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# What This Year's May Day Demonstration Told Me About France

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Publication date: mercredi 1er juin 2011

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The first of May 2011 in France, especially in Paris, was a beautiful Sunday during which the traditional demonstrations celebrating the "workers' holiday" might have been expected to draw record numbers. After all, six months ago, in October and November, there were repeated demos that sometimes had 3 million people in the streets throughout the country. The reputation of France was then upheld as a country where the reflex to take to the pavement is part of a strongly held political culture. But, this year, May Day was a relative flop.

[http://www.divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH266/1ermai\\_NPA\\_W\\_2204-3d842.jpg](http://www.divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH266/1ermai_NPA_W_2204-3d842.jpg)

Without a doubt, every labor union and political party was poorly represented. In addition, the leaders of these organizations were not in sight, or at least I didn't see them, although I spent hours posted in the middle of a street and watched them all pass by.

Being there was a depressing experience. The mood was subdued in spite of the beautiful weather. Of course being with tens of thousands of people in the street and feeling the enthusiasm of some irrepressible activists whose amplified chanting was from time to time infectious. But this massive march did not raise the hope of future events. Even the riot police (CRS) seemed tired and paying slight attention to the scene. As always, I was on the lookout for some clever banners or signs, but I found very little that was noteworthy. The question is why.

My take is that the First of May demonstrations are a kind of barometer of popular opinion, but one that must be read with circumspection. This is not the first time that participation in this annual eventâ€”created by the Second Socialist International in Paris in 1889â€”precipitously declined in circumstances that clearly call for even greater demonstrations. The absence of mass participation in such an event may be understood as a protest itself, which means that any prediction of future developments must go beyond the war of numbers waged by labor unions and the state authorities after the event.

[http://www.divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH258/1er\\_mai\\_2011\\_CNT\\_9708-65734.jpg](http://www.divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH258/1er_mai_2011_CNT_9708-65734.jpg)

Last year, in contrast, there was riot in the air. The numbers were massive and the atmosphere was electric. Everyone seemed to be gearing up for a fight. At the end of the regular march, the CNT (Confédération general du travail), after having received authorization from the Socialist-controlled Paris municipal government, continued the march into the ritzy part of the seventeenth arrondissement, near the Arch of Triumph. The objective was to demonstrate under the windows of a babysitting company called "People and Baby" that had abusively fired some of its workers. With red and black flags flying and punk rock blaring from immense amplifiers, upwards of a thousand people marched from the Garnier Opera House and then down the exclusive Avenue Hoche chanting incendiary slogans against capitalism and the government.

[http://www.divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH266/CNT\\_nettoyage\\_2011\\_W\\_2131-d821e.jpg](http://www.divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH266/CNT_nettoyage_2011_W_2131-d821e.jpg)

Not within living memory had people in this rich district seen what they must have perceived as rabble gesticulating violently and verbally threatening to overturn the society. Dumbfounded, they stepped out of the cafés and office buildings to observe the scene. Double decked tourist buses stopped or slowed down to allow their customers time to film the French folklore. And it went on and on until the horde reached the upscale Wagram neighborhood and the apartment of People and Baby's boss. There, in the sedate neighborhood, and after one of the boss man's neighbors graciously indicated which windows were his, speeches were made for almost an hour before the demonstration finally dispersed.

A few weeks later, after another major demonstration, the CNT this time joined by people from other political and

union persuasions, left the main march and proceeded to the headquarters of the powerful MEDEF (Mouvement des entreprises de Franceâ€”Movement of French business) employers' association on the very bourgeois Avenue Bosquet. Again, it was an operation combining the protestors' aggressiveness and the efforts of the authorities to open a safety valve in order to contain it.

[http://www.divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L283xH388/CNT\\_2010\\_PB\\_W\\_8982-a1e6e.jpg](http://www.divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L283xH388/CNT_2010_PB_W_8982-a1e6e.jpg)

This was the atmosphere over the past year. It was a heady period holding out the promise of more important events to come. They did come in October and November 2010, when the focus of protest was the proposed regressive reforms of the retirement system. Then, a general strike was clearly possible. The critical point came when the refinery workers in different parts of France blocked the distribution of gasoline and other petroleum products, an action generally supported by workers in other sectors. By then, French high school students had also entered into the action. At this moment, if a protester had been killed or some other dramatic event occurred, the situation might have exploded and become a more major historical development.

[http://www.divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH213/1er\\_mai\\_2011\\_1816-b18da.jpg](http://www.divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH213/1er_mai_2011_1816-b18da.jpg)

But it didn't happen. Sarkozy's classic strategy of simply holding tight, letting the movement blow off steam and then moving in legislatively and with the police when the steam began to decrease in intensity, paid off mainly because of the official restraint and the collusion of the major labor union federationsâ€”such as the CGT (Confédération générale du travail), the CFDT (Confédération française démocratique du travail, FO (Force ouvrière) and the CFTC (Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens). These bureaucratic directorships are tied institutionally to government administrations and, organizationally, have too much to lose in any confrontational social clash. In addition, as individuals and for self-interested reasons, top union officials generally seek to maintain close relations with political leaders.

At I watched the marchers go by from my vantage point on the base of a light pole in the middle of the Avenue Voltaire between the Place de la République and the Place de la Nation, the passage of the Socialist Party was certainly one of the more singular moments in the whole demonstration. There was no sign of contestation on the closed faces of these people who were clearly apprehensive about being there. This is understandable. In recent years they have been the objects of ridicule and even threats from union members and, especially, demonstrators from more radical organizations.

[http://www.divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L369xH355/PS\\_1er\\_mai\\_2011\\_W\\_2311-049cd.jpg](http://www.divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L369xH355/PS_1er_mai_2011_W_2311-049cd.jpg)

As they silently passedâ€”for these people have no songs to sing or demands to yellâ€”the nearest stared at the red and black CNT sticker someone had given me and slapped on the bottom of my coat. They see any reference to this epiphenomenon of the Spanish civil war and revolution as an incomprehensible yet frightening ghost from the past. Although they certainly have little knowledge of its historical or present reality, for these rank and file socialists the CNT is the sign of irrational rebellion, of potential violence and social war. If times are hard, if Sarkozy and his gang have highhandedly profited from the socialists' pusillanimity and double-dealing and driven them into the political dust, if fascism in the form of the high riding Front National seems to be rearing its ugly head, in their minds any political radicalism will only serve the Right. Here is the mindset of the French socialists, indistinguishable from that of those who support the Democratic Party in the US or New Labor in Britain.

They areâ€”these so-called socialistsâ€”a sorry-looking group indeed. They carried no remnant of the past to enliven their consensual morose-ness, to foster the illusion of opposition to anything diverging from the strictures of the IMF or the European Union. Their only desire is to elect someone like the socialist leader Martine Aubry, loyal daughter of Jacques Delors, one of the architects of the European Union. Their current champion, their secret hope, is the candidature of Dominique Strauss-Kahn (DSK), director of the International Monetary Fund. Are they hoping that, as

French president, DSK will implement the kind of "structural adjustment" policies he imposed on Greece ? I wondered what these French socialists were thinking as they passed, huddled around an out-of-tune jazz band to which nobody paid any attention whatsoever.

[http://www.divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH260/1er\\_mai\\_2011\\_1949-8af30.jpg](http://www.divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH260/1er_mai_2011_1949-8af30.jpg)

Reduced to its bare bones, the only radical distinctiveness of this demonstration came from imperialist backlash—protests from citizens of countries making up the numerous neo-colonies dominated by the French or from other regions of the once-called Third World. The Tunisians, Syrians, Turks, Kurds, Algerians, Sri Lankans (Tamouls) and other representatives of national groups living in France were forcefully present.

[http://www.divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH199/SR\\_1er\\_mai\\_2011\\_2464-7134d.jpg](http://www.divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH199/SR_1er_mai_2011_2464-7134d.jpg)

In one way or another, these are either people who escaped or who are privileged to live pampered double lives in the imperialist center, but whose hearts remain in the exploited periphery of empire.

[http://www.divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH202/1er\\_mai\\_2011\\_1968-29723.jpg](http://www.divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH202/1er_mai_2011_1968-29723.jpg)

Among the immigrant workers and foreign residents in France, a group of Tunisians outstandingly exhibited exuberant, militant enthusiasm. Here I found some creative good humor, such as the elderly man beating time on a drum next to a group of his compatriots collecting signatures for a petition calling for the cancellation of the Tunisian debt. Here a hypnotic popular protest song "C'est dans la rue que ça se passe" (It's in the Street that It Happens when something happens) by the group Jolie Môme was immediately transformed into "C'est chez nous [in our country] que ça se passé," then explicated by the improvised slogan : "Vous en avez revé. La Tunisie (or "l'Egypte" or "les Arabes") l'a fait" (You dreamed about it, Tunisia [or Egypt or the Arabs] did it)". All this to the general delight of all, regardless of their nationality.

[http://www.divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L397xH265/Cote\\_d\\_Ivoire\\_1er\\_mai\\_2011\\_2289-f63cd.jpg](http://www.divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L397xH265/Cote_d_Ivoire_1er_mai_2011_2289-f63cd.jpg)

Most vociferous was a very large contingent from the Ivory Coast. Hundreds of partisans of the now deposed president Laurent Gbagbo vehemently protested against the falsifications perpetrated by the French media and against the French military presence in their country. Like those who question the involvement of the French government in Libya, Afghanistan and elsewhere, they denounced imperialist designs hidden behind "humanitarian" intervention said to promote "democracy."

The new president, Alassane Ouattara, was installed after the French military command attacked Gbagbo's residence. Ouattara is a former banker and top official of the International Monetary Fund.

[http://www.divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH217/1er\\_Mai\\_cote\\_d\\_Ivoire\\_2269-169bf.jpg](http://www.divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH217/1er_Mai_cote_d_Ivoire_2269-169bf.jpg)

If May Day 2011 was a flop, it is because working people and political activists are now under the weather, suffering the hangover produced by the frenetic activity and let down of last Fall. As one long-time labor and political activist told me, the poor turnout was predictable given "the treason committed by the leadership of the unions." He and others stress that, however one may explain the situation, it is possible a dangerous precedent may have been established. As another experienced participant observed : "This state of affairs shows that everything must be done. Over the past several decades of May Day demonstrations, I've never seen a march, as I did this year, fronted by a row of CRS riot police dressed in black. We must accelerate the movement if we don't want them to replace us completely in the streets."

[http://www.divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH239/1er\\_mai\\_2011\\_1939-061fc.jpg](http://www.divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH239/1er_mai_2011_1939-061fc.jpg)

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PS:

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This article was published in *Counterpunch*, May 9, 2011.