

A wealth of experience for future struggles

Twenty years ago, in 2006, in France, the lecture theatres – bastions of academic boredom – were abruptly roused from their torpor by the clamour of heated debates on unemployment, job insecurity, exploitation and the future. Working-class young people (school pupils and students) stood united against yet another attack by the state: the Contrat Première Embauche, CPE, First Employment Contract, mischievously renamed the Contrat Poubelle Embauche – Rubbish Employment Contract. After three months of fierce struggle, faced with the sheer scale of the mobilisation, the French government was forced to back down and withdraw its unjust bill, even though it had previously declared: *“It is not the streets that govern”*.

Yet, despite the strength of this movement and this victory, the struggle against the CPE was quickly forgotten, to the point of leaving almost no trace.

Three months that sent shockwaves through the French bourgeoisie

On 16 January, the CPE was announced. It was an employment contract for those under 26 that allowed employers to dismiss staff without cause. This shameful attack – which treated young people as disposable, to be used and discarded as the employer saw fit – sparked a veritable wave of anger and outrage.

As early as 19 January, a student collective was formed and decided on a day of street demonstrations. This was set for 7 February. On that day, not only was the mobilisation of young people massive, but tens of thousands of workers, pensioners and the unemployed also unexpectedly joined in, coming together to express their solidarity with the younger generation through the struggle.

Buoyed by this spontaneous success, the very next day, 8 February, students across all universities in France organised blockades and general assemblies. The lecture theatres hosting the general assemblies were packed to bursting. The debates were lively. A small faction, including UNEF union members, pushed for purely student-centred slogans, whilst the majority wanted to highlight what unites all workers: the struggle against job insecurity. These two camps also clashed over the question of whether to open the general assemblies to other participants. Logically, the former wished to restrict the assemblies to student card holders alone, whilst everyone else wanted employees, the unemployed and pensioners to join the discussions. What would give this movement its strength was precisely the fact that the young people fighting this cause did not allow the student unions – those who seek to isolate and

divide – to take control of the assemblies. On the contrary, the general assemblies became genuine forums for the exchange of ideas, genuine decision-making bodies. As a result, the slogans ultimately chosen were those that concerned the entire working class, and the general assemblies began opening up to everyone. Workers who ‘happened to be passing by’ were welcomed with open arms and invited to take part in the debates and share their experiences.

In March, an internal UNEF document was leaked. This document explained how to infiltrate the general assemblies. In many faculties, UNEF members were then booed, and sometimes even expelled from the general assemblies, to cries of ‘UNEF, MEDEF!’ (the employers’ union).

Here, the students were fighting to defend the sovereign nature of the general assemblies, with their elected and recallable delegates (based on mandates and the handing back of mandates), through a show of hands. Every day, different teams organised the debate on the podium. In order to share out tasks, centralise, coordinate and maintain control of the movement, many general assemblies decided to elect various committees: press, events and strategy, reception and information, etc. All these general assemblies gradually linked up with one another through appointed delegates so that decisions could be taken on an increasingly broader scale. These sovereign general assemblies were the true lifeblood of the struggle. It was thanks to these vibrant and centralised general assemblies that students could decide on the actions to be taken, with the main concern being the extension of the movement to workplaces.

The students had fully understood that the outcome of their struggle lay in the hands of wage-earning workers. As one student said at a meeting of the Île-de-France coordination group on 8 March: *“If we remain isolated, we’ll be eaten alive”*. The student general assemblies therefore began sending large delegations everywhere to meet workers at companies near their places of study. And here again, of course, they came up against a trade union blockade: workers remained locked inside their workplaces with no opportunity to speak to the student delegations. But the ‘little Sioux’ of the universities, refusing to give up, devised other ways to get round the trade union blockade: striking up conversations in the street, inviting passers-by with placards and leaflets to attend the general assemblies, and setting up ‘suggestion boxes’ so that ‘bystanders’ could take part in the collective decision-making process.

The 2006 movement thus went far beyond a mere protest against the CPE. As a lecturer at the University of Paris-Tolbiac put it at the demonstration on 7 March: *“The CPE is not just a real, one-off economic attack. It is also a symbol.”* Indeed, it is

a symbol of the failure of the capitalist economy.

Since the trade unions were not calling for strike days, and in order to enable as many workers as possible to join the movement regardless, the student general assemblies decided to hold a day of demonstrations every Saturday. Thus, from late February to early April, the ranks of the marches swelled week by week. Starting with a few tens of thousands, we would number nearly three million on the streets by the sixth demonstration. When the trade unions sought to symbolically take the lead of the movement by positioning themselves at the head of the marches, thousands of students ran, overtook them and took side streets to regain the lead. In Paris, on 4 April, the students positioned themselves in front of the CGT and unfurled a huge banner uniting them all: *‘Students, sixth-formers, the unemployed, workers in precarious employment, in the public and private sectors – the same fight against unemployment and precariousness!’* What a contrast to the CGT banners, now trailing behind, which read “CGT Metalworkers”, “CGT RATP”, “CGT Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital”, “CGT City of Pantin”, “CGT Seine-Saint-Denis”, etc.

And this young generation was able to thwart yet more traps. When the government sent in its police to provoke, kettle (notably on the Sorbonne campus), and beat people up... the student general assemblies decided not to retaliate, so that the movement did not degenerate into fruitless violence that would divide it and drive many workers away. On the contrary, they decided to go and speak to the ‘robocops’ to try to convince them to stop their repression.

On 5 April, the blockades spread to railway stations, with the help of railway workers. The venues for debate multiplied. The next demonstration therefore promised to be on an even larger scale. Faced with this momentum of expansion and the workers’ ability to take charge of the struggles, the government gave in. On 10 April, the CPE was officially scrapped. If the bourgeoisie gave in in this way, it is because it saw in this movement a real danger: that the struggle would spread to the entire working class. The students rediscovered the vital importance of sovereign general assemblies and the power of spreading the struggle!

Why has this movement been consigned to oblivion?

There is one obvious answer: the actions of the bourgeoisie.

During the movement, the international press imposed a veritable news blackout, reporting almost nothing about this social movement. And even in France, not a word was said about the general assemblies; journalists focused instead on the roadblocks and on interviews with the few students lamenting their inability to study in peace. After the movement, the French bourgeoisie did everything in its power to erase the key strengths of this struggle: the general assemblies and the spread of the movement. In 2007, 2008 and 2010, its trade unions organised a whole series of ineffective ‘days of action’, to drive home to the workers that, no, it is not the streets that govern.

But there is a much deeper and more historical reason.

In 1991, when the USSR collapsed, a massive global campaign hammered home the biggest lie in history: ‘Stalinism = communism’. The collapse of the USSR thus supposedly signalled the end of history, the definitive victory of capitalism. Worse still: any struggle, any revolutionary hope of the work-

ing class could only lead to the disaster and barbarism that had been Stalinism. The result: being a worker was a source of shame. It was therefore impossible to draw on previous struggles. The workers’ memory had to be erased.

The entire decade of the 1990s was thus, on a global scale, a barren wasteland from the point of view of the class struggle. It was not until 2003 that, tentatively, workers – in this case, teachers in France – began to find their way back to struggle and to the streets. In 2006, therefore, the new generation – because it had not been crushed by the ideological steamroller of the 1990s – had the courage to take up the struggle. But it did so instinctively, feeling solidarity with all workers, without realising that they were reviving methods of struggle developed by previous generations over the past century and a half, without realising that they were waging a struggle belonging to the working class, without realising that they were a link in a long chain, without realising that they were a moment in the long historical struggle towards revolution.

That is why, when the movement died down, there were no discussion groups, no new organisations, no books of testimonies. Without roots, that generation was unable to withstand the headwinds.

Does this mean that this precious movement of 2006 has vanished into oblivion for good? That these lessons are forgotten forever? Absolutely not! Since 2022 and the ‘Summer of Anger’ in the UK, the working class across the globe has been raising its head and referring ever more explicitly to the idea that *‘we are all in the same boat, we are all workers’*. It is no coincidence that, during the 2003 protests against pension reforms in France, many demonstrators in the marches held up placards referring to May ’68.

There is a growing sentiment within our class: we no longer want to put up with this; *‘enough is enough’*, as demonstrated right now by the strike taking hold at Airbus in Spain. And alongside this growing spirit of resistance, there is also a growing realisation that we must reclaim our past in order to prepare for the future!

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