

French Lessons

Recent events in France have taken even the most optimistic leftwing observers by surprise. The French Right had seemed to be enjoying a prolonged honeymoon period following its electoral victory of March 1986, its political support remaining solid after more than six months of radical reforms. France appeared to be settling into a right-dominated consensus, in which Prime Minister Chirac's strong-arm neo-gaullism was winning wide popular support, particularly on law and order issues, and President Mitterrand was being reduced to employing delaying tactics

without any opportunity of taking the political initiative. Chirac was apparently proving that co-habitation with a Socialist president could operate smoothly: to the Right's advantage.

However, things livened up unexpectedly in mid-November with a massive protest movement by school and university students against the government's bill intended to tighten up university entrance. With the decline of radicalism in the universities, the new generation of French students seemed several light years away from the post-1968 radicals. Depoliticised and

more individualistic, they had apparently accepted the rules of the game in what remains a highly unequal and crisis-stricken university system. Nobody then expected that the first effective shots against the neo-liberal policies of the Chirac government would be fired from the universities.

The three weeks of student demonstrations, however, were no re-run of May 68. Their demands were less global, and less overtly political. Trade unions and the traditional left political parties and groups were kept at arms-length as the students addressed themselves

directly, and successfully, to public opinion. Undoubtedly one of the reasons why the Chirac government had to back down was that it failed to make the student strike unpopular (a poll carried out during the strike showed more than 60% popular support), particularly after the death of Malik Oussekiine at the hands of the traditionally brutal riot police.

During the strike, Chirac not only had to deal with the students, but also some backstabbing within his own government coalition, overt criticism from his rightwing rival in the next presidential election, Raymond Barre, and the inevitable banana skins strewn around by Mitterrand.

Having been humiliated into abandoning his university 'reforms', and with them his tough guy image, Chirac could only have expected that his troubles were just beginning. Days after the end of the students' strike, a spontaneous unofficial strike broke out among the railway workers, quickly paralysing rail transport throughout France. The character of this strike owed much to the students (and not only because they had shown that victory was possible): the railway workers took over the idea of daily general meetings and the insistence on direct forms of democracy, and some even set up a national co-ordinating com-



The demonstrations that wiped the smile off Chirac's face

Chirac vs Mitterrand

Do you have a favourable opinion of President Mitterrand:

December 1986

Yes 56%

No 39%

January 1987

Yes 58%

No 38%

Are you confident that Chirac can resolve the country's problems?

December 1986

Yes 53%

No 41%

January 1987 (after student strike and start of railway strike)

Yes 46%

No 49%

Source: Sofres Poll published in *Le Figaro Magazine*, 10 January 1987

mittee which bore a striking resemblance to that of the students.

The strikers' demands were close to those of their official unions (over work conditions and wages, and opposing management plans to introduce new criteria for promotion based on individual 'merit'), but the unions nonetheless had some initial difficulties adapting as the strike turned into the longest on the railways for 40 years. Whereas the Communist CGT seemed at home with the new forms of grassroots democracy, and constantly supported the more militant sectors, the other major union federations, the CFDT and FO, tended to adopt more accommodating positions. The CGT alone tried - with only partial success - to extend the strike to other parts of the public sector.

Much more was at stake than during the student protest: the railway workers' wage claims, if met, were likely to snowball through the public sector and seriously undermine the government's austerity policies. A major social crisis would not only have put Chirac's government in danger, but also changed the political landscape of left-right co-habitation. Mitterrand was aware that a little social unrest does him good in the opinion polls, but that major upheaval could make life awkward for him in the run-up to the presidential elections. Chirac knew that the failure of co-habitation to deliver the goods would strengthen Barre, who has been opposed from the outset to what he considers to be an impossible compromise.

If the labour movement has failed in its first attempt to get its act together after years of apathy and disaffection, then this is largely due to these pressures towards 'national unity' between the government and the president. However, both students and railworkers have provided ample proof that the road from serfdom looks like being a pretty bumpy one for the French neo-liberals. •

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