

The 2017 French elections and labour: An Interview with Bernard Thibault

Interview conducted by Nicolas Pons-Vignon (Translated from French by Clara Dallaire-Fortier)

The Socialist Party, in power since 2012, has forced the adoption of a new labour law (Loi Travail) in spite of resistance from some unions (especially from the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT), France's largest union), and implemented austerity budgets that are unprecedented since the Second World War. What are the stakes, in the 2017 legislative and presidential elections, for the union movement and more broadly for the working class?

Bernard Thibault: The President of the Republic and his government, like many before them, only recognise that they have failed workers during election time. They have disappointed not only by failing to keep their promises, but by implementing reforms that contradict the principles historically defended by the left, for instance in the case of the so-called labour law. The challenge of these elections – which does not get much attention in a political context dominated by scandals about elected officials and candidates – is to ensure that there is a focus on social issues.

Macron, the leading candidate according to survey results, presents a programme that is reminiscent of Tony Blair's New Left: a mix of economic neoliberalism with progressive views on social issues. What does this idea of 'going beyond the left-right divide' inspire in you?

B.T.: Six months ago, Emmanuel Macron was still unknown to a majority of French people. First an advisor to François Hollande, he was then briefly appointed as minister of finance, before he decided to resign and run as an independent candidate. He was encouraged to do so by some politicians who had anticipated the crisis of the two main parties¹, which have been ruling government alternately for decades. Right-wing voters eliminated the favourites Sarkozy and Juppé in the primary, and chose François Fillon and his ultra-conservative programme on both social and economic issues. Since then, Fillon has been widely discredited after being accused of a number of serious offenses. While on paper the winner of the primary of the right had great chances of winning the presidential election, Fillon's determination to maintain his candidacy at all costs will probably make his side lose. At the same time, after Hollande renounced running for another term, the socialist primary rejected Valls, the outgoing Prime minister, to elect a candidate representing the left of the Socialist Party. Despite their commitment to support the candidate chosen through the primary, Valls and his friends have not accepted the

result; they have announced that they will vote for Macron. In so doing, they are preparing a political reshuffling.

All this to say that Macron is a product of the crisis of the major French parties. His credo 'neither to the right nor to the left' is not new. By aiming to bring together disappointed people from the right and the left, he hopes to create a heterogeneous 'centre'. Yet the centre has never formed a stable political majority in France. Right and left are still important categories in French society, and from experience, the 'centre' leans heavily to the right. Macron's popularity derives from the media and business community's willingness to accommodate him despite his lack of experience as long as he makes campaign pledges favourable to companies, especially the large ones, and to the financial sector. Finally, he is presented as the only one able to prevent Marine Le Pen from winning the election. This is dubious since polls show that she would lose to any other candidate (Fillon or Mélançon) in the second round.

For forty years, the far right's electoral results have progressed, so much so that it now represents a credible candidate for victory. A large share of its supporters come from the traditional strongholds of the left and the unions. How do you explain this, and what strategies could be put in place to counteract the inclination of workers towards xenophobic populism, which is a global phenomenon, as the victory of Trump in the United States has shown?

B.T.: It is true that the threat of the far right taking power has never been more credible in France. Regardless of what he may say, it is a part of the disastrous outcome of Hollande's presidency. If Le Pen's influence has progressed in the country, it should be noted that the more the population is unionised, the less the ideas of the National Front are shared. This is an important lesson. The progress of the National Front partly expresses a disappointment with and a challenge to other parties who have been ignoring people's aspirations. Furthermore, there is also - and it would be useless to deny it - an adherence to the National Front's racist and xenophobic discourse, which does not hesitate to present Muslims as responsible for terrorism and unemployment.

The issue of migration, particularly within the European Union, was a central theme of the campaign on Brexit in the United Kingdom. Do you think that European rules have alienated the French working class? Are reforms necessary to limit social dumping in Europe?

B.T.: In my book *The third world war is social* (2016) – only available in French for now – I have described the specific European mechanisms that create competition between workers within a single economic area. The promotion of the free movement of capital, people and goods without considering the social conditions under which such exchanges take place has led us into a downward spiral from the point of view of socio-economic rights. European law is sometimes in contradiction with the international labour standards set by the ILO, while there are great differences between European countries on how they comply with labour standards. In order to change profoundly the direction Europe is taking, necessary reforms would include revising the directive on posting workers; abandoning austerity policies; introducing a decent minimum wage for all; and ensuring the EU's compliance with ILO standards.

The left is facing the elections in a divided state with, on one side, Benoit Hamon (Socialist Party) and, on the other, Jean-Luc Mélenchon (*La France insoumise*, 'Unsubmissive France'). Do you think an alliance would be desirable? If so, on which principles should it be built?

B.T.: Unfortunately, this is indeed the case: the left is divided in the presidential elections and it is now too late to consider an alternative scenario. It might have been possible to work towards gathering energies and unifying projects, but the government's record weakened this possibility. Indeed, it would have implied significantly different political choices from those made in the last five years.

This penalises the two candidates and makes it more difficult for a 'left of conviction and of action' to be among the ballot's favourites, even if the outcome of this political soap opera is still very uncertain. Thus, the presidential election seems to be a competition within the left in order to know who embodies its leadership. This challenge will be renewed in the parliamentary election that will take place a month after the presidential one.

Only two candidates for the French presidential election (Hamon and Mélenchon) suggest increasing the minimum wage. Meanwhile, the ILO has just published its annual report on wages in which it draws governments' attention to the increase in wage inequalities and to the sharp slowdown in global wage growth. How do you explain the indifference of the majority of French candidates to this question?

B.T.: The majority of the other candidates consider that global competition requires rigorous wage regulation regardless of the social and economic consequences of this political blindness. They appear to disregard the daily reality faced by millions of workers earning the minimum wage or depending on incomes from part-time jobs, which are increasingly frequent. At best, these candidates, representing monetary and budgetary orthodoxy, plan to recycle social contributions into direct salaries without confronting such a transfer's impact on the quality of social protection. It is too easy to announce a reduction in social contributions while ignoring that the latter constitute a deferred salary. In other words, they are not proposing to move out of the devastating downward cycle in labour remuneration relative to the income of capital.

However, the latest ILO report on wages warns governments against the likely effects of such an approach if it were to continue and become generalised: worsening social difficulties for workers, rising unemployment and thus, potentially, an economic recession on an international scale. By demanding increases in real wage and the level of pensions, unions are the only ones working against this threat of new global crisis.

Bernard Thibault is the former General Secretary of the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) and a member of the Workers' Group of the Governing Body of the ILO.

Reference:

Thibault, B. (2016) *La troisième guerre mondiale est sociale* (in French; *The third world war is social*), Paris: Editions de l'Atelier.

Footnote:

1 These are the Socialist Party (left) and The Republicans (right).