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# 'This political struggle is about the big issues'

Macron made grave errors with his pension reform. Can he save his image as a reformer? An interview with Martial Foucault

*Read this interview in German and Russian.*

**How important is pension reform for Emmanuel Macron's political vision?**

During his election campaign in 2017, Emmanuel Macron said he intended to overhaul pensions to create a "universal" system. It's therefore not surprising that as president, Macron is driving forward his reform. The original plan was to simplify the pension schemes of 42 professions – employees of the French railway, the Parisian transport system and the French gas company, as well as lawyers, notaries and others – and create a uniform system by 2025.

**How is the debate over pension reform affecting Macron's image as a "reformer"?**

President Macron's – and his government's – perseverance in pursuing their goal despite the protests of hundreds of thousands of workers since early December 2019 fits the French leader's style. Macron has said that "the new world" does not let his agenda and pace of reforms be dictated by the street. After large-scale protests didn't prevent him transforming French labour law, unemployment insurance and the state-owned railway company during his first months in office, it was time to tackle pensions.

Such a brisk pace risked uniting all the French citizens who were dissatisfied with the president's response to the furious socio-political protests by the "yellow vests" in winter 2018-19. It's a real political dilemma: Should Macron dare to permanently alienate those French people who have modest incomes – or should he abandon pension reform and sacrifice his reputation as a "reformist president"?

**Why are people showing so much distrust towards these reforms?**

The distrust towards pension reforms mainly comes from a series of political and structural errors. The reform was summed up as "Every euro paid into the pension fund will give every pensioner the same entitlements." A universal system was supposed to be set up and special schemes ended. The government convincingly presented the advantages of rewarding employees for each day worked in a points-based system. Hoping to convince the public of the advantages of a new pact between working people and pensioners, the administration even fielded a specialist for negotiating with unions, Jean-Paul Delevoye.

But Prime Minister Edouard Philippe decided to couple pension reform with balancing the new system's budget. On 11 December 2019, the government topped that announcement by stating its wish to hike the age of retirement to 64. Taken aback by this new condition, the unions resisted and working people protested. Linking these two issues was clearly a grave error. Unsurprisingly, on 12 January 2020 the government caved in and scrapped its plans for the new retirement age. Too late: The government had created the impression that it was trying to buck the major trade unions and disregard the practice of social dialogue.

**The government and some of the trade unions are using this social conflict to compete to be seen as the best defender of the common good. What's at stake in this struggle?**

The resistance to Macron's social reforms is not just a rejection of reforms that challenge the French social model. It's based on widespread suspicion amongst employees – and all French people – of politics in general.

The crisis of politics shows itself in the decline of representative democracy – the relationship of those governing with those they govern. It's also about the model of social democracy, which has been replaced by the concept of "social dialogue"' that aims to have the state, employers and employees reach consensus. Originally, social democracy was viewed as regulating relations between powerful groups and classes. But it has adopted a new form of interaction. However, adapting compromises and engaging in "give and take" and negotiations hasn't worked out smoothly.

This political struggle is about the big issues. One on hand, it's about the executive acting too pragmatically and thereby risking to ignore the trade unions, which the French consider too politicised. On the other hand, there's the question of whether purely economic considerations prevail over earlier utopian radicalism. This means that

social democracy would be limited to local issues and forced to abandon future ambitions.

**What are the government's challenges as well as reformist and protesting unions to find a way out of the crisis without losing face?**

This situation raises some new questions. And numerous statements invoke party-political and ideological considerations. It's not so much Macron's economic liberalism that is questioned, but rather what many see as his authoritarian governance style. This has led to remarkable developments in public opinion and the world of work.

For a long time, French citizens had been demanding "a state" or "an increasingly interventionist state". Now this demand seems to have dwindled. This could explain the divide between employees and Macron, whose politics are liberal but whose practices are reminiscent of de Gaulle. The president seems to feel that social reforms are necessary because France has some catching up to do in the European context[??1] . Macron says that efficiently implementing reforms requires the state to take charge instead of engaging in dialogue with social partners – a process which aims to find compromise and by definition has no place in an "urgent" programme.

**The political benefits of the reform seem minor faced with the risk it poses for the government's popularity. Was it a miscalculation in light of the presidential election of 2022?**

I don't believe that Emmanuel Macron can reap any short-term political benefit from this: Public opinion has changed. Pension reform was considered legitimate as long as it aimed for social justice. But introducing the notion of a balanced budget made Macron look like a president who is indifferent to the fate of low-income citizens. However, one could argue that it was a clever political calculation to siphon votes from the right wing. In fact, Macron continues to be appreciated by voters who favour and expect his continued adherence to economic values.

Nonetheless, looking at the 2022 presidential election, one has to ask if Macron's confrontation with left-wing voters isn't risky: Could competing with the traditional right-wing – the Republicans – and the far-right wing – the National Rally, formerly the National Front – for the same voter block serve to pave the way for left-wing consolidation – from the Communist Party to the Socialists and the Greens?

*This interview was conducted by Benjamin Schreiber.*



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