. This article allows him to engage the responsibility of the government in adopting a law. By doing so, the law is considered already adopted without passing through the traditional debates and vote at the *Assemblée Nationale.* The only way to counter such a process is by presenting a motion of no confidence within 24 hours. Using article 49:3 to impose the work reform by force has the merit of revealing the true face of representative democracy.

When this was made public, people converged in front of the *Assemblée Nationale,* the lower house of the French Parliament. For the occasion, *Nuit Debout* also relocated its general assembly in front of that building. Upon arriving, we discovered that an imposing police deployment was already waiting for us. Police squads and vehicles could be seen everywhere around the area. Some were guarding the front of the National Assembly; others were standing by, waiting for orders, ready to attack us from the rear if needed. However, the police presence did not intimidate the thousands of people who gathered that night in front of the building to show their opposition to the government.

Unfortunately, for the most part, the action remained static, as police lines carefully contained the expanding crowd by blocking strategic accesses or surrounding groups of demonstrators, like on

proposals made by *Nuit Debout,* or simply did not feel included by the movement. These failures contributed to a lack of diversity. As a result, the French Occupy movement sometimes felt more like an activists' microcosm than an inclusive movement in which everyone could feel welcome.

During discussions at *Nuit Debout,* some of us experienced resistance to anarchist and revolutionary ideas. Even if we were allowed to speak our minds, some people were not ready to challenge their own beliefs, habits, or comfort. It was challenging to argue to people that reinventing our relationships and ourselves should not be limited to *Nuit Debout,* but should become a widespread practice.

Finally, some of the practices and power dynamics integral to *Nuit Debout* contributed to its decline. In an effort to approximate "democratic equality," the "official" moderators allowed everyone present to address the crowd about subjects of their choosing, giving each speaker the same amount of time to develop their thoughts—just a couple minutes. Although appealing in theory, this practice rapidly revealed its shortcomings, as imposing the same speaking time on each orator did not achieve the expected effects. Instead, this decision ended up preventing spontaneity and serious discussion. Furthermore, because the moderators deliberately refrained from directing or reframing, the conversation moved arbitrarily from one subject to another without any closure. While attending general assemblies at *Place de la République,* it was not uncommon to have the impression that one was participating in group therapy—in which everyone could express their frustration in public—rather than taking part in a constructive discussion that would lead to important decisions for the movement and our future.

Ultimately, the fatigue resulting from weeks of activism and occupation—the feeling of constantly going around in circles in the general assembly—the incapacity to rally more people to the movement—the lack of interest in preparing for what would come

next—and increasing police harassment at the square put an end to the French Occupy movement.

Increasing the Pressure

April 5, 2016 – That Tuesday morning, students and activists gathered at *Place de la Nation* for another autonomous and offensive demonstration. That day, several affinity groups decided to join forces and work hand in hand for strategic purposes. Police forces were already controlling access to the main square by searching the bags of potential "threatening protesters." These security measures did not stop many of us from participating in the action. As soon as the crowd of demonstrators rushed into the street, a large black bloc appeared at the front bearing several reinforced banners. Less than ten minutes after the beginning of the protest, numerous police forces began to encroach on the back of the march. To stop this, part of the bloc confronted them.

After long minutes of intense confrontation, the riot brigades charged us and succeeded in splitting the march in two, isolating the head—where the black bloc was—from the rest of the crowd. Several arrests took place during the police charge, and the majority of us ended up cornered between police lines and a large wall. This marked the end of the action. After more than an hour of waiting, the police received the order to search and arrest as many people as they could. As a result, more than a hundred people were sent to police stations to get their IDs checked before being released.

There are several ways to understand the failure of this morning action: first, the crowd was not compact enough, which enabled the police to separate the "potential threats" from other demonstrators. Also, the confrontations lasted longer than they should have, allowing us to make more mistakes and to become more vulnerable. Finally, the bloc remained completely static, as most of us

long minutes of confrontation, riot police squads slowly gained the upper hand, dividing the head of the demonstration into two parts. Again, we paid the price for our failure to stay mobile, a mistake we had already made in the past and failed to learn from. The first part of the group was completely surrounded by police lines only half a mile from our destination, *Place de la Nation.* Again and again, we confronted the police lines in hopes of creating a breach, but without success.

However, the second part of the "autonomous procession," which remained all that time behind police lines, refused to disperse or to continue demonstrating without us. In solidarity, hoping to reunify the head of the demonstration, they increased the pressure around the police lines by getting closer and collectively screaming anti-police chants. After almost an hour without moving, police brigades finally backed down, as they were completely surrounded and could not handle the pressure anymore. When the two crowds reunited, we all joined in long cheering and the protest resumed its course. During the half mile that remained to our destination, we spray painted almost every wall, smashed billboards, and some of us attacked a small group of riot police in a nearby street. All these initiatives received acclamations from the crowd. Then, suddenly, thousands of people began chanting in unison *"Nous sommes tous des casseurs"* ("We are all rioters") until we reached *Place de la Nation.*

This last event might seem trivial; in reality, it represents an extremely important ideological shift in the movement. Since the beginning of the movement against the *Loi Travail et son monde,* media figures and politicians had worked hand in hand to make a distinction between the "legitimate, good, respectful, and non-violent demonstrators" and the *"casseurs"* or other "rioters" belonging to the notorious "black bloc," who supposedly had no legitimacy or place in the movement. Unfortunately for them, the events of May Day broke their spell. People realized that the so-called "rioters" were just demonstrators like everybody else. Moreover, during the

symbols of the capitalist system. His main arguments were that such actions were stupid and dangerous because they would get us all arrested. This example highlights some of the conflicts between different schools of thought in anarchism—but mostly, it shows how deeply rooted skepticism towards a plurality of tactics remains among many activists.

As had become usual since the beginning of the movement, anarchists, autonomous radicals, and non-affiliated individuals took the lead in the demonstration. What a great pleasure it was to do this on Labor Day, relegating trade unions—political traitors and pawns of established political power—to the end of the procession where they belong, behind those who refuse any kind of political hijacking or representation.

The least we can say is that the "autonomous procession" on May Day was incredible. We had never seen thousands of people of all ages, genders, and social backgrounds interacting in such a powerful and chaotic harmony.

Because police had often shot tear gas canisters, flash-bang grenades, and rubber bullets at demonstrators since the beginning of the movement, numerous people came to the protest with protective equipment: safety or swimming goggles, face masks, gas masks, scarves, first aid medical kits, and more. As soon as the demonstration started, we set the tone by attacking the isolated police units positioned along our route. All kinds of projectiles were thrown at them: glass bottles, stones, firecrackers, fireworks. Despite the imposing police presence—from police officers in plain clothes (recognizable from miles away) following us on each side of the march to riot squads at each intersection and in front of potential targets—we managed to remain offensive, compact, and in constant motion.

Unfortunately, the situation changed once we reached the intersection of the *Boulevard Diderot* and the *rue de Chaligny.* There, police forces succeeded in blocking us, and, to some extent, disorienting us by attacking the march from several directions at once. After

were only focusing on the clashes; there would have been no real obstacle or danger if we had continued moving through the streets.

Later that day, some of us met at *Place de la République* during *Nuit Debout.* Some comrades were still detained after the morning events; they could be facing criminal charges. To show solidarity, we initiated a prisoner support action. We appealed to others at *Nuit Debout* to gather in front of the police station where our friends were detained. Many people left the *République* and started converging in the *Saint Michel* district where, decades earlier, students had created barricades during the uprising of May 1968. A spontaneous demonstration began blocking traffic as we approached the police station on *rue de la Montagne Sainte Geneviève.* About fifty people joined us in front of the station, chanting in unison, "Free our comrades!"

In the meantime, other people began blocking the major intersection next to the station, employing various components from a nearby construction site as barricades. Due to the traffic this created, the police called for reinforcements, which had great difficulty reaching our location. Knowing that the reinforcements were finally approaching the police station, the crowd decided to leave the intersection and began another wild march towards the cathedral *Notre-Dame.* Near the cathedral, police tried to block some of us, but without any real success. Indeed, more and more people from *Nuit Debout* were already converging in front of the police station. This solidarity action lasted until early the next morning, gathering more than a hundred people.

If we can draw conclusions from this action, we would argue that spontaneity, motion, and determination took the police by surprise and gave us a clear advantage against them that night. This also shows how *Nuit Debout* was used as a platform to inform protesters about planned initiatives.

April 9, 2016 – Following a major demonstration, thousands of people gathered as usual at *Place de la République* to spend another night at *Nuit Debout.* The first action that took place that night

was against borders. Around 9 pm, several hundred people left the occupied square and went to *Stalingrad.* Once there, protesters destroyed all the fences that prevented migrants and refugees living in this district from setting up their tents and building a camp under the elevated metro station. Afterwards, the group improvised a wild march back to *République.*

A bit later, during the general assembly, three speakers made the same funny proposal: why not invite ourselves to get a quick drink at our Prime Minister's house? His house was located on *rue Keller* in the *Bastille* district, not too far from *République.* After walking around the square to initiate the action, we could hear from the crowd different voices shouting "Aperitif at Valls'!"

As a result, about 3000 people left the square and entered the only boulevard that was not blocked by the police. At a quick pace—mobility being our chief asset against police squads—the crowd made its way through the streets, happily chanting the already famous *"Paris, debout, soulève toi!"* ("Paris, stand up, rise up!") and *"Tout le monde déteste la police!"* ("Everyone hates the police!"). During our advance on the Prime Minister's address, several quick confrontations with police took place, the police station of the 11th district was attacked, police cars parked outside were destroyed, and small barricades appeared in the streets. Access to the Prime Minister's building is well-guarded, and police reinforcements showed up rapidly. Reaching Manuel Valls' apartment would have not changed anything, anyway, as he was in Algeria. Police troops surrounded part of the remaining crowd; after half an hour, they decided to let everyone go, pepper spraying everyone one last time for good measure.

On their way back to *République,* the remaining couple hundred people, joined by some new supporters, initiated another offensive action. Surprisingly, traffic had not been interrupted on the main boulevard leading to the occupied square, and police forces were totally absent. Activists took the streets again, smashing advertising billboards and every single front window of the banks and

government during the occupation, and one of the main people responsible for state collaboration with the Nazis—enacted new legislation stating that May Day would be called *"la fête du Travail et de la Concorde sociale"* ("the day of labor and social harmony"). The objective of the law was to create a rupture with socialism and Marx's theory of class struggle. Since that law, Labor Day in France continues to bear the name *"Fête du Travail,"* paying tribute to Pétain's maxim *"Travail, Famille, Patrie"* ("Work, Family, Fatherland").

How ironic and exciting it was for us to take the streets on Labor Day, then, when we had been fighting for almost two months against a new work reform—but also against the concept of work itself and the political and economic system as a whole. We were absolutely determined to see how this day would unfold.

Every May Day, during the morning, traditional anarchist unions such as the CNT, the *Fédération Anarchiste,* and *Alternative Libertaire* gather at *Place des Fêtes* for an anarcho-syndicalist demonstration to pay tribute to the events of the Haymarket and its martyrs. Unfortunately, these protests are purely symbolic—they are more akin to a nice Sunday family outing under black and red flags than a passionate, offensive anarchist action. Nevertheless, alongside with other autonomous anarchists and insurrectionists, we decided to join their ranks to participate in the festivities—and who knows, maybe make the event more effective than usual.

Hundreds of people took part in the demonstration from *Place des Fêtes* to *Place de la Bastille,* the official departure point of the national Labor Day demonstration. The anarchist march was more fun and offensive than we had expected: the walls of a church were spray painted, specific stores, windows, and ATMs were redecorated, and firecrackers and other projectiles were thrown at some police squads. As a whole, the action went without a hitch, as police kept their distance from us most of the time. The only discordant aspect of the morning was that someone who identified with anarcho-syndicalism started threatening some of us for attacking

the address. In the meantime, other activists would lead a group of refugees to the location.

We eventually received the address, left *République,* and took the metro to our destination. The squat was an unoccupied high school on *Avenue Simon Bolivar,* near the *Pyrénées* station, in the northeast of Paris. After waiting in small groups outside fast food restaurants or cafés to look less suspicious, we learned that the group of migrants was close. The crowd converged in front of the building, occupying the entire sidewalk and hiding the main entrance from sight. Several activists sneaked inside the high school, opened the main entrance for the migrants, and then, a few minutes later, closed and locked the doors from inside. Altogether, the entire action only took several minutes.

Unfortunately, the authorities were warned that something unusual was happening in the neighborhood, and the first police car patrol showed up just after the doors were closed. We decided to stay near the squat, ready to respond to police intervention. Police reinforcements stopped in front of the squat, but in the end they did nothing more than try to see if the building was occupied and threaten us.

Despite several actions to support this initiative, the squat only lasted for two weeks. On Tuesday, May 3, late at night, we received a last-minute appeal to gather in front of the squat early the next morning, as an eviction was imminent in consequence of a decision of the Administrative Court of Paris. Unfortunately, the large crowd that responded to the appeal could not do much to stop this massive police operation. As expected, on May 4, early in the morning, polices entered in the squat and violently evicted almost 300 migrants.

May 1, 2016 – For many countries around the world, May Day is the international day of workers, paying tribute to the workers' struggles of the late 19th century and the introduction of the eight-hour workday. However, it has a different connotation in France. In 1941, Marshal Pétain—fervent anti-Semite, head of the French

insurance agencies on their way. At *Place de la République,* there were still a good thousand people present and a bonfire was lit. The rest of the night was spent in riots. People started putting barricades into the streets, some surveillance cameras were sabotaged, projectiles were thrown at law enforcement units, and an *AutoLib* car—the name given to the electric car-sharing service operated by the industrial holding group Bolloré—was set on fire. Police responded by charging the square, using flash-bang grenades, and shooting rubber bullets, inflicting several arrests and injuries.

April 14, 2016 – After more than a month of national mobilizations against the *Loi Travail et son monde,* the French government was ready to do whatever it took to bury the movement once and for all. The authorities gave police more material and human resources, but also more freedom to impose "social order" in the streets.

A national coordination of students organized a protest for the afternoon of April 14. The initial route was to connect *Place de la Bataille de Stalingrad* to *Place de la Bastille.* As usual, groups of students, anarchists, and members of the Ultraleft met in the morning at *Place de la République* with the intention of initiating a wild action that would end by joining the afternoon's authorized demonstration. On their way to *Stalingrad,* the march attacked numerous symbols of capitalism and the state. Upon reaching *Stalingrad* square, the march faced numerous police squads that were already surrounding part of the afternoon demonstration. It seemed that the police had received orders to contain the crowd and to block or delay the protest's departure. Deciding not to let the police divide us, we started confronting the closest police lines in order to create a breach that would allow all the demonstrators to join together.

The police ultimately retreated under increasing pressure and the action finally started. The tension was palpable. Confrontations erupted as soon as the head of the demonstration reached *Place de la République.* Looking at the police presence at the square, it was obvious that they had received the order to stop the protest

by any means necessary. They emptied the entire square by throwing tear gas canisters and flash-bang grenades.

That night, President François Hollande was invited to a live political TV show to talk with a panel of selected citizens. *Nuit Debout* decided to project the debate. As usual, we went to the square to "take the temperature" of the crowd and see if there would be any opportunities. After the events of the afternoon, police forces had increased their presence all around the square. During the discussion, President Hollande clearly stated that the *Loi Travail* would not be withdrawn, but some modifications could be made during dialogues with trade union representatives.

Soon after the debate ended, we gathered with other radicals and started walking around the square as an attempt to initiate something. Quickly, people lit torches and some of us started chanting *"Si on ne marche pas, ça ne marchera pas!"* ("If we don't take action, no change will come!") while others discussed whether to go to the Presidential Palace.

Hundreds of people set out for the Boulevard Saint-Martin, but were stopped by police lines. While a group of us confronted the men in blue, the rest decided to continue the action by entering the Boulevard Magenta, where, once again, police forces were waiting for us and started shooting flash-bang grenades and tear gas. However, while focusing on the small group confronting them, police forces made a strategic mistake: they neglected to secure an adjacent street. We took advantage of the situation by entering the *rue Léon Jouhaux* and unleashing the storm.

The first target attacked was the regional Customs' building. At the end of the street, we all crossed the bridge of the *Saint Martin* canal, then turned on the *Quai de Jemmapes,* increasing our pace and covering the walls with our thoughts, dreams, and desires. A bit further, some people smashed the front windows of a corporate grocery store, then rushed inside to loot everything they could. Ahead, we could see numerous police vehicles coming our way. Taking advantage of their lack of mobility, we took a narrow street, heading north to the *Boulevard de la Villette.* Along the way, we expressed our rage by destroying banks, real estate and insurance agencies, *AutoLib* cars, bus shelters, billboards, and a *Pôle Emploi* agency—an administrative institution in charge of employment that actively participates in maintaining the conditions of exploitation by providing a desperate workforce, reinforcing social inequalities, and destroying people's lives by denying or reducing unemployment benefits.

At *Colonel Fabien,* we took the *Avenue Mathurin Moreau,* leading to the *Buttes Chaumont* Park. Again, several *AutoLibs* were destroyed, and hasty barricades were erected in the street to slow police vehicles. As a wink to the COP 21 decision to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, some of us decided to assist by destroying a luxury car dealership located nearby. Once in front of the park, what remained from the hundreds of people who had left *République* continued walking towards the 19th district's City Hall.

However, feeling that the wind would sooner or later turn, we decided that it was the right moment for us to leave the action—which ended few minutes later anyway, when the first police squad showed up just after the crowd reached City Hall. Indeed, as we were withdrawing through another avenue, we passed dozens of riot cops who were trying to reach the demonstration.

Nevertheless, the arrival of numerous police reinforcements in the area—a desperate attempt to regain control of the situation—did not change the course of the evening. That night, the storm raged in the streets of Paris, and we were part of it.

April 21, 2016 – While taking part in *Nuit Debout* at *Place de la République,* we got word that an initiative to help migrants and refugees was planned for later that night. The idea was to open a new squat somewhere in Paris for migrants to occupy. To succeed, such an action would require support from outside to prevent the police from intervening. We were informed that the location was already selected, and that, at the appointed hour, we would receive