

Strikes and demonstrations in France against raising the retirement age

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A wave of demonstrations and strikes has swept France involving hundreds of thousands of blue- and white-collar workers and bringing Paris and many other cities to a halt. In some places the demonstrations were larger than those in autumn 1995, when a strike wave led to the fall of the conservative government of Alain Juppé.

Alongside wage demands the protests are directed against the attempt to raise the pension age from 60 to 65. In France it is possible at present to retire at the age of 60 after working in private industry for 40 years, and in the public service after 37.5 years. Early retirement rules apply in other particularly burdensome professions.

The attacks on pensions, which like unemployment benefits in France are jointly administered by the trade unions and employers associations, led to strikes and protests in different sections of the public service throughout January. This reached a climax on January 25, when over 300,000 took part in demonstrations. In Marseille alone there were 40,000 people on the streets. Many urban transit systems were affected, as was the SNCF long-distance rail network and numerous regional newspapers, Radio France and Air France. Workers from Renault, the tire manufacturer Michelin and some Paris department stores participated in the actions.

On January 30 the entire public service took to the streets, after discussions broke down between the government and the seven trade unions representing the public sector. Hospitals, schools, town halls and post offices were all closed by the strike. On February 1, workers at the Paris urban transit authority RATP joined in what was effectively a 24-hour general strike.

Up to then, the demonstrations by public service employees were usually kept separate from those of

workers from private industry, but this time they took place together. Police and special units of the CRS paramilitary riot squad attacked the demonstrators with great brutality. During a demonstration of 300 to 400 firemen in the northern city of Lille, a 54-year-old firefighter had his hand torn off by a tear gas grenade and eleven of his colleagues were also hurt, with four being arrested by the police.

Despite many restrictions the strikes have imposed on public life, they enjoy overwhelming support in the population. However, the conflict is not so much an action as a reaction, as the central employers' association Medef has consciously provoked it.

At the beginning of January, Medef president Baron Ernest Ernest-Antoine Seillière demonstratively called upon those businesses in his federation to stop making payments to the pension fund. After years of controversy over pensions and previous cuts had met with violent resistance, this was a calculated provocation. Stopping payments to the pension fund has immediate effects on the value of pensions. From April this year, pensioners who retire before reaching 65 will receive approximately 22 percent less.

Seillière, who has led the employers' association since 1997, is well known for such provocations. Just over a year ago, he mobilised employers at a protest meeting against the law introducing the 35-hour week, and a few months ago he pushed through a substantial worsening of unemployment insurance benefits. In the future, all payments will depend on the unemployed person being ready to accept any "reasonable" job, not necessarily in his usual occupation. Seillière is systematically pushing forward what he calls "social reconstruction": the dismantling of all social security schemes piece by piece.

The government under Prime Minister Lionel Jospin

has tried to speak from both sides of its mouth on the issue. While it displays understanding for the trade unions' demands, it constantly stresses the necessity for the reform of pensions and signals its agreement with the employers' association. From the outset, the restructuring of retirement pensions was contained in Jospin's government program. In April 1999, and then again one year later, he proposed to "stabilise" the public service pension scheme by raising the contribution period from 37.5 to 40 years. In order to make this suggestion palatable, he suggested the inclusion of additional wage bonuses in the pensions' calculation, which meant a slight increase in pensions, but this only brought accusations of half-heartedness from the employers' camp.

Since then, the government has been working on relieving pension funding by using private capital formation schemes. Dominique Strauss-Kahn, Jospin's first minister of finance, who resigned in autumn 1999 and was praised several times by Seillière for his restrictive budgetary policy, advocated very similar conceptions. Seventeen years ago he co-authored a book about restructuring the French pensions' system with a former Maoist named Denis Kessler, who today is Seillière's deputy and vice-president of Medef. Strauss-Kahn's successor, Laurent Fabius, today pursues a policy that boils down to the hidden introduction of private pension funds.

Knowing well the explosive nature of any proposal to cut pensions, Jospin would rather the protests were directed against the employers' association and its chairman than against the government. The large strike movement and mass demonstrations that brought down his predecessor Alain Juppé, when Juppé tried to raise the pension age, are still fresh in Jospin's memory.

As is so often the case, the trade unions are playing a rotten double game in this dispute. While they call for strikes and protests and rail against Seillière and the employers' association, behind the backs of the strikers they are holding confidential discussions with Seillière. The main aim of the unions is to defend the bi-partite administration of the pension and unemployment benefit schemes, in order to protect the social position of the trade union bureaucracy.