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The Class Struggle in France

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"Flower power in your face" ("Flower power dans ta gueule"). This was my favorite slogan seen at the demonstration in Montpellier, France on October 16, 2010. It emblazoned a cardboard sign and was carried by a young girl with curly hair and a headband. At the bottom of the sign was printed in very large capital letters : "Tous ensemble pour la Grève Générale" (all together for the General Strike).

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Curious, I asked the girl about the sign, and about the reverse side on which was written : "Never trust a hippy" ("Ne fais jamais confiance aux hippies"). "Is this really a problem," I asked, "Are there still hippies around". Respectful of my age, she hesitated to respond, before saying : "Yes, there are. We are the hippies." She is 15 years old and, I found, as capable of discussing the issues of "neo-liberal" reform of public institutions in France as anybody. At least, people like her understand what might be called simple commonsense. Students at all levels and young workers know that requiring people to work longer, as the retirement reform proposed by the Sarkozy government calls for, will result in fewer jobs for the young.

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This is an ineluctable deduction, but one avoided by almost all French politicians. Even the French Socialist Party, for example, also accepts that the retirement age must be raised, in accordance with the decisions of the sacrosanct European Union. Only the more radical organizations, such as the Communist Party, the Greens, the New Anti-Capitalist Party (former Ligue communiste révolutionnaire) and, of course, revolutionary unions and political formations like the CNT (Confédération Nationale du Travail), Alternative Libertaire, Lutte Ouvrière and the Fédération Anarchiste, call for real progressive fiscal reform, the reduction of work time and other radically structural changes.

We can analyze the facetious slogans as we wish, and there are thousands of them, conceived and formulated with humor and creativity. Whenever a movement in France lasts for more than a few weeks there is an impressive explosion of imaginative sloganeering, the commandeering of popular songs provided with new and politically pointed lyrics (often far better than the originals) and street theatre of all types.

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I've been to almost all the recent demonstrations in France, at least since during 1986 when French students forced the government to withdraw a reform of entrance requirements to universities. What I have observed during these numerous occasions to participate in mass mobilizations is what I learned during long-ago graduate studies focused on the history of France and its popular movements and the ideas that accompany them or react to them—there is a revolutionary tradition in France.

And yet, paradoxically, I'm always surprised. For in between the movements I habitually lament the progressive loss of critical consciousness in France, the emergence of new pernicious forms of media distraction (typically originated in the United States), the fact that there are more McDonalds restaurants per capita in France than elsewhere in Europe, the dumbing-down of education and all the other symptoms of consensual one-dimensionalism.

But this is what a revolutionary tradition means—regardless of adaptations to technological change, rebellious attitudes to authority persist. Popular uprisings in France are part of a cultural heritage going back to, at least, the Seventeenth Century. The peculiar thing about these popular uprisings is that the impulse has never been eradicated. Almost every generation in modern French history has participated in them. Somehow, and regardless of political conjunctures, the reflex of going out into the street to change policies or regimes remains. And, of course, the fact that France is a densely populated territory with a particularly centralized state administration and transportation

system facilitates popular mobilization.

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Resistance grows when a centralized state forces the populace to steadily give up more and more of its personal liberties and resources. In the present context, a good part of these liberties and resources are to be found in the fruit of former struggles. The eight-hour day and paid vacations were won through hard popular struggle in 1936. The resistance movements during the wartime occupation and then the Liberation in 1945 gave birth to the present system of social security, public health services and retirement benefits. These institutional changes quickly came to be considered inalienable social rights.

The present government in France has pledged to overturn the situation. Privately, already in 2007, president Nicolas Sarkozy said he would be the French Margaret Thatcher. He would force through fundamental changes, reducing the power of the political Left and "modernizing" France by dismantling state-financed social programs. In April 2007, Sarkozy said he would do everything to eliminate the attitudes and practices associated with the turbulent days of May-June 1968. During his election campaign, he declared : "In this election, the question is to know whether the legacy of May '68 is to be perpetuated or if it must be liquidated once and for all." For him the answer was clear : "The page must be turned on May 1968."

With his seemingly boundless energy and careful efforts to dissimulate his allegiance to powerful industrial and financial interests, Sarkozy impressed much of the electorate. He assured the young that he would provide jobs and increase purchasing power. He pledged to the seniors that he would crack down on crime and provide security for all. By recruiting members of the Socialist Party and carefully selected individuals from ethnic minorities to his new government, Sarkozy posed as a leader above political parties—neither Right nor Left. After several months in office, he divorced from his wife and quickly married a former top-model and pop-idol-groupie turned singer (with the help of her family connections and fabulous inherited wealth). "Super Sarko" was born.

It might have worked. But then, in 2008, a bit more than one year after his election, the crash of the New York stock market changed everything for Super Sarko. People in France, as elsewhere, began asking questions : Why are the banks and other financial institutions being given assistance, and not ordinary people ? Why must the universities become unequal in status ? Why are the numbers of schoolteachers being reduced when it is generally understood that more are needed ? Why are post offices and railroad lines closed ? Will programmed privatization really result in better services ?

At the same time, more and more information about Sarkozy's connections to the industrial and financial elites became known. On the night of his election he gave a party for them in one of the most expensive restaurants in Paris. He then went on a cruise in a yacht provided by a powerful crony, after arriving (in Malta) in the friend's private jet. Well, such anecdotes don't reveal that much, do they ?

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But Sarkozy is a funny, little man with a large ego, and he tends to call ridicule onto himself. Soon he became the butt of jokes, and the object of scurrilous speculations about his need to vaunt his virility and to demean his subordinates. Progressively, Sarkozy came to be the most despised French president in recent history. Today his "approval rating" is in the vicinity of 26 percent.

Far more important than the peccadilloes of the man Sarkozy is what he represents socially. He is the point man for what the sociologists Michel Pinçon and Monique Pinçon-Charlot call the French oligarchy. In September 2010, one month ago, these authors published *Le président des riches. Enquête sur l'oligarchie dans la France de Nicolas*

Sarkozy (The President of the Rich : Investigation of the Oligarchy in Nicolas Sarkozy's France). The book establishes incontrovertibly that Sarkozy does the bidding of the powerful employers association (MEDEF—"Movement of French Enterprises) and the financial elites. His personal power base, in the exclusive western suburb of Paris of Neuilly and the business center of La Défense, is a center of rampant political corruption and nepotism. Before being elected president, Sarkozy was minister of finances and interior minister. He did much to prepare, artificially, the budget deficit that, supposedly, justifies the reform now being legislated against the will of the population.

What distinguishes Sarkozy is his unadulterated contempt for people in general and poor people in particular. It took French people (or at least the 71 percent of the French population supportive of the present mobilization in the streets) three years to become fed up with his attempts to gut social services in the country.

The current protests focus on the regressive "reform" of the state retirement programs, but they go far beyond. We learned just a few days ago, thanks to the on-line newspaper Mediapart, that a financial group was recently created to offer "complementary retirement services" based on "capitalization" to those who find the present (or reformed) system inadequate. A certain Guillaume Sarkozy, brother of the president, directs the group and was a former number two of the MEDEF employers association.

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Thanks to Nicolas Sarkozy, French people have learned much about the governance of their country. This is why they are now in the streets.

Post-scriptum :

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