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Shouldn't a protest movement led by unions be benefiting the left?

Imperilled by Macron's diktats and threatened by left wing chaos, France's far right is managing to present itself as the defender of democracy

For three months, France has been in revolt: Demonstrators have marched; railroad workers have blocked tracks; barricades and buildings have been set aflame; protesters have done battle in the street with police. The most recent innovation has been tamer: People have banged pots whenever the president has appeared. The cause? President Emmanuel Macron's measure raising the retirement age from 62 to 64.

This might at first glance appear to be the work of a vibrant political left wing, fighting pro-business, anti-worker policies from a centre-right technocratic government. Indeed, France's labour unions — though representing a smaller share of the work force than elsewhere in Western Europe — have been united in their opposition, making them a redoubtable force. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who leads the left-wing coalition NUPES, has been a central figure in the parliamentary fight against Macron, nearly bringing down his government with a no-confidence vote in March.

And yet it is not France's left that has benefited from the popular rebellion. It is the far right.

Recent polls showed that if last year's head-to-head presidential election were held now, Marine Le Pen, the leader of the far-right Rassemblement National, would beat Macron handily, 55 to 45 per cent. Other polls that list all possible candidates have shown that Mélenchon, despite his and his group's support for the anti-Macron movement, has gained a mere percentage point since last year's elections, hovering at around a quarter of the votes and, in some scenarios, only 20 per cent.

In a situation that seems tailor-made for a resurgence of the left, how is it that, for the moment at least, it is not just the right but the far right that has benefited?

The Yellow Vests and the decline of the left

Hatred of the established order is no longer a marker of leftism, and France's recent history testifies to this. The Yellow Vests, France's last mass protest movement, which began in response to an eco-friendly hike in gas taxes in 2018, was a strange hodgepodge of positions and attitudes, and its political leanings varied from city to city and even differed from one roundabout to another where the protesters gathered.

The movement rejected attempts by politicians to join them and very early developed a solid right-leaning conspiratorial element. Jacline Mouraud, whose October 2018 video helped spark the movement, later supported the far-right presidential candidate Eric Zemmour, a committed racist. A direct outgrowth of the Yellow Vests was the phenomenal popularity of the 2020 Covid conspiracy film 'Hold Up,' as was a vocal anti-mask movement.

It is their opponents, the centrists say, who are the true threat to democracy: the left for its support of violent protests and the far right by its very nature.

The right-wing populist current in the Yellow Vests from just a few years ago has not vanished, and it is making itself felt in the new polls. The Rassemblement National has been the face of the populist right since its beginnings, and its history has been one of growth. These polls are a sign that this move has continued, to the benefit of Le Pen.

Her rise has been assisted by the missteps of her foes. How the increase in retirement age was finally made law — bypassing a vote in the National Assembly — was seen as a confirmation of Macron's undemocratic, even authoritarian tendencies. The political centre and centre right have been neutralised by their support for the president's unpopular measure. In response, the centre and centre right are on the attack. It is their opponents, the centrists say, who are the true threat to democracy: the left for its support of violent protests and the far right by its very nature. Macron's ministers hammer away at this idea in the media.

How Le Pen became 'the voice of reason'

For its part, the left has been hampered by its own inadequacies. Mr. Mélenchon and his coalition, betting heavily that anti-Macron sentiment will benefit them, have lacked a coherent strategy, other than maintaining pressure through advocating increased mobilisation while

adopting disruptive tactics in the National Assembly. Last October, well before the current crisis, polls showed that their rowdiness during legislative sessions had already led many to think left-wing politicians were incapable of governing. This political mayhem has thus far helped only the Rassemblement National, which is no longer universally viewed as a political pariah.

Le Pen and her party, remarkably, have become, in the eyes of many, the voice of la France profonde, the voice of reason. She has condemned the violence on the streets (though never the police's), as well as Macron for 'losing the meaning of democracy,' adding, 'when the ruler wants something and the people don't, it should not be done.' She has promised that she will reverse the retirement age change if — when — she's elected.

Over the past four decades, every political alternative but the far right has been tried and found wanting — the Socialists of François Mitterrand and François Hollande, the conservatives of Nicolas Sarkozy and the centre and Macron.

Her party's 88 members of the National Assembly, the third-largest group in the legislative body, have succeeded in further normalising the far right by playing the role of the adults in the room. The far right is managing to present itself as the defenders of democracy, imperilled by Macron's diktats, and of stability, threatened by left-wing chaos.

Is this a durable position? The Yellow Vest movement did not lead to the defeat of Macron in 2022. But those elections did see Le Pen receive more votes than her party ever had.

The government's mishandling of the pension overhaul, from failing to convince the French that it was even necessary to forcing it through when it was unable to obtain a legislative majority, has increased the people's animus toward politics and politicians. Over the past four decades, every political alternative but the far right has been tried and found wanting — the Socialists of François Mitterrand and François Hollande, the conservatives of Nicolas Sarkozy and the centre and Macron.

Though much of this held true a year ago, the change in the retirement age touched something fundamental in the French, cementing the divorce between the people and politicians. Le Pen has never held power, and so she has never failed her voters. She offers a fresh start and holds out the promise that, unlike those who have ruled France till now, she will defend the people's interests. For now, at least, this argument is

perhaps the clinching one in the minds of many in France.

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