

2005-06

The rebellion of young proletarians in France

An interview with Jeanneneton

The following interview with the French comrade Jeanneneton took place in the summer of 2007. It has been included in the 3rd issue of 'Blaumachen', published in Greece in June 2009. Jeanneneton is the writer of *Two weeks spent in Rennes*, "a first-hand and in-depth account of events in Rennes by a participant in the anti-CPE movement". Her account was translated in Greek during the second period of the student movement of occupations in Greece and handed out in the occupied university campus of Thessaloniki in January 2007. It was a small contribution for the circulation of proletarian struggles by some occupants, students or not.

We thank a lot both Jeanneneton and J.

Blaumachen, November 2009

Blaumachen: *What has been presented as the reason for the outbreak of the movement was the intention of the French government to vote for CPE. Taking in mind our experience from the student struggle in Greece during 2006-07, where the new legislative framework regarding higher education was more or less a pretext that ignited a wider social explosion, we wonder whether this was the case with the so called anti-CPE movement as well. What do you think?*

Jeanneneton: You use the word "pretext"; many people have used it too. This social movement was something more general; it was about the new conditions of precarity. What CPE would do was not that much worsening these conditions; our situation is already shitty; precarity already exists. CPE was a way of making it official and normal, because at the moment some aspects of precarity are not completely legal, not completely official; bosses still have to invent a "reasonable" excuse to fire you etc. So CPE would blatantly legitimise precarity: "Now we can do whatever we want with you, we can sack you for no reason" and all that.

B: *Did CPE concern only graduates or young people in general?*

J: CPE concerned young people in general. It was not a law against students, which was the case with the movement in Greece, the latter being against a law implementing the alignment of higher education with the imperatives of the European Union.

B: *You mean Bologna declaration...*

J: Yes. There had been a movement against university reform in France in 2003, which lasted for 2 months but gained nothing.

B: *How do you explain this? Why that movement failed while this one...*

J: That movement concerned only students and it didn't involve school children at all. Besides, the reform didn't attack the totality of student life; it was about the diploma but not directly about work. CPE obviously attacked more people, in a more profound way.

B: *Can one claim that the anti-CPE struggle was a movement against the extension of formal precariousness to the graduates?*

J: The anti-CPE struggle was more than that. The limits inside the student movement were not the limits of the whole movement. It's not correct, I think, because most people participating were not graduates but undergraduates. The big majority of students do not continue studying after the first year. People who pass their "baccalauréat" ("A" levels) gain access to the university and they get student grants, but the money is not enough for one to survive. So, the majority of students have to work¹; this majority usually fails the first year exams. Half people give up studying after the first year. The number of graduates is very small. So, mainly undergraduates participated in the movement, who already experience precarity in a lot of cases².

B: *Is there a limit on how many years one can be a student?*

J: No. There is a limit on how many times one can fail in relation to whether they can get a grant from the state. If one fails twice, they cannot get a grant anymore. In addition, as I've already said, the money is not enough for one to live without working part time. Most students have to work. So universities are quite open even for poor people to get in, but after a few months there are those whose parents can pay for their studies and can manage it and those who have to work and can't manage it³, because studies are very difficult and very selective. I must also say that it is not easy for one to count on the grants for another reason: the whole amount of money is usually granted on November or December, so they have to be rich enough to survive from September to November. Some people cannot do that.

B: *We've read the interesting viewpoint below: "Whereas in '68 students were seen as external, though sympathetic, to the working class, today they are very much seen as a part of it: Future workmates than future managers"⁴. Do you agree with this? How do you think this altered situation was reflected in the movement?*

J: There were 300.000 students in '68 while now there are 1.300.000 and half of them work. In addition, studying doesn't mean that one is going to get a good job. The French higher education system is divided

¹ According to available statistics for 2004, 50% of students in France were officially employed outside university.

² The following contrast is interesting: While in the mid-70s only 5% of youths under 26 had been employed as temporary workers, the respective percentage for the mid-90s was 35-40% with a rising tendency. For the latter period, the percentage of adults over 26 working under precarious conditions was only 3-5%. Besides, after 1997, the more favorable employment conditions for university graduates have changed, following the general trends of precarisation of the employment of young proletarians (the above statistics are presented in the text *Unemployment, temporary employment and young proletarian struggles in France*, TPTG #12-13, available only in Greek).

³ In Greece, on the other hand, reproduction of students, even of those coming from relatively depreciated proletarian families or low income peasant and petit-bourgeois ones, is based to a great extent on parents' income. Of course, this was much more the case 15 or so years ago. During last years, the situation in France described by Jeanneneton is increasingly becoming a reality in Greece too: parents cannot afford their kids' studies, so more and more students have to find a job (mainly part-time jobs and almost exclusively informal ones without social security).

⁴ *Like 1968, but different... Similarities and contrasts with the anti-CPE struggle*. It can be found on libcom.org.

between normal universities and Grandes Écoles. One has to be selected for a 2-year prep course to get into the latter. The elite of the nation studies in these Schools; the ones who will become lawyers, governmental staff and all that. These students didn't participate in the movement. On the other hand, especially all those people studying social sciences have very little chance to find a job related to their field.

B: *So, to conclude, how did the anti-CPE movement confront the general precarisation of life?*

J: As I've told you, for the majority of the first year students in the social sciences field there are no guarantees. Some of them didn't enter the university to find a better job; they did it because they couldn't find a job in the first place and didn't know what to do. So they said "let's get the grant for the first year and we'll see what we'll do". So I wouldn't say guaranteeing our future was the case. As for precarity, some people say that the movement was against precarity, some others that it was against neoliberalism or the worsening of conditions in general. What the movement really was against was the present situation rather than the worsening of it by CPE. This is not really articulated as precarity or something similar. It's just about living at the moment and having to worry about your retirement when you are 16, going to the university and meeting all that shits like teachers, not knowing if you ever get a job and even if you get one worrying about whether you are able to keep it. It could be precarity in some sense; it is the general feeling that things are not going great in our life.

B: *A few months before the anti-CPE struggle another major social event had taken place in France. We mean the riots in the suburbs. What do you think was the impact of that struggle on the students and the anti-CPE movement in general?*

J: Everybody knew what happened in 2005 and that it was going to happen again. So, one had to take sides. After the riots, one was either against the riots or for the riots. The same during the movement; one was either against what had happened or for it. It was a question constantly coming back during the movement, obviously practically in Paris where there were clashes between demonstrators and "banlieue kids", but even before that, even in places where there were no such clashes; it was a constant question: we live in a society in which we know that there will be such riots so either we are with the police or with people from the suburbs. There is the Sarkozy issue as well. There were some clashes with the police after his election. People knew that the ones who were going to get the most shit by the new Sarkozy presidency were those in the suburbs. So, it was a matter of showing that not only people in the suburbs would fight the police. There are also people in the city centers who would do the same thing.

B: *Were these riots massive?*

J: The first one in Paris, yes. It rejected the results of the elections, that is the most important moment of democracy; it was the first time something like this had happened; it was spontaneous; it lasted for hours and a few thousand people participated. Riots took also place in ten more French cities. They were massive in Rennes. The number of destroyed shops etc was as big as the one reached during the anti-CPE movement.

B: *So, you say that these riots took place against Sarkozy as a symbol, against neo-liberalism, let's say?*

J: These riots were not only symbolical. I think people who rioted that day knew that their own condition was going to worsen too: for politicised people involved in movements, social control and repression were clearly going to get worse; but also generally, living conditions of poor people, especially unemployed, were going to become more difficult.

B: *What do you think of the organisational forms of the movement? In your account you write about a formalism that existed in general assemblies. What do you mean by that? In the 4th update by the Sorbonne occupation committee in exile⁵, we've read: "We are fighting against a law passed with a majority vote by a legitimate parliament. Our simple existence proves that the democratic principle of majority vote is questionable; it proves that the myth of the sovereignty of the general assembly can be usurped. It is part of our struggle to limit, as much as possible, the tyranny of the majority vote. All that space given to the general assemblies paralyzes us and only serves to confer legitimacy on paper to a bunch of wannabe bureaucrats. The assemblies are neutralizing all initiative by establishing a theatrical separation between the word and the act. Once the vote has been cast for a strike until the withdrawal of the law for equal opportunities, the general assemblies should become a space of endless debate, a space for sharing experiences, ideas, and desires, a place where we constitute our strength, not a scene of petty power struggles and intrigues for swaying the decision". This critique reveals a really existing democratism in the movement, probably containing more radical practices. Do you agree?*

J: In Rennes things were different from Paris. I stayed two weeks in Rennes and then I went to Paris, the week during which the CPE was withdrawn. But there were still some assemblies and actions taking place. In Paris one had to have their student card in order to vote; there was a more powerful democratism than in Rennes. In Rennes one didn't have to be a student in order to participate and vote in the assemblies. The president (of the university) tried to impose voting with student cards but this effort was sabotaged. Obviously, formalism and democratism existed as well, but I think that militants could sometimes use democratism to push the movement forward. There is one example in my text: illegal actions were voted in the assembly and when the police or the SO (service d'ordre) would say "no, you can't do that, it's illegal" we could respond "it's democratic". It's a little bit mad; we voted for illegal actions or for the "revolution" on the banner and all that. So, for some people going the democratic way was a way of being more radical, in some sense. There was a point up to which democratism worked in this way, while later it worked in an opposite way, when people started to vote against the strike. Then many people tried to attack the concept of democracy.

B: *So, the different situation between Rennes and Paris led to the advancement of this critique by Parisians and not by you.*

J: Well, there was the need of a critique of democratism to be held in Rennes as well. There are two examples: the assemblies in the universities and then that project of creating an assembly of "Rennais"⁶. There, we confronted another problem with democratism too. In the university, the formalism I'm talking about meant that in a way everything had to be voted for. It was completely absurd voting for how many banners we would bring in the demonstration. I remember being in a lecture room with five hundred people. The procedure was so formal that those in charge would say for each question: "are you for, are you against, are you abstentionist or are you not participating in the vote?" There were these four choices. So, everybody should vote. One couldn't avoid voting. They could vote that they didn't want to vote. But this situation was so boring and absurd; even if there were these four choices only ten people voted in the end, while many more were destroying things in the lecture room out of boredom ...

B: *Do you believe that this kind of formalism, voting for everything, and the idea that one can use democracy for promoting radical practices had a role in the ending of the movement in Rennes? You write that a general assembly held on Monday 10 April (the day that the withdrawal of the CPE was announced) voted against the continuing of the strike and after that the strike ended.*

⁵ One of the communiqués written by the Sorbonne occupation committee in exile, which was created after the evacuation of the Sorbonne occupation by the police on 12 March 2006. It can be found on news.infoshop.org.

⁶ See also the text *Two weeks spent in Rennes*.

J: Another assembly took place on Wednesday 12 April which voted for the continuing of the strike and then fights started between those for and those against. So, the president closed the university for the next two weeks. Those people who had earlier tried to use democracy in order to push forward radical things, when they saw democracy being against them, they were very happy to be against democracy; so, on Tuesday 11 April they tried to block the university. When the president attempted to open the university by force they blocked it again even if this was not democratic.

B: *We say that because in Thessaloniki during the February-March 2007 student movement, there was the example of the Technical department where radical unionists had always had the opportunity to vote for occupation, so when the majority voted against, it stopped. On the other hand, in medical school, this opportunity didn't exist because those people who were for the occupation were most times in the minority; so after losing one of the first big general assemblies they used anti-democratic practices to block the function of the school. And this is our question, whether this confusion with democracy that you describe led some people to stop when the majority voted against.*

J: Sure. Such practices are obviously a way of blocking that could have taken place; waiting for the majority to agree is usually just inertia. When we put forward the assembly of “Rennais” the principle we wanted to promote was that if enough people want to do something, they do it. We had to fight with Trotskyists for a long time about that. This assembly of “Rennais” was very short lived, but I think most people seemed happy with this idea, that if you want to do something and you are prepared for the consequences, then you should do it.

B: *What was the role of the student unions? Did a critical attitude towards them exist?*

J: In Rennes, unionists from UNEF were much despised during the assemblies. Because they knew it was unpopular to be a union member, when delegates for the national coordination were elected, they would come and say “I’m not member of a union” when everybody knew they were union members. Each time one would say that they were from UNEF, everybody would hoot them. Then, there were the student sections of radical unions like CNT (anarchists) and SUD (Trotskyists, alter-globalists), which were not so much in a union kind of mind. Because the movement was very big, divisions between radical unions like CNT and SUD tended to disappear as they tried to follow the mood of the student majority and even to be always one step more radical, forgetting their previous non-violence principles.

B: *According to Mouvement Communiste⁷ “The mobilisation of thousands of secondary education establishments, in the centers of towns as well as in the suburbs, was the crucial element which tipped the balance of forces on to the side of the young people”. Do you agree? What was the content of the high school kids struggle? Did their struggle essentially converge with the student one (except for their encounter in the demonstrations)? Did the kids in struggle come mainly from the suburbs?*

J: I think it’s true that the mobilisation of school kids had a very big impact. I believe one of the reasons was that even if the big majority of the school children don’t live in the suburbs -so, there were school children demonstrating in the city centers of all the provincial French cities as well as in Paris- people from suburbs managed to participate in the high school student movement; mostly not coming to Paris to destroy students’ heads, mostly demonstrating in their high schools, in their city. There were lots of clashes with the police in front of schools in Seine-Saint-Denis and other suburbs around Paris.

B: *Did school children demonstrate against CPE?*

⁷ See *A lovely spring in France*, which can be found on libcom.org

J: Yes. As for the content, one must see the more general precarity issue. First year students can't be sure that they will find a good job. At the same time, there are a lot of people in the secondary schools who are not going to continue school after 16. So, precarity is also very close to school kids: they know if they don't get good marks, they can't find a job; all the same, if you quit school at 16, you can't find a job, apart from the very very crap ones. So, I think schoolchildren were the link between the November riots and the students, even if they did not all come from the suburbs.

B: *Did they have demands concerning school subjects?*

J: I don't think so. The movement was against CPE and precarity, but against the government as well. There was also the idea that if the government had won this social dispute, it would have been likely that all movements after that would be defeated, so it would have the opportunity to completely restructure the whole French society, like Thatcher had done in the '80s. She didn't withdraw the law against miners and after their big defeat it was completely impossible to organise anything. I think there was this idea everywhere, that if the anti-CPE movement had been defeated, then any next movement would have been defeated too. There is also something else that has to be noted. A high school student movement had taken place the year before, in 2005. There were also clashes then in Paris between demonstrators and kids from the suburbs. The state was extremely repressive, compared to other struggles. I mean, I participated in a high school student movement in 1998 and the police wouldn't dare to beat children; but in 2005 they didn't care about it. I think schoolchildren participated in the anti-CPE struggle because they had faced this defeat the year before.

B: *What was the relation of the working people to the anti-CPE struggle? Are there examples of workers or parts of the working class getting practically involved with the movement? On the other hand, what were the students' efforts to come together with the working masses? We've read about some inter-professional meetings with workers taking place or about the existence of general assemblies open to everyone (not only students) and struggle committees in high schools bringing together students, parents and teachers. How prevalent were these tendencies? In the same framework, there was also that effort of yours to create a Rennes committee of struggle. Could you tell us some more about it?*

J: Well, I have to say that there was global support to the movement by the population. But in terms of demonstrating, mainly people with secured jobs in the unionised sector demonstrated.

B: *Do you mean workers in the public sector?*

J: Yes. And as far as the private sector is concerned, people working in big companies, which means they are well unionised and can afford going on strike without losing their jobs. Then, there was the problem of how to get other people involved and we had that idea of creating an assembly of "Rennais". We didn't believe that there would be a general strike, because the support of many workers was just on solidarity, which is not enough to go on general strike. As for the young people who work and are the first to be affected by the reform, they usually work in precarious conditions and cannot afford going on strike. So that's why we wanted to find a way for them to get involved in the actions, even if they could not go on strike. It was a way to make them participate in another level. The idea behind the assembly was not so much trying to push for general strike, but mainly being able to organise actions blockading the economy together with workers outside their working hours.

B: *Do you think that this effort failed?*

J: Yes (laughing). Well, what happened is weird: before that, Trotskyists would visit factories to distribute leaflets and nobody would be very interested. They would organise meetings in which thirty union men would come and say “in my factory nothing happens, bye, bye” and that was it. So, when we went to that commission⁸ trying to organise the Rennes committee of struggle, the leaflet we wrote was a bit laughed at by the Trots. However, when we handed it out during the demo we thought that we would have thirty or fifty people waiting at the meeting place we had arranged, but there were a thousand⁹. So, I think a success is that people who read the leaflet thought that this was a more adequate way to get involved than the usual one, so they came to see what was going to happen. But the unions managed to take over the thing; they came to the meeting place with their vans playing loud crap music and with their loudspeakers and were giving their speeches until everybody got bored and left. Then, we tried to organise something in the university; it was a bad idea because people don’t really go to the university if they are not students. Even if it was open to everybody, the meeting place was bad.

B: *Were “student identity” and the role of the university within the capitalist division of labour radically questioned within the movement?*

J: The fact is that even if the movement was to a point a student one, the law was not against students. One couldn’t say that they were threatened as students. From the beginning they had to speak about a law which threatened a lot more people than students. So, that was a fact. But then, a student identity was maintained, especially in Paris. It was a sectarian identity. Students would recognise that there were all these people fighting CPE who were not students; this would be alright, but one had to struggle in their little sector or something like that. They said “we are students, we struggle at the university and we don’t want external people to come and interact with our movement. It’s OK if they do their thing and we will do ours”. This kind of student identity existed.

B: *So, students did actually reproduce the division between students and non-students.*

J: Mostly in Paris. In Rennes there were a lot of attempts against that, which doesn’t mean that there was no division at all. There was a student identity maintained and people didn’t manage to go over the division. We tried it at least.

⁸ As far as the organisation of the struggle in the university of Rennes is concerned, there were 5 commissions meeting everyday in which everybody (student or not) could participate: “action”, “internal” (making links with the university workers : teachers, cleaning staff etc...), “external” (making links with workers outside the university as well as school kids, unemployed, etc...), “occupation” (organising life in the campus : picket lines, cleaning rotas...) and “repression” (informing everybody on our rights when arrested, going to court etc...). These commissions would make propositions to the general assemblies (though it was possible to do that without participating in any commission) and if accepted the commissions would then work on making these propositions happen [from Jeanneneton’s account *Two weeks spent in Rennes*]. She refers to the “external” commission here.

⁹ We republish below part of the leaflet calling for participation in the Rennes committee of struggle: “*The question isn’t simply to manifest one’s support for the students anymore, but to get organised to confront a governmental offensive which affects all socio-professional categories. Tonight’s meeting will not constitute an ‘interprofessional assembly’ where we will be content to repeat that indeed ‘the situation demands a general strike, but.....’ We don’t expect simply that those present attend as ‘representatives’ of ‘their’ workplaces where the situation isn’t ‘ripe’ enough ; our invitation is aimed at those, wherever they may come from, who desire to take part, immediately, in blocking the economy (trains, roads, industrial zones), and to generalise work stoppages. Those that want to promote unlimited strikes in key sectors of the economy. We feel the urgency of organising actions immediately, knowing that the government is waiting for the school holidays and to blackmail with the upcoming exams in order to weaken us*”. The whole leaflet is included as an annex in the text *Two weeks spent in Rennes*.

B: *In your text, you describe various actions aiming at attacking the economy, like railways and roads blockades, removals etc. We've also read about some "self-reduction" practices (apart from looting occurring in some suburbs by high school kids), like free use of trains in order for strikers to get to a national demonstration in Paris, self-reduction of prices in university restaurants, blocking toll posts etc. To what extent were these practices in the minority? What were the effects on blocking the economy?*

J: When we tried to blockade the ring road in Rennes it was 6am, so the workforce going to Rennes was blocked. There were mixed feelings. Big solidarity in the beginning but then a kind of being bored because being blocked so many times would get people into trouble. But it was quite efficient and because it was so, after the second effort, the police cleared the road immediately. I think that if they want to clear it they can do so; I don't think we could have done better.

B: *Were all these practices something new or had they been used in the past too?*

J: I can't really remember of them being used so much before. Occupying train stations is quite common, but I don't think blockading ring roads had been much used in the past. Removals were new as well. But obviously, these actions didn't manage to block the national economy. I don't think the government withdrew the law because the economy was in trouble.

B: *It was more of a social crisis...*

J: Yes.

B: *But you write that little shopkeepers in Rennes had some trouble. Isn't this important for you?*

J: Yes, it is. But it was a pressure against them; I don't know if it was a pressure against the government too. However, one has to take in mind that these practices emerged together with a relative disappearance of the industrial sector and places that one should obviously block. Because the economy is more fluid these new practices were a kind of effort to bring it to a halt.

B: *Were you minorities organising and participating in these actions?*

J: In Rennes, no. In the assemblies there would be five out of twenty thousand students; this means one fourth. The majority would vote for such actions, which obviously didn't mean that all would come. Depending on the action, two hundred people participated sometimes, some others a thousand. In a blockade of the ring road we were five hundred. Everyone voted for or against these actions; democracy allowed them to take place. In Paris on the other hand, since something like that was not possible, because of the powerful student identity, radicals had to do things in minorities outside the movement, like the occupation of EHESS etc. I'm not blaming them at all. They couldn't do anything else, since the division between students and radicals was big. So, radicals rejected democracy; they left assemblies and did their things. This didn't happen in Rennes. Radicals and students were together, voting these illegal radical actions. So the latter had a massive impact.

B: *As far as we know the student strike began in Rennes 2. In addition, we've read in your text about banners like "General strike, let's block everything" or "Revolution", slogans like "we don't care about the CPE, we don't want to work at all", or spontaneous and massive riots. So, was the situation in Rennes more advanced than in other cities? How do you explain the differences between Rennes and Paris?*

J: I can think of some reasons but I don't know if they explain things. I think in Rennes the divisions between the different parts of the population are not as big as in Paris; the conflicts are not as severe; life

for poor people isn't as difficult as in Paris, so the necessity to stay in one's little secure sector is not as big. But then there is something with regard to the radicals. Usually what happens in big cities is that there are all these radical groups, ultra-left, anarchist, autonomist, who are numerous enough to survive on their own; so they never try to do things together. While in Rennes, for example, radical groups are not numerous enough to survive on their own, so when they want to organise some action they have to do it altogether. They wouldn't have been able to do minority actions, as in Paris, because they are not enough. During the movement they had to do things together with students and all the other people.

B: *A difference between the student movement in Greece and the anti-CPE struggle was that in France university occupations were not a dominant means of struggle. How do you explain that?*

J: It was mostly a strike before being an occupation. People voting in the assemblies every Monday would first vote "Are we on strike or not?" and the second question would be "do we use the means of occupation or something else"? So students could be on strike but not occupying the university, if they didn't want to block people from going into it. Most universities were on strike, not occupied. In the sense that strikers would not go to their lessons, they would demonstrate and do actions, but other students could attend their lessons if they wanted to. The fact that the occupation was not the center of the struggle was a very weak point of the movement in France. In Rennes II only one place was occupied; even teachers could get into without control. It was the same in Paris. Students would occupy their school with the agreement of the university administration. In Rennes, there was a moment when we realised that we were performing too many actions and so we were not in the university at all. You couldn't do everything. You could not stay too much in the university because that way you wouldn't go and confront other people; then we return to the student identity issue. On the other hand, if you are never in the university you let the staff continue its work.

B: *In Greece, because student identity was very powerful we spent most of our time in the university. We had some trouble with teachers trying to secure their research programs and we had to fight them, but most times research stopped. The main problem in Greece was that of getting out of the university. We tried to organise some road blockading or other actions aiming at blocking circulation but these were very much in the minority.*

J: If you compare it with '68, then there were people trying to organise a new life in the universities, make it a place for experimentation; that didn't happen now at all.

B: *We'd like now to come back to the rather important issue of the relationship between the anti-CPE movement and the November riots in the suburbs, taking in mind that the law for the equal opportunities connects the management of young proletarian life in the suburbs with that of student life. Did the November rioters have the hope of being integrated in French society in a better way?*

J: I don't think it's possible for somebody to see a struggle for integration, since the situation in the suburbs illustrates the failure of integration, in some sense. In addition, what integration would mean for youngsters in the suburbs is doing what their parents or grandparents did, working like shit in factories, breaking their neck and die young. These kids have seen their parents trying to be low-profile, not rebelling, going to work and not asking things, because they were immigrants. So most kids don't want to be integrated like that because they know it doesn't work anyway and being integrated means accepting that shit. The other point, that *Theorie Communiste*¹⁰ makes as well, is that there is no more the proletariat which is very integrated, has secure jobs etc. More and more divisions and precarity make it difficult to find the reason to be integrated in the population. There is no more the image of the happy family, with the

¹⁰ See *The anti-CPE struggle* report that can be found on libcom.org.

dog and the car, which somebody would like to be integrated in. So people involved in the November riots in the suburbs didn't defend themselves as workers. Their rioting was a kind of total negation of what they are, in a sense. Riots in the suburbs were against the conditions of life as a whole, against the fact that people from the suburbs are treated like rubbish to be left alone out of the cities, not even given a job or anything.

B: *So "November" was mostly a riot for its own sake.*

J: I don't know. It sounds a bit too negative. At least it didn't have any demands that the state could meet and they knew that, I think.

B: *This is interesting, the fact that there were no demands during the riots, while students had a concrete demand: the withdrawal of the CPE.*

J: Yes, but we also had no demands in some sense. The withdrawal of the CPE was not seen as a victory. I was in an assembly when it was announced and nobody was so happy, because the situation has already been bad, as I've said above. The government tried to implement a law that would make it worse and this law didn't pass. But that didn't alter an already bad situation. So it was not a success in the sense of winning a better situation than before. In the assemblies and the coordinations people would usually try to add demands. It was not only CPE, it was also the law for the equal opportunities or CNE; and tried to add and add and add, but this was not adequate as well, because I think that what the movement was against was bigger and deeper than the addition of all these little things. But it could not win. You could hope for a movement with the demand of stopping capitalism or stopping wage labour or all this shitty life. The movement could not demand what it wanted.

B: *Were the suburb riots of 2005 politicised in the face of Royale (head of the socialist party) during the elections?*

J: I doubt it. During the elections there were only Royale and Sarkozy and the latter is very unpopular in the suburbs. So some people there, thinking the democratic way is the right way to stop Sarkozy, did vote for Royale; but they were a minority. Royale didn't offer anything to make people believe in. It was mostly to prevent Sarkozy from being elected.

B: *What is your image of the 23rd March demonstration in Paris, where conflicts took place between youngsters from the suburbs and students? Some commentators say that this was an isolated phenomenon that took place only in Paris and with a participation of only a small minority of "banlieue kids". According to the Sorbonne occupation committee in exile these conflicts were the result of the previous efforts by cops and unions to keep "banlieue kids" out of the movement. With regard to that incident, Theorie Communiste writes "No comprehension of the anti-CPE movement is possible if one separates this struggle from the November riots. Beyond the common object represented by the general movement of precarisation of the labour force, the connection between the November riots and the anti-CPE struggle was consciously lived and practiced in the anti-CPE movement. This is precisely where the problem lies. The middle class saw the social elevator being blocked, the "excluded" know that they will never be able to climb in it and had announced in November that their own situation, in all its aspects, had become unbearable and was a target. The widening of the movement could not be the result of an addition of situations, but of their conflictive encounter. [...]The dynamics of the movement was contradictory, and a contradiction can lead to a violent fight between those who participate to a movement". What is your view?*

J: All three explanations are true in some sense. I think, especially in Paris, it is true that one can see very different behaviours in what is called fighting against precarity. For example, there is the idea of fighting precarity that most students and high school children from quite rich areas in inner Paris have; there is on the other hand the reality of what precarity is and how to fight against it that people from very poor suburbs outside of Paris have. So maybe the conflict was unavoidable in some sense, especially in Paris where the divisions are so deep. Then it is true that union guys did give people to the cops. I also remember going to a school children demonstration the year before and being shocked by the way the SO had prevented external people to come in; they held each other's hands or arms and looked so frightened when somebody with a hood would come up. However, some anarchists who fought police say that they were attacked as well, so the above doesn't explain everything. I guess that these big demonstrations are an opportunity to get mobile phones and things like that as well. This happens in big gatherings like the 14th of July celebration, since they offer the opportunity to make some money out of them. In Rennes now, two separate groups of people participated in the riots...

B: *Anarchists and "banlieue kids", as you write in your text?*

J: Yes. I don't think one should divide people by the way they are dressed; but one could see two different tactics and two different ways of fighting police...

B: *But no conflicts between rioters took place in Rennes...*

J: No. No conflicts. Not much dialogue too. I mean, during the riots anarchists and "banlieue kids" would fight police together, but they didn't have the opportunity to have dialogue, discussion, interaction. The "banlieue kids" didn't come to the university or assemblies. So it was more a practical decision to do things together rather than a real unity of solidarity or something like that.

B: *Since the French State was afraid that violent behaviours could be diffused among the participants in the movement, it tried to divide strikers and demonstrators between "good" ones and "casseurs". The Greek State had a similar tactics during the student movement, obviously manifested after the demonstrations and riots on March 8 2007 in Athens. How did the movement respond to this effort to divide it?*

J: In Rennes this effort didn't really work. If you remember, I write in my text about different people saying that we should write a banner proclaiming that "we are all casseurs". It wasn't done for various practical reasons but everybody seemed to applaud the idea. People were against that division. As for Paris or other cities, I don't know. I watched the movement in other cities mostly through the media and the latter just emphasised the division.

B: *Finally, how do you explain the fact that although the withdrawal of CNE and the law for the equal opportunities was included in the demands of the movement, the latter stopped when CPE was withdrawn? And then, what was in your opinion the significance of the anti-CPE struggle? What do you believe are its consequences to the implementation of the neoliberal project in France?*

J: I think there are different reasons about why the movement stopped after the withdrawal of CPE. Well, there is an easy one: the fact that a lot of people were tired after being on strike for three months. Then there is the fact that whatever students would do, you had the media portraying the movement as a struggle against CPE. Even if students made declarations that it was not only CPE, the media would show "CPE has been withdrawn, CPE has been withdrawn". I mention these, but I think there are other more important reasons. It is true that the law for the equal opportunities didn't concern students. It did concern schoolchildren and mostly poor ones from the suburbs. So I guess that if students were to continue, it

would be in solidarity to them. There were some solidarity calls after the withdrawal of CPE: “we’ve got what we wanted, we now must continue to struggle in order not to leave schoolchildren alone”; but solidarity is not enough to keep up a whole movement. Furthermore, as I’ve mentioned above, adding to CPE the law for the equal opportunities or CNE raised the question “were would it stop?”; the movement could never stop adding demands. These are not what we were fighting for. Even if these laws were withdrawn, that is not what we fought for. We fought for something more general and I can’t see how we could be able to win.

B: *So the withdrawal of CPE was something like a pretext for stopping the strike like CPE was a pretext to begin it. We mean that after the withdrawal of CPE either the movement would have attacked wage labour (and a mainly student movement could not have done that as long as it remained a mainly student movement) or it would have stopped.*

J: Well yes, I think so. What would be that thing which people would be ready to fight for after three months of struggle? Not the withdrawal of another law; it had to be something much greater than that. This comparison with Thatcher that I’ve mentioned above, this is my way of understanding things because I live in England. I advanced this idea when I was taking part in the assemblies in France. If the government had managed to defeat this struggle, then it would have been very difficult to claim victory again. Before the anti-CPE movement there were lots of defeats, like the teachers movement in 2003 which had been badly defeated: for the first time people didn’t get the days of strike paid. Then there was the high school children movement in 2005 which had been defeated. All movements in France had been defeated after 1995. Which means that CPE was a kind of symbol: if they had managed to defeat this huge movement, with all that solidarity, which lasted so long, then it would have been impossible to imagine of building something bigger in the next twenty years or something. What happened now is that the government didn’t manage to make this big demonstration of power. So Sarkozy has now to be very careful with voting new laws or he will have to confront a big movement just like the anti-CPE.