

CHALLENGE TO NEO-LIBERALISM

MASS PROTESTS IN FRANCE

Peter Custers

Street protests peaked just before the senatorial debate was scheduled to take place. On Thursday October 21, the Senate of France witnessed acrimonious debates over the package of pension reforms proposed by France's rightwing ruler Sarkozy. The French President has put forward a plan for changes in retirement rules which at first sight appear unexceptional. Taking as starting point the fact that its population, just as elsewhere in Europe, is ageing rapidly, the French government argues that two adjustments in pension rules are urgently required. The age at which people are allowed to retire and have the legal right to a pension, is to be raised from 60 to 62 years. Further, whereas until now people were entitled to a full pension, and in consequence would normally retire, at the age of 65, - Sarkozy wants to raise this age to 67 years. Whereas elsewhere in Europe, similar reforms in pension rights have evoked little or no public outrage, —reactions by the French population have been highly critical, to say the least. Over a period of roughly a month, mass protests in cities all over France have been staged, and have snowballed into a major challenge to Sarkozy's government.

In analyzing the reasons for the large response to, and the success of the social actions, it is necessary to highlight at least two factors, i.e. their unitarian thrust and their militancy. Over a period of about a month, mass demonstrations and manifestations have been organized throughout the length and breadth of the country, i.e. in many cities simultaneously. These protests have been marked by a large degree of unity between France's main trade union bodies, i.e. CGT, CFDT and FO. Whereas several years back, when similar protests were staged, the unions failed to sustain a united opposition against the government's plans, —this time round all the three mentioned trade union confederations have stuck together. In consequence, people's participation in the protests has been overwhelmingly large. Estimates regarding the number of participants in 6 consecutive days of national actions range from 1 to over 3 million people for each. Again, public sympathy towards the protests has largely sustained. According to France's leading daily *Le Monde*, fully two-thirds of the French population, more than 70 percent, believe that the protests against Sarkozy's pension reforms are justified!

Again, the French protests have also been marked by growing militancy, a fact noted with great concern by French officials. During the week leading up to the debate in the French Senate, which has obviously been a crucial week in the whole conflict, the country has witnessed continuous workers' strikes in key sectors of the economy. Most threatening to the government was the fact that workers of oil refineries joined the strikes. French and European newspapers have reported that all of France's 12 oil refineries were paralyzed by workers' resistance for over a week. Further, the strikes have been backed up by actions aimed at blockading the transportation of oil from oil distribution centers. And while these actions entailed a risk that public sympathy towards the protests would wane, the strikes and blockades have been highly effective. Half of the air flights from Paris' international airport Orly had to be cancelled due to the disruption in gasoline supplies. And according to both *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*, by the middle of the week as much as a third of the gasoline refilling stations, i.e. 1600 in a total of 4000, had to be closed due to depletion of stocks. By then, Sarkozy intervened and ordered that protestors obstructing transports from oil distribution centers be dislodged.

There is yet a third factor that is very significant in France's present wave of protests: youngsters are taking part enthusiastically. The numbers of high school students for instance who joined the demonstrations on October the 20th was stated to be nearly 200 hundred thousand. Both universities, traditionally a legendary seat of French social resistance, and high schools have witnessed fierce opposition against Sarkozy's pension reform plans. This might seem surprising at first. For why should young people seeking work today worry about a retirement age that lies beyond the horizon, at the end of their working life? Yet interviewed by journalists, student activists have expressed a common sentiment. They fear that an extension of the working life of the elderly will negatively affect their own chances at finding employment. And unemployment is an issue that cannot be slighted, certainly not in today's France. According to official data, France's unemployment rate as of June of 2010 stood at 10%, up from 7.5% in the middle of 2008, i.e. before the financial crisis hit the European economy. French youngsters are especially vulnerable. According to reliable sources, the employment rate among people aged less than 25 years is only 28.1%, meaning that less than a quarter of those seeking paid work succeed.

Economists defending Sarkozy's pension reforms have now launched a publicity offensive, saying it is wrong to presume that changes in the retirement age for the elderly automatically affect the chances of youngsters seeking work. They dispute the idea that there is a direct connection between the two. Yet the discontent in France has much broader contours than the issue of pension reforms alone. Everywhere in Europe, huge financial resources have been allocated since 2008 to save powerful banks and other financial institutions from bankruptcy. Meanwhile, policymakers have stubbornly stuck to old policies, even as people know that deregulation of financial markets and neo-liberal policymaking were decisive factors triggering the crisis. Instead of fighting the current recession with large scale public investments aimed at stimulating employment—for instance via projects accelerating the shift to renewable energy, —policymakers are obsessed with balancing budgets and with cutting spending so as to reduce their public deficit. Against the given background, the French protests may be read as a referendum on neo-liberalism, or rather as a second one. When referendums were organized on the draft European Constitution several years back, —the majority of the French voted 'no' because the draft enshrined neoliberal policymaking. As the French Senate continued debating the pension reforms in recent weeks, the unions have announced fresh days of national protests. □□□