

French Labor's Historical Defeat; U.S. Teachers' Surprising Victories

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As the French get ready for the “*rentrée*” – the annual back-to-school/back-to-work day following the August vacation – social peace appears to reign in the land. The long-expected militant strikes and struggles against the neo-liberal counter-reforms introduced by President Macron early last Spring have failed to materialize. Surprisingly, the Macron government successfully force-marched its anti-labor, anti-welfare, pro-business agenda through parliament with little effective resistance by the unions and Left parties.

Meanwhile, in the U.S., a wave of spontaneous teachers' strikes spread from West Virginia to other conservative 'Red' states, winning significant victories and surprising the media and the labor leadership. The contrast is surprising.



In France, resistance to the arrogant, deeply unpopular Macron started off with a bang in March with student strikes and big demonstrations on the 50th anniversary of the 1968 student-worker rebellion, which, retrospectively, was seen positively here even in the mainstream media. Yet, unlike 1968 or even 2006, when spontaneous strikes and popular demonstrations forced the government to withdraw its program, the resistance, orchestrated by the unions, never got off the ground. *Au contraire*, the self-confident Macron, perceived as “the president of the rich,” continued fast-tracking a full menu of cuts in education, public services, retirement and worker benefits, all by executive decree (to be later rubber stamped by the legislature).

Yet despite their publicized calls for “convergence” between strike movements among railroad workers, students, hospital workers, and civil servants, the French union leaders in fact kept the strikes local, fragmented by sector, and limited – all the while carrying on semi-secret talks with government officials. Even when the government bared its teeth and turned its brutal riot police and even Army units against non-violent student occupiers and peaceful mass demonstrations, the union leaders failed to call for action in solidarity with the beaten and arrested members of the students union. Big contrast with 1968, when police brutality against demonstrating students sparked the organization of a general strike of 10,000,000 workers, as TV documentaries regularly reminded us all during this luke-warm Spring offensive.

A Paradoxical Comparison

A comparison with last Spring's events on the U.S. labor scene may be suggestive. Here, despite Donald Trump's far-right, anti-labor crony-capitalist reign, an unforeseen wave of militant, self-organized teachers' strikes began spreading from one conservative state to another. And winning significant victories! Beginning in late February in the U.S., underpaid teachers in so-called Red States set off a wave of successful, mostly self-organized strikes, aimed at reversing years of neo-liberal budget cuts that had reduced both the teachers and their schools to poverty-level. In a totally surprising reversal, these teachers' strikes, organized from the bottom up and largely circumventing the weak unions that claimed to represent them, won major wage increases for teachers and other public employees as well as significant budget increases for education.

These victories have been won through a combination of tactics first employed in West Virginia.

They included ground-up grass-roots organization, creative use of social media, forging alliances with parents and other workers (organized and un-organized) and ultimately by marching en masse on the seats of government for direct confrontation with the public officials (state governors and legislators) who have the real power to open the coffers and pay for these desperately needed reforms.

The underpaid 'Red State' teachers, circumventing the usual narrow trade-union 'professionalism,' chose to struggle along broad class lines with other groups of workers (like school custodians) and for public goods that benefit all poor and working people. Woman power was the driving force in this movement. The teachers thus avoided being isolated by the usual conservative charge that they are merely defending "privileges," a charge that in France is effectively aimed at the state railroad workers and public servants in general. The teachers thus succeeded in winning public opinion to their cause and were thereby able to face off against public officials, conservatives all, who know they will need these folks' votes to win this November's elections. All these gains were unprecedented, not just in the size of the raise but in their inclusiveness and interference in political decisions concerning budgeting and the preservation of public services. Although complicated, they were negotiated directly with the governments by self-organized groups of workers.

The spread of the protests from West Virginia, Oklahoma and Kentucky, to Arizona – all Republican-dominated states with weak public sector unions – signaled the depth of frustration from teachers and parents over years of education budget cuts. The spark of this spring's teacher strike wave against austerity leaped across state borders from one legal jurisdiction to another, in part thanks to the Internet and social media. In West Virginia, a private Facebook page [access limited to teachers] enabled the West Virginia teachers, dispersed in rural areas, to come together, share opinions and information, and unite around tactics. And when the leadership of the two West Virginia teacher unions, the AFT and the NEA, publicly signed an agreement with the Governor and "ended the strike" without consulting the teachers, the strikers were able to unite on Facebook, continue their walkout, and denounce the phony deal to the media (who had already reported it and had to retract). Quoth the *NY Times*: "When they defied union leaders' calls to end the strike on March 1, the strikers redoubled the pressure on lawmakers to deliver on their pay raise. The lesson, experts said, is that undermining public sector unions, as the Janus case seeks to do, will not guarantee labor peace."

Back to France

Similar issues (defense of public services like universities and railroads) had also been raised in France as goals proclaimed by the unions' leaders, but nothing significant was accomplished or even attempted. The government and media continued to scapegoat the railroad workers, considered "privileged" by the media because they still benefit from early retirement provisions won at the end of WWII –as if the real "privileged" groups were not the bosses and bankers!

Meanwhile, the French media were playing this long-awaited spring offensive as a dramatic struggle between the French unions, personified by tough-talking Philippe Martinez, the leader of the militant CGT (historically affiliated with the Communist Party) fighting to hold onto "outdated labor privileges", and Macron, the modernist, coolly trying to drag France into the 21st century and make her "competitive." This epic wrestling match between the heavy-set Martinez with his big black drooping moustache, billed as the red-caped "Rabble-Rouser" and "His Excellency," the slim, arrogant, aristocratic Macron (blue-caped). As we shall see, this fight turned out to be just as phony as professional wrestling on TV, with the CGT and the other union leaders going through the motions while throwing the fight in return for a seat at the table.



French student strike

The railway workers were indeed struggling to preserve an essential public service, which the government clearly had plans to privatize once the struggle was over. But the railroad workers remained isolated and grew discouraged, while the CGT kept a firm grip on the leadership tactics. The French union leaders failed to organize the promised “convergence” with other striking groups (hospital workers, civil servants, students) not even calling symbolic one-day demonstrations in solidarity with them. The stop-and-go strike partial railroad strike (*grève perlée*), organized by the CGT union leaders, never effective, dragged on for months, annoying commuters and exhausting the workers economically. Up to 80% of the engine-drivers were striking on any given day (and losing their pay), but thanks to an arrangement with the CGT, the SNCF railroad management was able to keep most of the trains running using managers as scab drivers! So the workers, not the SNCF, were losing money.

This was a demoralizing lose-lose situation for both workers and commuters, but the union leaders were unwilling to do the obvious: shut down the railroad in an open-ended strike and call out the other workers in solidarity. Nor did they allow General Assemblies of workers to take over, as in past struggles. Instead, the leaders met regularly with government ministers behind closed doors, sparring verbally in public while pulling their punches.

Eventually the CGT and the other railway unions agreed to open negotiations with Prime Minister Edouard Philippe, who had said on record that he would hold talks only if the unions agreed to an EU-mandated opening of the railways to competition, the scrapping of the rail workers’ favorable retirement statute, paving the way for cuts in wages and conditions, and the privatization of the SNCF. However, the CGT had the workers continuing the stop-and-go strike all through the Summer, even after the parliament had passed the reforms, slowly bleeding out the last of their militancy.

This historic sabotage of the workers' struggle by the CGT should not come as a surprise. In 1936, during the factory occupations and massive nation-wide general strike that ushered in the Popular Front, the Communist Party, with its trade-union arm the CGT, proclaimed "You must know how to end a strike!" (*"Il faut savoir terminer une grève,"* Maurice Thorez). The Pop Front got some big concessions out of the bosses (like vacations and healthcare), but most of the salary gains evaporated with a year. A decade later, at the end of WWII, when the collaborationist French business class was disgraced and the Resistance still armed, the same Thorez (having spent the war in Moscow) told French workers to "Roll up your sleeves" and re-build capitalist France before making the "Revolution." During the 1968 student/worker uprising, the CGT kept the workers and students apart and colluded with De Gaulle to end the general strike of 11 million employees, herding them back into their factories with mendacious reports that "all the other" units had already returned to work.

What Common Denominator?

Here again, the comparison between the French Spring offensive that wasn't and the wave of successful self-organized teachers' strikes in the U.S. is suggestive. The common denominator is the role of the union bureaucracy in each case. To be sure, French and American unions are quite different in their structured and historical cultures - the U.S. "business unionism" model vs. France's syndicalist tradition and nation-wide unions. However, in both cases the interests of their leaders - of the labor bureaucracy as a social layer - may differ widely from those of the working classes in general and their members in particular. The modern labor bureaucracy, which depends on the national state for its legitimacy, is an integral part of the capitalist mechanism. This assures its place at the table and defines its designated role as a shill in the game of class struggle.

As we have just seen, in France, where unions are legal, respected and heavily integrated into the state (receiving 80% of their revenue through various cooperative organisms), the tactics imposed by the union leaders effectively *dis*-armed and *dis*-organized the struggle of the workers, civil servants and students they supposedly represented. They went through the motions of combatting Macron's neo-liberal reforms, while clinging dearly to their place at the government trough during this epochal pro-business economic transformation. The workers lost big, but the leaders held onto their jobs, helping the government make "inevitable" cuts and negotiating give-backs.

In contrast, back in the U.S., the successful teachers' strikes took place in the context of Red states where the nationally-affiliated NEA and AFT unions are either illegal (unrecognized) or marginal, with few members and little power. In West Virginia, as we have seen, the out-of-touch professional union leaders in the state capitol helped the pro-Trump governor put an end to the self-organized teachers' walkout (technically not a "strike" which would be illegal) behind the teachers' backs. The next day the NEA and AFT officials (as will as the politicians and the media) had egg on their faces when actual strikers, united through their private Facebook page, denounced the "agreement," continued their job action, and went on to victory.

In West Virginia, the bureaucrats were unable to stifle the rank-and-file, and the enormous power, courage and collective savvy of *self*-organized labor burst forth, inspiring others to do likewise. As the *NY Times* reported "Unions have tended throughout most of their histories to be forces that seek stability, not unrest ... When they are weakened, we're more likely to see the re-emergence of instability and militancy, and the kind of model that we're seeing happen in West Virginia." In some of the other states, the teachers did work with or through the official unions, but the teachers there were self-organized in their own caucuses and Facebook groups and were able to keep the upper hand.

What Next?

This week the French working classes are returning to their workplaces, but their heads are not held high. To this observer, it appears that they have suffered an historical defeat: the end of the fabled “French exception” to dogmatic Thatcherite neo-liberalism. The French exception was based on France post-WWII Constitution as a “Social Republic” conceived when the workers in the Resistance were still armed and the owners, most of whom had collaborated with the Nazis, were under suspicion.

The Social Republic is now history, and the French business class, under Macron’s neo-liberal reforms, is getting ready to Thatcherize France with a vengeance and take its revenge after suffering 70 years of state regulations favorable to workers. They will succeed – *unless* the French rank-and-file workers take a hint from the W. Va. teachers and figure out a way to organize themselves autonomously. Let us hope that the U.S. wave of teacher Internet-connected self-organization which crested in the Spring, continues through the Fall, spreading to other states and inspiring other professions.

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“Don’t mourn, organize!”

Most working people – French or American – understand that there is strength in unity and that without organization, labor can never successfully defend itself against capital. Why then is union membership down to 7% in both countries? Maybe workers are tired of fighting with one hand behind their backs, dominated by professional union leaders who make their livings pimping them to management for a price.

One possible solution to the problem of labor’s domination by the fat-cat, class-collaborationist labor bureaucracy is simple. Starve the beast. Cut all union ties with government “support”. Have all union reps paid at workers’ wages. Limit mandates to a year or two and keep rotating officials back into the actual working class.

Labor bureaucrats always justify their existence with the argument that labor relations are complicated and require their professional expertise. Nonsense. The teachers of W. Va. and Oklahoma have just proven them wrong. They were able to negotiate collectively the most complex issues to successful conclusion using common sense, class consciousness and democratic methods. Among those methods was transparency.

The power of transparency was made clear 40 years ago in Poland, when the *Solidarnosc* leaders of striking workers at the Gdansk shipyard insisted on carrying out their negotiations with management over an open microphone audible to the great crowds of workers gathered below. Today, instead of passively accepting whatever their leaders tell them, the rank and file are able to get accurate information, discuss their goals on private Facebook pages and mobilize to fight for them in real time.

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