

EDITORIAL

## 'I Class Struggle'

### French Exceptionalism and Challenges for Socialist Studies

ELAINE COBURN

CADIS-Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales and American University of Paris.  
Paris, France

**Keywords:**

capitalism • class • France • ideology • protests • states

**Mots-clés:**

capitalisme • classe • France • idéologie • manifestations • états

*'Je lutte des classes' - 'I class struggle'*

*– sticker worn by protestors in Paris, Lyon, Marseille, Lille, and other major French cities on Tuesday, October 12, 2010, during the 5<sup>th</sup> day of strike action. The protests aimed to challenge proposed legislation to raise the legal age of retirement in France from sixty to sixty two years of age. As in the English translation, the original French is grammatically awkward, an ambiguous if not ambivalent union between 'I' and 'class struggle'.*

One of the major issues for socialist studies is working class dynamics in contemporary neoliberal times. In an interview with Dorothy Smith, in this volume of *Socialist Studies/Études Socialistes*, she recalls the strong working class movements in England in her youth and sees nothing comparable in the present. This is a problem for socialist studies, since class is unarguably a central concept in socialist theories. If there is no active and vigorous working class movement, what does this mean – for capitalism, for working class people, for transformations beyond capitalism? In this editorial, I would like to use what looks like a classic, contemporary working class protest in France, where I live, to lay out some of questions and challenges for socialist analyses and activism.

As I write, on Tuesday, 18 October 2010, French workers are on the eve of the fifth day of action in six weeks against proposed legislation to raise the legal age of retirement from sixty to sixty two years. Truck drivers are blocking the main roads into Paris, but also the highways into major cities like Lille. Teachers are on strike, hospital workers have followed, and high school and university students are blocking access to their

institutions, with over three hundred high schools closed according to the National Education Ministry. In some instances, students are blocking streets and rail lines. Workers at oil refineries have barricaded the premises, keeping out colleagues ordered back to work by the state, so that over one thousand of the twelve thousand five hundred local gas stations in France are out of service. Despite the protests, which have mobilized millions, and the fact that President Nicholas Sarkozy promised during his presidential campaign in 2007 that he would not raise the legal retirement age, most observers agree that there is little chance that Sarkozy and the conservative majority will back down. The final vote is set for Thursday, 19 October or Friday, 20 October, although the Socialist Party is seeking to delay the vote with a variety of parliamentary tactics. (The legislation was passed on 10 November 2010, with some concessions, for example, for those who began working before eighteen years of age, mothers of three children and those whose work conditions are particularly difficult and dangerous.)

2

---

With my husband and three small children, I marched with thousands of others in Lille, on one of the days of action. The protest is broadly similar to many others I have participated in, both in France and in Canada. The streets are filled, as far as the eye can see, with marchers. There are union banners, balloons, loudspeakers, people with drums and ear-splitting vuvuzelas, inspired by last summer's World Cup of Soccer in South Africa. Small firecrackers are lit, going off with a loud bang that frightens my children. There is a brass band, affiliated with the Communist Party, playing from the back of a small, flat-bed truck and later on the sidewalk. People hand out stickers announcing union affiliations or sell t-shirts. Around me, marchers wear colourful stickers that read 'Je lutte des classe' or 'I class struggle'. Others carry cardboard placards that affirm their right to pensions at the current age of sixty years 'Because I'm worth it', the slogan of the L'Oréal cosmetics company, owned by French billionaire Liliane Bettencourt. Still others distribute free copies of left-wing newspapers, many satirical. Pamphlets pass from one hand to another, most directly concerned with the injustices of raising the legal retirement age. The police are numerous and visible, cordoning off some streets, but there is no meaningful confrontation. This is not the case in other cities, however, where vandalism and violence fuel rumours of police provocateurs, some apparently wearing union stickers. The police have used teargas and flash balls, resulting in serious injury to at least one high school student, who risks the loss of his eye. Hundreds more have been questioned by the police, particularly in conjunction with the high school

protests, where there have been instances of hooliganism. A racialized population concentrated in the public housing projects in the suburbs of large cities, France's lumpenproletariat, smash public bus windows, set fire to garbage cans and steal motorcycles left unattended by careless protestors.

After about two hours of marching, we reach Lille's central square, but it is very crowded and we no longer feel comfortable with the children, so we turn back. With the bus drivers on strike, there is no public transport. We stop for tea in my husband's downtown municipal office and later walk the five kilometres home with the children. Another day of protest is over, at least for us, although there are demonstrations in all major cities in France and more will follow this one.

### **Working Class Protest: French Exceptionalism?**

The protests in Lille and elsewhere in France are an almost stereotypical example of the kind of self-conscious working class movement that socialist theories anticipate: ordinary *working* people, those who make a living selling their labour power for a wage or a salary, are out in the streets to protect always-provisional working class gains, in this case pension rights. Students participate, rejecting government efforts to convince 'the young' that they have generational, not class interests. 'Sans papiers', or undocumented workers, circulate a petition demanding regularization, marching alongside legal workers. France's six major union federations participate, overcoming sectoral differences and varying political orientations. There are representatives of various working class political parties, including the mainstream Socialist Party, the New Anti-Capitalist Party, organized by a youthful-looking postal worker and the Communist Party. Even the aesthetics are resolutely working class: protestors hold homemade cardboard signs in deliberate contrast to slick, shiny advertisements and many men wear their work clothes, fluorescent vests and big steel toed boots, in defiance of the conventions of bourgeois fashion.

In contrast to the narrow media coverage in Canada and the United States, utterly dominated by right-wing ideologues, the protests in France will be discussed at length in a range of relatively sympathetic press, particularly the printed media. My husband and I, for example, are subscribers to *Liberation*, which has historic and ongoing ties to the Socialist Party of France. The subscriber-owned newspaper *L'Humanité* is officially Communist and while much smaller, is easily available in most cities. In the evening, we watch an hour and a half long political show on

public television, where there is every chance we will hear self-professed Communists and even the occasional anti-capitalist revolutionary, both activists and scholars, presenting views that in North America would disqualify them as serious interlocutors in a public debate. On the whole, the French media is far from progressive and voices of capital still radically outweigh those of workers. Nonetheless, the range of public opinion is significantly broader than in the Anglo-Saxon world.

Moreover, the protestors in France march with the memory of successful protests in the recent past. The strikes of 1995 are on everyone's mind, when millions of workers in the street resulted in the government's decision to abandon pension reform, although other worker-unfriendly legislation was enacted. Contrast this with Ontario, Canada, for example, where from 1995 to 1998, a series of the largest mobilizations of working people in Canadian history against the neoliberal reforms of the provincial government, had no effect on the course of then-Premier Harris' policies. Despite low rates of unionization, the French working class is militant and has a centuries' long history of at least partial success in blocking capital oriented state policies.

4 Of course, this does not mean that capital is not organized in France. Against the current demonstration of working class opposition and solidarity, there are the usual suspects. This includes the national federation of French businesses, the Mouvement des entreprises de France (MEDEF), calling for provisions to minimize disruptions to the French economy, both in the name of the survival of small businesses and to preserve the competitiveness of French businesses, small and large, within Europe. Despite 'globalization', the French state is very much present, still an important political force in disciplining labour on behalf of capital, in this case helping to further class interests above and beyond the level of the individual firm by requiring two more years of labour from each worker. The police are mobilized, to contain and sometimes violently repress protest. Predictably, the business media, like the Financial Times, remarks upon the 'absurdity' of schoolchildren mobilizing around retirement rights, under the headline 'Defiant France Ignores the Abyss' and concludes with Margaret Thatcher's infamous words as a warning to French protestors: 'There is no alternative'. Mainstream right-wing newspapers like *The Figaro* emphasize the 'impartial' support of the International Monetary Fund for the pension reforms; the IMF had suggested an increase in the retirement age in 2009 as a way of reducing the French deficit. The French state raises the possibility that, without pension reform, the nation's credit rating at Moody's will slip, provoking

capital flight, halting economic growth and harming the 'general' national interest.

### **Questions for Socialist Studies**

The mobilizations in France raise a number of questions, not least because the French protests –although characteristic of a certain kind of working class protest -- seem so atypical. In particular, the movement in France seems exceptional when contrasted with the anaemic to non-existent working class mobilizations of Anglo-Saxon countries, including Canada, the United States, Britain, Australia and Ireland. In the current phase of capitalism, when the working class seems everywhere historically weak, what are the major challenges to socialist analyses and activism? What transformations are there within the world capitalist system and in specific national or local sites that might help explain the current weakness of the working class and the relative strength of capital? Socialist studies have distinct contributions to make in analysing the current dynamics and tensions within the world capitalist system, to try and make sense of events like the protests in France – but also to understand why, with historic levels of inequality, there are not more working class protests of this kind. Below, I suggest some characteristics of, and sites within contemporary world capitalism, where socialist insights might be particularly fruitful and consequential for working class activism:

5

**1. Increasingly coordinated international infrastructure to 'regulate' and 'coordinate' capitalism at the global level.** The post-war World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are increasingly active, at least in the sense of expanded mandates. They are joined by new global or international organizations, like the World Trade Organization and, performing a somewhat different function, the World Economic Forum. Credit rating agencies like Moody's and Standard and Poor's similarly act globally, sanctioning states considered insufficiently capital-friendly. In what looks like an increasingly thick international field of 'financial institutions', is there movement towards world governance on behalf of, if not always at the behest of capital?

**2. The ongoing dominance of finance capitalism.** Mitigating efforts to coordinate capitalism and so save capitalism from its own worse excesses and unpredictability, as in the above scenario, is the possibility of the ongoing dominance of finance capital. 'All which is solid melts into air' in a world in which financial assets are made 'real' by nearly unintelligible

complex mathematical formulas and a social consensus that money begets money. Financial speculation embraces the fanciful and far-fetched: bets are laid on the possibility of state's defaulting, there are futures on the weather... Huge inflows and outflows of capital are informed by premonitions and panic, beyond the control of national and international capital, with sometimes disastrous consequences for ordinary working people. This is the scenario for the last decade or more, but what is the likelihood and implications of persistent 'casino capitalism'?

**3. Thick ideological apparatus and the dominance of organic intellectuals for capital.** The ideological apparatus that support capital and naturalize and rationalize capitalism are, like international financial institutions, thick. These include the for-profit media and think tanks like the Mont Pélérin Society and the Fraser Institute, which are increasingly mainstream, presented as providing 'objective' analyses and policy advice. Economics and business departments and orthodox economists, who often hold the most important policy positions in international financial institutions and within powerful ministries in national governments, are the institutional and professional homes and vectors of ideologies favourable to capitalist social relationships. As Gramsci argued, even street names and buildings celebrate entrepreneurs, while forgetting working class achievements. These ideologies are not static, but elastic and changeable, often incorporating and denaturing rebellious counter-hegemonic challenges, as with 'green consumerism'. Moreover, capital-friendly ideologies may be increasingly imperialistic, so that narrow economic explanations are now invoked to 'explain' inequality and poverty, preoccupations previously outside orthodox economics concerns. A major task for socialist studies is mapping the thick institutional complex of ideological apparatus and organic intellectuals for capital, not least professional economists, as well as their transformations.

**4. The state as manager.** In her interview in this volume of *Socialist Studies/Études Socialistes*, Dorothy Smith argues that states no longer manage capital. Rather they manage their populations vis-à-vis capital. States compete as sites to attract domestic and foreign investment, promising flexible labour and environmental laws, as well as low tax rates for corporations and the wealthy. Management of working class populations includes a wide variety of legislation that disciplines labour, for example, making it more difficult to unionize, facilitating processes for firing workers and so on. Likewise, 'management' of domestic working

populations includes the use of the strong arm of the state. This may be episodic, as when police are mobilized to contain working class protests like those in France, or 'everyday' so that the United States, for example, significant proportions of the population, especially 'black' men are in prison. Anti-terrorist legislation strips citizens and non-citizens of even formal rights before the courts and the flexible interpretation of 'terrorist' means that dissenters risk harsh penalties. Such management or containment of potentially disruptive working class elements domestically is complemented by imperialistic policies abroad, protecting capital investments or prying open markets through war. In a world of mobile, transnational capital, states relative autonomy from capital is diminished. If states continue to matter, with non-negligible differences in their relative responsiveness to capital and the working class, are states nonetheless generally increasingly limited to roles 'managing' for capital?

**5. The natural limits of capitalism.** Arguably, the single issue that Marx did not and perhaps could not have anticipated is the literal exhaustion of natural resources and the inability of capitalism to reign in production and consumption activities that contribute to global warming and threaten the ongoing existence of humanity. Philosopher Slavoj Žižek has argued that it is now easier to imagine the end of the world, due to environmental catastrophe or total war, than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. Socialist studies have particular insights into the inability of capitalism to take environmental destruction into account and the disproportionate burden of the brunt of manmade environmental disasters on the working classes worldwide.

**6. Whither working class resistance?** There seems to be little evidence of a worldwide working class 'for itself', to counter an increasingly confident and self-conscious transnational capitalist class. At the world level, the alter-globalization or 'global justice' movement has been unable to seize the initiative back from capital -- despite the 2008 economic crises that at least temporarily highlighted some of the perverse priorities of capitalism: a world in which billions can be mobilized to save banks, but in which a billion human beings go without enough to eat. Resistance to austerity plans that resolve the latest economic crisis on the backs of working people is remarkably scattered, particularly in Europe and North America. There is little sign of international solidarity. Symptomatically, French workers took to the streets to protect French pensions, but did not march in

solidarity with Greek, Irish or now British workers facing similar or worse attacks on their social welfare.

Of course, workers are divided, for instance, by citizenship, legality, gender, experiences of racialization, whether or not they work in the public or private sector and in blue collar or white collar employment, location within the world system and so on. It is clear that working class movements that appeal to workers narrowly, abstracting from their experiences as women, as people of colour, as workers in services or industry, will not succeed. But, what forms of organization and language can accommodate such simultaneous recognition of the multiplicity of working class experiences, and their essential unity? What specific local, national, regional and international initiatives hold promise for a shift from fragmented working class people to a confident, vigorous class conscious world movement of workers?

**7. The Fascist temptation.** In a world of increasingly inequality, working class solidarity is not a given. Indeed, working class anger, frustration and suffering may be turned against both those better-off, in an expression of right-wing anti-elite populism, and those worse off, a racialized lumpenproletariat stigmatized as the ultimate other. The temptation towards fascism is an ever-present shadow: towards a better future, or towards one in which unbridled capitalism is linked with the worst forms of anti-elitist, but also, anti-poor populism?

8

---

Of course, this sketch of some of the class dynamics that socialist studies must come to grips with if it is to be useful is incomplete. Yet they are entry points for understanding and acting upon a radically unequal world. Socialist studies has its part to play in the struggle to undo the commonsense of capitalism and strengthen progressive movements everywhere. When we brought our children to witness and participate in the Lille demonstration we sought to show them what it looks like, to struggle, together, for a better, safer, more just world. So that, in the noise, the marching, the banners waving, they would see that no one is condemned simply to submit to dominant structures of power.