

Representation and Displacement: Labor Disembedding and Contested Neoliberalism in France

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Abstract: This article analyzes changing patterns of worker protest and mobilization in France, with particular emphasis on the post-1970s era of neoliberalism. It argues that processes of state-led disembedding of labor have underpinned major changes in the leadership, content, and class bases of worker contestation. Drawing on more than forty original interviews as well as extensive secondary sources, it highlights a long-term shift in the dynamics of labor's political engagement, in which unions' role has been increasingly displaced by broad-based, anti-systemic social movements. Protests have called into question the legitimacy of French capitalism and the state, revealing the dysfunctions of political representation with troubling implications for the stability of French democracy and the governability of advanced capitalist economies.

Keywords: French politics, social movements, industrial relations, neoliberalism, governance, trade unions, anti-systemic protest

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Biographical Sketches

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Since the late 1970s, advanced industrialized economies have witnessed a profound collective rethinking and reconstitution of workers' political, social, and economic representation. In the post-war era, the regime of what John Ruggie memorably termed "embedded liberalism" was characterized by expanded but institutionally constrained forms of liberalism in both the domestic and international arenas.¹ These involved open but managed trade and capitalist economies buffered and supported by robust systems of social protection. Central to this regime were interconnected and mutually reinforcing institutions of working-class incorporation, including both national and sectoral industrial-relations systems and varying forms of shopfloor representation. In many countries, industrial-relations institutions gave workers a seat at the table around which fundamental distributional and representational questions were debated, while works councils provided them with a means of influencing and optimizing firms' production strategies.

With the demise of the post-war boom in the early 1970s, however, workers' place in the post-war mixed economies came under sustained challenge. A series of economic pressures—the exhaustion of Fordist growth models, accelerating de-industrialization and the rise of service economies across the advanced industrial world, and forms of economic integration that favored capital over labor—contributed to job losses and rising precariousness among the working class. Such destabilizing economic developments operated in tandem with explicit political projects, whereby national governments sought to weaken labor's collective character and its role in governing capitalist economic systems. These twin processes of economic and political change not only fostered rising economic inequality among workers already beset by rising unemployment and stagnant wages, but they also threatened the political consensus and representative mechanisms that had helped to sustain the boom.

In perhaps no country in the past three decades have these interconnected processes of labor-market liberalization and contested neoliberalism been more salient than in France. French governments across the ideological spectrum have joined their counterparts in many advanced democracies to reconstruct industrial relations institutions in ways that involve “an expansion of employer discretion over the management of labor in the firm” and a concomitant destabilization of the class compromise between capital and labor that was central to the post-war order.² As elsewhere, the reconfiguration French industrial relations has accompanied attempts to implement significant neoliberal reforms. State power reshaped society and subjected many important decisions about the allocation of economic resources to the market, rather than to various forms of democratic practice. The result has been the political and economic disenfranchisement of workers.

French labor’s institutional marginalization has not led to quiescence, however, as its contestation of neoliberalism has helped to define the past three decades of French social- and economic-policy making. Although declining strike rates in the early 2000s led some to speak of disappearing class antagonisms, large-scale conflict has re-emerged with a vengeance. We argue that these episodes of popular conflict are not simply another instance of what Charles Tilly has famously referred to as “the contentious French.”³ They instead represent an important shift towards intensifying rhetorical critiques and political contestation of marketization.

We identify three broad shifts in contention, related to *leadership*, *content*, and *class basis*. Since at least the 1970s, French unions have been widely recognized as “bureaucrats of protest.”⁴ In the aftermath of the near-Revolution of May-June 1968, large-scale conflict was largely confined to periodic union-led protest in response to particular reforms of labor-market rules and social-protection arrangements.⁵ By contrast, protests of the last fifteen years have been

spearheaded by largely spontaneous social movements distant from unions' typical policy concerns and repertoires of action. Moreover, although still focused centrally on distributional issues, the new protests invoke fundamental, even existential, questions about the legitimacy of capitalist economic relations and the possibilities for equitable social and economic outcomes under its aegis. Recent protests have also transcended the working-class basis of traditional unionism to include shopkeepers, service-sector workers, students, and *petits indépendants*, often in alliance with segments of the working class but not dominated by them.⁶ This intensification and broadening of the terms and constituencies of protests harkens back to May-June 1968, when particularistic concerns about wages and perceptions of the representational failures of political institutions evolved into broad, anti-systemic protests about the nature of French capitalism and democracy.

These developments cannot be fully explained by prominent accounts in the comparative political economy or the social-movements literature. Consider the structural transformations highlighted by political economists in the Regulation School, such as the shift from a Fordist to post-Fordist growth model and the subsequent restructuring of the working classes.⁷ To be sure, this scholarship identifies crucial elements of the shift in economic context that provide an important backdrop for understanding changes in contention, in France as elsewhere. At the same time, processes of neoliberal adjustment have been ongoing since at least the 1970s, and yet until recently unions remained the principal vehicle for articulating working-class protest. As the pressures of marketization have intensified and forms of worker representation have fragmented, workers have increasingly sought to question the legitimacy of capitalism itself.

Nor are these emergent shifts easily attributable to standard narratives around the emergence of collective mobilization, such as the disruption of quotidian practices or internal

movement strategies.⁸ While France's contested marketizing reforms have surely disrupted patterns of everyday life, recent protests' emphasis on broad themes of systemic transformation cannot be easily interpreted through the lens of efforts to reconstitute the established routinized order.⁹ Likewise, although the short-term strategies highlighted by the social-movement literature—for example, the development of ideologically resonant collective action frames—are doubtless important, our view is that such frames cannot be understood outside broader systemic political shifts.¹⁰

This article situates the mobilization of capitalism's discontents within historically specific eras in the economic *and* political structures of French society. Using France as a signal case of the shifting dynamics of worker protest, our analysis highlights how the state's evolving approach toward the regulation of both unions and labor markets, and its representational consequences, have altered the opportunity structure surrounding contention. Over the past forty years, French governments of both the left and right have pursued marketized economic strategies in response to global economic shifts, even as they have sought to secure worker quiescence through the expansion of the social-protection system. In the area of labor regulation, this strategy has entailed a growing institutional exclusion of organized labor and a subsequent weakening of class-based channels for worker grievances.

Over time, this has created a *double crisis of representation*. On the one hand, workers increasingly find themselves with formal but not substantive representation. The gradual incursion of neoliberal practices into the fabric of French capitalism, in the context of the broader fragmentation of the party-political left and of labor's institutional disembedding, has made worker grievances more salient but unions less capable of mediating them. At the same time, whereas the state was once able plausibly to claim that it was pursuing the collective good, a

growing number of French citizens view it as deploying its power for largely technocratic ends. As workers have been disenfranchised, not just in the party-political arena but also in the industrial-relations system, both the form and content of their grievances have changed, shifting to more broadly anti-systemic protests led by new movements such as *Nuit Debout* and *Gilets Jaunes* that have emerged as (unstable and relatively incoherent) interlocutors with the state. It is they—more consistently and coherently than unions or France’s fragmented far-left political formations—who now raise systemic questions about the fairness and legitimacy of the capitalist system.

Our analysis, then, highlights not just the economic and distributional failures of the French model, but also the *symbolic* and *representational* failures of political elites and institutions. As Hannah Pitkin has cogently argued, the concept of representation is much richer than functionalist, mechanical, or strictly institutional models would suggest. In Pitkin’s view, understanding the concept requires that we begin etymologically, recognizing the core meaning of “re-presenting,” or “making present again.”¹¹ Doing so allows us to identify several valences of the word, including descriptive and most importantly symbolic representations, and encourages us to acknowledge the systemic character of representational failures such as those of French labor and the state, which involve, borrowing Pitkin’s formulation, a failure “to act in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them.”¹² In the context of French labor, such a conception calls attention, not only to the absence of effective *formal* channels through which workers can express their grievances and demands, but also their growing sense of *absence* and *erasure* in French social dialogue.

In focusing on the implications of labor’s political and economic marginalization, we also counter a common trope in liberal political economy: that efforts to weaken unions will reap

important rewards. Economically, the argument goes, unions raise wages above competitive levels, represent the interests of labor-market insiders at the expense of outsiders, and act as undemocratic rent-seekers; efforts to expand employer discretion at the expense of unions should thus yield substantial economic benefits.¹³ Without denying the possibility of parochial behavior by unions nor the problem of insider-outsider cleavages, we contribute to a broader stream of scholarship calling into question whether trade union retrenchment offers a solution to Europe's problems.¹⁴ France today has the lowest unionization rate in Western Europe. And yet, four decades of industrial-relations fragmentation and union marginalization has delivered neither worker empowerment nor social harmony. On the contrary, a diverse array of protest movements has arisen in the vacuum left by France's increasingly enervated unions. Indeed, recent developments in France suggest that reliance on episodic interlocutors rather than institutionalized actors such as unions for the political articulation of grievance is far more likely to lead to anomie and anti-systemic politics than re-embedded markets. Far from a panacea for creating economic dynamism, attacks on unions and other forms of worker representation may undermine the social peace and cooperative labor relations necessary for long-term economic prosperity and the legitimation of capitalist markets.

In the next section, we build on recent scholarship in political economy in analyzing the dynamics of popular contention but complement its focus on temporalities in capitalist transformations with an additional emphasis on workers' representational structures.¹⁵ In adopting this approach, we seek to complement the largely economic lens of Regulationist work by providing a more explicitly and systematic *political* account of the effects of workers' economic exclusion. Through a periodized analysis of shifts in French political economy and industrial relations, we detail how the state's shifting economic strategy was associated with a

slow but uneven process of labor disembedding. Drawing upon thirty-one in-depth interviews with Yellow Vest activists, thirteen interviews with political elites and journalists, and extensive analyses of secondary sources,¹⁶ we connect these to a growing crisis of legitimacy, and the changing character of protest and industrial conflict, via the analysis of two recent protest movements—*Nuit Debout* and *Gilets Jaunes*—highlighting their role as both emblems of the fragmentation of the French social contract and agents of the delegitimization of French capitalism and democracy. We conclude with a discussion of the significance of these developments for the future stability of French capitalism and, more generally, the adjustment and developmental strategies of advanced industrial democracies.

State-Led Liberalization and the Disembedding of French Labor

We begin from the postulate that the shifting nature of social protest in France cannot be properly interpreted absent an understanding of the role of the state and its relationship to French labor relations. This section offers a periodization of the shifting political solutions sought by the state manage class conflict in the workplace, summarized in Table 1. Our analysis highlights how French unions emerged as political rather than purely economic actors, and how in the aftermath of the Socialist President Francois Mitterrand’s liberalizing agenda, which dismantled the post-war *dirigiste* state in the early 1980s,¹⁷ large-scale conflict was largely confined to periodic union-led protest in reaction to particular labor-market regulations and social-protection reforms. We then document the rise of two interconnected trends in the post-*dirigiste* period that, over time, worked to destabilize unions in the broader context of a fragmenting party-political left.

[Table 1 here]

The first change entailed a shift in the economic agenda of the French state toward what we call *Compensated Liberalism*. In the early years of France's retreat from *dirigisme*, France saw not just a rollback of the statist economic model and many labor protections, but also the construction of a countervailing system of social protection aimed at undercutting opposition to market reforms. During this period, even as unions were weakened economically at the firm-level, they retained their capacity to channel worker grievances and to confer popular legitimacy on state efforts to impose flexibility. The post-2007 era, however, marked an important shift in the dynamics of economic governance: the rise of *Uncompensated, Impositional Liberalism*. Since the global financial crisis of 2008, the state has been willing, even eager, to bypass unions in devising and implementing harsher, more one-sided liberal reforms.

These processes, we argue, reflect important tensions within the French political economy that have had long-term implications for democratic legitimacy. On the one hand, since at least the 1970s, French governments have publicly declared their desire to work with unions, driven by the need for partners to help promote labor quiescence. And yet, over time, they have shown a commitment to advancing an economic project to be pursued through unilateral means. Although the regime governing labor relations still grants unions *formal* "rights of representation," these rights are increasingly hollow. As the openings for civil society have been successively closed, and the links between formal and substantive representation severed, France has experienced a deep and growing rupture between governing elites and the masses.

The Rise of Compensated Liberalism and Virtual Unionism

Understanding changes in the dynamics of French industrial relations, and French protest, since the 1970s requires situating these shifts in a broader historical context. In the early postwar

period, France instituted a system of *developmental statism*,¹⁸ which drove economic growth and modernization from above through what Andrew Shonfield famously characterized as a “conspiracy in the public interest” between the state and big business.¹⁹ The system was characterized by broad political exclusion of labor at the national level, extensive state regulation, and predominantly industry-level wage bargaining.²⁰ Although France’s developmental project was lifting all boats, with standards of living for French workers doubling between 1950 and 1973,²¹ labor’s marginalization and fragmentation, coupled with the political exclusion of the French Communist Party (PCF) and an opaque and unresponsive political elite, led to labor’s increasing radicalization, reinforced by an economic strategy in which rapid industrialization and capital investment typically took priority over wages and consumption.

The era of developmental statism was characterized not just by working class unrest, but also by substantial *petit-bourgeois* mobilization, reflecting a sense of political and economic marginalization artisans, shopkeepers, and other *petits indépendants* shared with manual workers. The *Poujadiste* movement of the 1950s, for example, represented an important historical variant of today’s anti-system, tax-justice populism in which unions acted largely as followers.²² Begun as a revolt by a small group of shopkeepers and artisans against heavy-handed tax-collection efforts, the *Poujadistes* focused largely on distributional issues, appealing not only to shopkeepers but also to struggling farmers, industrial workers, low-level white-collar workers, and others who resented both the inequities of France’s growth model and an opaque and unresponsive political class.²³ In this respect, *Poujadisme* presaged the contemporary pattern of worker mobilization that extends beyond the traditional industrial working class.

The ensuing three decades witnessed the growing tensions within the post-war *dirigiste* system and shifting strategies for dealing with them. As the French economy prospered during

the *trente glorieuses*, or “thirty glorious years” of post-war growth, the distributional inequities of *dirigisme* grew more pronounced, as did worker discontent with the political and economic system. With the upheaval of May-June 1968, French policy makers became as preoccupied with ensuring social peace as they were with fostering economic growth. The 1968 Grenelle Accords, which granted significant wage and other concessions to unions as a way of buying social peace, began a decade of frustrated attempts to relegitimize French capitalism. The limitations of these efforts soon became apparent, however, and by the early 1980s French policy makers confronted a series of fundamental choices relating to France’s growth model and its political and distributional effects.

Elected in 1981, Socialist President François Mitterrand first sought to transform *dirigisme* in a more explicitly workerist and redistributive direction. After 1982, the state stepped back from setting prices, rationing credit, and drafting detailed, prescriptive economic plans.²⁴ That said, the abandonment of directive industrial policy was not accompanied by wholesale economic liberalization. As both Jonah Levy and Mark Vail document, liberalization during this period involved a Polanyian dynamic of compensation.²⁵ Although authorities extended the reach of the market, they also granted affected workers a variety of social protections, including expanded early-retirement programs, a minimum income, and subsidized employment. The purpose of this strategy of *Compensated Liberalization* was to permit firms to pursue economic efficiencies by pacifying the potential victims and losers from economic modernization, in a strategy that Levy aptly characterizes as a “social anaesthesia state.”

If France’s departure from statism entailed dramatic shifts in industrial and social policy, it also involved an important effort to reshape French labor relations. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, governments on the left and right articulated labor projects united by a common theme: a

move from state-directed labor-market regulation to a system characterized autonomous, societal collective bargaining, dominated by firm-level (but not necessarily union-led) negotiations. An important step toward reorienting the French system away from “law” and toward “contract” came with the passage of the Auroux Laws in 1982. These efforts precipitated the decline of traditional trade unionism and its replacement with alternative state-legitimated organs of workplace representation intended to supplant unions.

Crucially, although the raft of efforts to promote firm-level bargaining eroded the economic power of French unions, their *political* role in national conflicts remained surprisingly robust during the era of *Compensated Liberalism*.²⁶ Against a backdrop of declining union membership, especially in the private sector, labor regulation during this period reflected a pattern of what Chris Howell has called “virtual unionism,”²⁷ whereby unions’ power rested not so much upon their ability to control labor’s collective capacities as upon their role as *symbolic* “representatives of workers *as an interest* to the state.”²⁸ In this context, unions were charged with articulating the demands of both their largely public-sector membership and France’s largely non-unionized, private-sector workforce, a role which provided workers with a symbolic sense of agency, allowing them “representation” in multiple senses.²⁹ At the same time, they also served a legitimating function *for the state*, negotiating the terms of economic bargains, especially in moments of economic crisis. Indeed, unions remained privileged interlocutors in part *because* of their ability to “channel social protest away from posing a threat to the regime.”³⁰

The Decline of Virtual Unionism and the Advent of Uncompensated Liberalism

A series of state initiatives in the late 2000s ushered in a new period of labor-market and industrial-relations governance, characterized by fraught relationships among labor, employers,

and the state, whose conflicting imperatives began to erode the fragile pace that characterized the earlier period. By the 2010s, French policy had shifted to a harsher *Uncompensated Liberalism* that further liberalized the French labor market but also increasingly by-passed the unions, regulating industrial-relations conflicts by fiat and ultimatum rather than negotiation.³¹

The election of Nicolas Sarkozy marked an important inflection point in governments' strategy for managing social conflict. In 2008, Sarkozy's government imposed a major reform of unemployment insurance, the so-called *Loi sur les droits et les devoirs des demandeurs d'emploi*, which privileged the interests of big business, despite his administration's discursive commitment to social dialogue.³² The law adopted a relatively punitive and coercive approach to the unemployed, making continued receipt of jobless benefits contingent upon acceptance of "reasonable" job offers, as defined by the national employment office, and suspending benefits after a worker's failure to accept two such offers. In contrast to earlier labor-market measures, such as the youth employment law adopted by the government of Socialist Lionel Jospin, the law worked to reduce unemployment through altering the behavior of the unemployed, rather than devoting state resources to creating jobs.³³ In subsequent years, French industrial relations would become increasingly characterized by a philosophy of "contract if available, law if necessary."

Indeed, if the state's growing dominance of social dialogue consecrated the omnipotence of the market rather than workers' rights, it also used institutional levers to tilt the playing field in favor of reformist unionism and MEDEF, the employers' association historically most favorable to neoliberal reforms. The main institutional mechanism for this strategy involved the dramatic reconfiguration of the rules of *représentativité* of both unions and employers, with profound implications for the balance of power between labor and capital. The new regime on *représentativité syndicale et patronale* did not immediately change the producer-group

landscape, at least on the surface, but was designed to reconfigure union participation in inter-professional dialogues into a fundamentally bipolar arrangement between the Communist CGT and the more moderate CFDT and, on the employer side, to promote the hegemony of MEDEF.

Ironically, governments' efforts to reconstitute the terrain of producer group representation—allegedly done in the name of legitimizing any agreements that were signed—actually made rapprochement among the social partners *less* likely. On the union side, polarization continued even under the new bipolar equilibrium. On the employer side, compromise became more elusive, in large part because MEDEF adopted increasingly intransigent positions. Given that the new rules of the game granted MEDEF veto power over any national-sectoral agreements, there were very few incentives for other social partners—be they unions or the other employer organizations—to come to the table.³⁴

As social bargaining became ever-more dysfunctional, successive French governments of all political stripes reverted to their historic penchant for direct regulation of industrial relations. When Socialist President François Hollande was elected in 2012, he stated his commitment to strengthen “social democracy,” in this instance through the establishment of an annual *conférence sociale*.³⁵ Instead, Hollande took a page from the playbook of his center-Right predecessor Nicolas Sarkozy, pushing through an unpopular liberalization of Sunday working laws while bypassing both the social partners and the legislature through the controversial and rarely invoked Article 49-3 of the Constitution, which permits the government to pass a law through the National Assembly without either vote or debate.

The current presidency of Emmanuel Macron took Hollande's strategy of unilateralism to the next level, marrying an economically liberal policy agenda to explicitly statist commitments. In a range of policy areas, from labor ordinances, to unemployment, to pension and vocational

training reform, Macron has consistently shown what one observer called “a contempt for intermediary bodies.”³⁶ Consider, for example, the 2017 labor and 2018 Pénicaud ordinances, which prioritized company-level agreements in most matters dealing with remuneration. Far from consulting the social partners, Macron instead requested that the National Assembly give the executive branch the right to publish rulings on reforms to the Labor Code. Similarly, in addressing the deficit of France’s system of unemployment insurance (UNEDIC) and reforms of vocational training, traditionally co-managed between labor and employer representatives, Macron was openly contemptuous of “social democracy.” Today, there is wide agreement that *paritarisme*—a key institutional component of social partnership at the national level—is on the cusp of extinction.³⁷

Indeed, the last ten years have witnessed such a dramatic hollowing out of social partnership that today it is not just the unions but also MEDEF that faces an existential crisis. Michel Oferlé cogently frames the problem: “What can MEDEF be used for if most of the demands it has made for decades are now anticipated by political power?”³⁸ Its new president, Geoffroy Roux de Bézieux, speaks openly of transforming the organization from one focused on lobbying and co-management into more of a think tank. This withdrawal from the field of social dialogue, and the reliance on the state to impose a liberal economic agenda, has always been popular with some within MEDEF, including former president Pierre Gattaz, but others argue that it paves the way for stalemate and a loss of legitimacy.

The Shifting Dynamics of Social Conflict in France: A Double Crisis of Representation

As the French state shifted from a developmental to liberalizing posture in the post-1982 era, it adopted an increasingly confrontational posture *vis-à-vis* French workers and their union

representatives. Although initially committed to promoting social partnership, over time the state has used it as a means to achieve a fictive patina of social consensus. This shift, from an embedded, compensated form of liberalism to an uncompensated, impositional variant, has represented a *double closure* of representational channels. The state's liberal economic policy stance has polarized the unions, which have become strangely disconnected from the broad-based economic concerns of French workers, particularly outside of their largely public-sector membership, as the state's maneuverings have forced them to devote energy to preserving basic institutional prerogatives—such as their access to state funds via co-management of welfare institutions. Indeed, the two central representational pillars of virtual unionism identified by Chris Howell and others have now arguably unraveled. Unions are increasingly incapable of representing labor's interests to the state, even as the state treats them as irrelevant for legitimating economic-policy reforms.

Nor has the promised utopia of decentralized industrial relations for French workers materialized, leading instead to widespread worker anger and growing delegitimization of both social bargaining and the social partners. As Le Queux and Sainsaulieu observe, outside of a handful of large establishments, the French private sector remains almost entirely union-free, and worker participation in economic decision-making relies on employer voluntarism.³⁹ Although works councils exist, they tend to fulfill the minimal legal requirements of providing employee information, rather than acting as integrated institutions designed to connect workers' shopfloor concerns to management, as in Germany. And while some scholars point to a rise in firm-level agreements as emblematic of healthy workplace negotiations and a thriving civil society,⁴⁰ these dynamics have given rise to so-called *donnant-donnant* agreements, in which workers exchange (often at the point of a metaphorical gun) previously negotiated rights for short-term job

security.⁴¹ Government surveys also show that 80% of firm-level collective bargaining was accompanied by industrial conflict—suggesting that decentralized labor relations nourished not German-style patterns of labor incorporation but rather widespread discontent.⁴²

Against this backdrop, recent polling suggests a concomitant decline in French citizens' faith in unions and social partnership. For example, a 2018 Harris poll showed that French citizens have negative views of unions, employers, *and* social partnership. Fewer than half of respondents expressed a positive view of unions, and only 2% of respondents supported the social partners' occupying a more important role.⁴³ Another study remarked both on the general distrust of unions (two-thirds of respondents reported not trusting unions, 27% "not at all") as well as the "violence of feeling" *against* unions among even the working classes.⁴⁴

Even as the French express declining trust in unions, the re-centralization of state power and its deployment for marketizing ends has also deepened perceptions that the political class, regardless of ideology, is unconcerned with the needs of working people. The risk of representational failure has always been greater in France than elsewhere due to its tradition of strong centralization, which makes decision-making easier even as it makes the state a target for political rancor.⁴⁵ The intensity of France's crisis of consent can be seen in declining rates of trust in key government institutions. In the early 1970s, for example, some 60% of voters reported trusting the institutions of the Fifth Republic, a substantial increase from late in the Fourth Republic. Although direct longitudinal comparisons are difficult due to changing survey questions, it is telling that by 2012 the share trusting government had fallen to 30%, and by 2017 to 22%. A 2020 Pew survey reported that fewer than half of surveyed individuals were satisfied with democracy and that 73% of respondents believed that the political system needed

significant reform. Although there was an uptick in trust in government in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has since collapsed.⁴⁶

French workers express declining confidence in both unions and government, but they are no fans of unions' chief enemy: neoliberalism. In the CEVIPOF survey mentioned above, analysts combined a series of questions to construct an index representing respondents' support for economic liberalism. Only one-third of non-cadres (managers) in the public or private sector held strongly reformist views. Although responses unsurprisingly varied with partisanship, even among those who voted for Macron in the first round of the 2017 elections, only 39% agreed that "acquired rights are a threat to competitiveness."⁴⁷

This contradiction—between animosity toward unions and declining confidence in the political system on the one hand, and tepid support for economic liberalism on the other—has contributed to the emergence of new (if unstable) Polanyian counter-movements and a widening of the landscape of industrial conflict beyond its normal channels.⁴⁸ After three decades of decentralization of industrial relations and the erosion of unions' role as privileged interlocutors with the state, recent conflicts over wages, working conditions, and associated institutions of social protection look less like fights between the state and unions over policy and more like aggressive, if perhaps more diffuse, public interrogations of the life chances offered by French capitalism. As protests over the past decade have assumed an increasingly anti-systemic focus, battles over particular policy changes have often failed to attract sustained public participation, reflecting unions' struggle to remain relevant.⁴⁹

By contrast, workers have been drawn to participation in broad-based, if often short-lived, social movements. Early manifestations of the disconnect between institutionalized unionism and social militancy were reflected in anti-globalization protests of the early 2000s

spearheaded by ATTAC (*Association pour la taxation des transactions financières pour l'action citoyenne*). They could also be seen in a rise in spontaneous direct actions by workers at the firm level—including, most famously, a spate of “bossnappings” in the wake of the 2008-9 financial crisis.⁵⁰

But the most famous of such movements in terms of generalizing fights against French capitalism beyond the traditional avenue of union-led protests, and in securing a broader social basis for contestation, have been the *Nuit Debout* (“Up all Night”) movement of 2016 and the *Gilets Jaunes*, or “Yellow Vest” Protests of 2018-2020. Below, we trace the origins of these increasingly structural popular critiques of French capitalism and the state and argue that they reflect the weakness of unions as the symbolic representative of French workers. We document three emergent features of recent protest movements: their *leadership*, which is self-consciously distanced from the formal labor movement; their *content*, characterized by a deep anti-elite animus and a focus on the economic inequalities and exclusionary politics of the Fifth Republic; and their diverse *social base*, which transcends traditional class boundaries while articulating traditional workerist demands.

The Resurgence of Anti-Systemic Protest Movements: From *Nuit Debout* to *Les Gilets*

Jaunes

Nuit Debout emerged in 2016, in response to the El Khomri labor reforms introduced by François Hollande's Socialist government, which made it easier for firms to lay off workers and reduced severance payments for dismissed workers. The first demonstration began in the wake of a CGT-organized protest against the laws, in the form of a late-night viewing party at the Place de la République, where attendees were shown activist François Ruffin's satirical film *Merci*

Patron! (“Thanks, Boss!”), which touched upon themes of offshoring by French firms and their effects on everyday families. One night of gatherings turned into another, and then another—and soon the movement took on a life of its own. From Marseilles to Lyon to Nice, demonstrators across more than fifty cities came together in the evenings (hence the name “Up All Night”), not only expressing opposition to France’s increasingly neoliberal economic order but also articulating a more generalized rejection of politics under the Fifth Republic.

In much the same way as the subsequent *Gilets Jaunes* movement, *Nuit Debout*’s political agenda initially revolved around somewhat narrow opposition to a particular policy change—in this case the new labor legislation—but soon expanded to involve critical discussions over a far broader range of issues, including housing affordability, solidarity with immigrants, feminism, the need for a universal basic income, and the need for a new way of doing politics.⁵¹ *Nuit Debout* emphasized “the vacuum of legitimacy in which almost all collective decisions are made today.”⁵² Despite some convergence in goals between the movement and trade unions, ND leaders insisted on their independence from both mainstream political organizations and unions, which they viewed as hierarchical and whose leadership they saw as subject to co-optation. Instead, they promoted horizontal forms of organizing and *convergence des luttes* (“confluence of struggles”).⁵³

Nuit Debout’s left-leaning populism appealed particularly to young people. In his victory speech, President Hollande had staked a claim that his presidency could be judged by what he did for the younger generation. At the time of the El Khomri laws, youth unemployment remained stubbornly high, at 25%, and many of those who were employed were on temporary contracts. Although the government claimed that the labor law would improve long-run job prospects for younger workers, ND’s reading of the laws as furthering the economic degradation

of young French workers resonated with many. But an April 2016 poll suggested public sympathies for the movement were not limited to the young. To be sure, 76% of surveyed young people “understood” *Nuit Debout*, and 61% supported it (even after violence marred some protests). But even among the broader public, half of respondents expressed support for *Nuit Debout*’s aims.⁵⁴

Despite this substantial societal support, *Nuit Debout* fizzled out after only a few months, soon after the government of Prime Minister Manuel Valls rammed the El Khomri law through parliament without debate. According to one highly placed official in the Labor Ministry at the time, El Khomri was opposed to the law, which she saw as radical and going “far beyond what the [reformist] CFDT could accept” but was overruled by Hollande’s Prime Minister Manuel Valls and then-Economics Minister Emmanuel Macron, becoming the public face of a measure that she did not support.⁵⁵ Despite its failure to block the law, *Nuit Debout* represented an early crystallization of citizens’ challenge to the role of capitalism within French society, especially among French youth. Indeed, interviews suggest that *Nuit Debout* was formative for mobilizing many young people into protest politics. One activist declared:

My first vote, when I was 18, was for François Hollande. I voted for Hollande and I was in the street celebrating at the time of his election, and everyone thought rather naively that things would change for most people. After, there were the worst laws passed in many years, including on the labor code. I think it was really powerful stuff in the political construction of young people. And with the labor law, I felt really disgusted. That was the last straw. In any case, it is always the private interests that took precedence over any political decision. And I came across people who seemed to know about what they were

doing, who proposed ideas in the mobilizations and meetings, where I was angry. It grabbed me and I thought they were right.

-Interview, Emily (pseudonym), Student, *Nuit Debout* and Yellow Vest Activist, Paris.

A mere two years later worker disaffection once again boiled over, this time into a more wide-ranging wave of social protest—the so-called *Gilets Jaunes* movement that began in 2018. Unlike its predecessor, this movement could not be dismissed as an expression of unhappy “bobo” youth; rather, it clearly represented a deep fissure within the French body politic, not just a social crisis but also a crisis of representation. Initially framed as a response to an increase in France’s fuel tax (hence the “yellow vests,” safety garments that French law requires all drivers to keep in their vehicle), the movement, loosely organized by workers from a range of industries and coordinated over social media, railed against the stagnation of disposable incomes and channeled broader anger with generalized social and economic inequality, with as many as 300,000 daily protesters in November 2018 and drawing tens of thousands of weekend protestors well into the following Spring. These protests enjoyed even stronger public support than the ND protests, with polls indicating 80% support in autumn 2018 and sustained levels of approval of 50-60% of the French public,⁵⁶ reflecting a powerful capacity to channel public grievances in ways that went well beyond the relatively institutionalized patterns of the virtual trade unionism of the 1990s and 2000s.

In interviews, many *Gilets Jaunes* activists discussed the declining relevance of unions as political partners, their cooptation by the state, and their diminishing organizational strength:

Most of the money is coming from the state or from the corporate bosses. It means that unions exist mostly towards this end. That’s why they are completely linked with

everything. There is something bizarre about unions in France. They are not going to end struggles. They are not on the left anymore.

-Interview, Raphaël (pseudonym): Bus driver and Yellow Vest Activist, Paris.

I think, now, more than ever, unions are openly integrated with the state. They have always been. It's not a question. It's just that before they had such a strong movement in their base that they had to be as radical as possible, to be natural leaders not to be contested. They had to pretend to be radical and the more they were radical, the more people would follow.

-Interview, Athena (pseudonym), Artist and Yellow Vest Activist, Paris.

The protests also assumed the character of a rural revolt against urban France, where wealthy elites enjoying robust public-transportation networks were perceived as out of touch with those in the provinces relying on automobiles for transportation and suffering from the dismantling of many local and regional train networks in favor of massive investments in long-distance, high-speed rail. Like *Poujadisme* before it, the *Gilets Jaunes* can thus be usefully understood as a populist revolt with its roots in rural and peri-urban France, and a grievance structure capable of attracting significant numbers of industrial workers, retirees, and working classes.⁵⁷

With a tightly managed, so-called *Grand Débat*, involving town-hall-style meetings with protesters around the country, President Macron sought to tamp down the protests through staged dialogue and minor concessions, including the repeal of the recent fuel-tax increase. He refused, however, to meet other demands, such as the re-institution of a wealth tax introduced by Hollande, or to take any significant measures to arrest the decline in workers' purchasing power.

Yellow Vest leader Priscillia Ludosky called the *Grande Débat* a “publicity stunt” in our interview and supported the creation of an opposition-led “True Debate” (*Le Vrai Débat*).⁵⁸

A central reason for the movement’s striking scope was its ability to articulate a form of “valence populism,” embracing “non-positional issues such as the fight against corruption, increased transparency, democratic reform and moral integrity, while emphasizing anti-establishment motives.”⁵⁹ It successfully captured widely held grievances, reflecting a sense of betrayal of the state’s promise in the 1960s to give French workers access to the middle class, and an “erosion of the social contract” between masses and elites.⁶⁰ As one protester explained, “Many people are impoverished and now they understand that it is the system itself that has impoverished them... [The] population understands it was impoverished by people who were themselves corrupt elites. That's why there is rebellion.”⁶¹ This erosion in public trust has been exacerbated by the growing urban-rural divide, with the *Gilets Jaunes* protesters assuming a symbolic economic significance for a wide swathe of the French working class, frustrated by the absence of meaningful representation of their interests by either unions or political elites, which one interviewee termed “a crisis in representative reality.”⁶²

Many Yellow Vest activists described frustrations with the perceived failures of French representation and political institutions. Their most popular solution, a referendum, would begin to return power to the hands of “the people”:

They tell us to vote, and when we vote they don't do what they say they will do. So people don't trust them anymore. We have two big political parties and a lot of people do not vote or leave it blank. That means people don't want them. The big problem is that we do not take into account people who do not vote. The percentage of people not voting is big. And we have to look into the problem. It shows something...one of the first things we asked for

was a referendum, the Référendum d'initiative citoyenne, so as citizens we count. If we ask for something, it happens. If we propose something, we want [policymakers] to hear it because we don't trust them to do it alone. They are working for us.

-Interview, Priscillia Ludosky, Yellow Vest Leader, Paris.⁶³

The yellow vests, they are not perfect. We do not know politics because we're workers and we don't make policies. But we had representatives, we paid a lot for representatives to go to school, and the representatives are against us today. Why put up with the same nonsense again? People think we have representation? Hah!

-Interview, Amjhed (pseudonym), Handyman and Yellow Vest Activist, Paris.

The contrast between the widespread anger channeled by the *Nuit Debout* and *Gilets Jaunes* over fundamental questions of social inequality and economic fairness and the narrower scope and scale of union-led protests against Macron's 2018 labor reforms provides insight into the sources of worker grievances and their relationship to fragmented channels of workplace representation. The reform of the French labor code focused, above all, on accelerating the decentralization of bargaining and privileging firm-level negotiations. Unions, led by the CGT, came out against the reforms, but divisions among them blunted the protests' scale, with the traditionally more reformist CFDT declining to mobilize, *La France Insoumise* calling its own, separate protests, and students failing to turn out in significant numbers.⁶⁴ The measure was relatively technocratic and did not directly threaten workers' standard of living, and the broad segment of the working class represented by the *Gilets Jaunes* simply "did not care" about the measures, according to one observer.⁶⁵

Protests against Macron's 2019 proposals to reform France's complex pension system were rather different. Aimed at benefits in both the public and private sectors, the protests resonated with French workers' grievances at declining living standards and social and economic inequality. Demonstrations in December 2019 drawing around 800,000 protesters across France, according to the Interior Ministry (unions claimed around 1.5 million). One poll showed 69% public support for the strikes, with greatest support among eighteen- to thirty-four year-olds who were fearful about their long-term economic prospects.⁶⁶ These protests were larger and more sustained than those against the more abstruse reforms to the labor code, and many credited the relative size of the pension demonstrations to the organizational strength and networks of the *Gilets Jaunes*, many of whom were in attendance. Ultimately, the pension protests forced Macron to rescind the law, which he is struggling to revive after the 2022 elections deprived him of an absolute Parliamentary majority.

If the protests against the labor reforms failed to mobilize those outside of the left's base, the *Gilets Jaunes* and pension protests achieved wider resonance with French workers angry about declining living standards and broad questions of economic fairness. The lesson here is that on the rare occasions when unions succeed in mobilizing the broader public, they do so by virtue of the content of their appeals, which must resonate with pre-existing public concerns and grievances, not through their organizational leadership. Though successfully expressing concerns related to the cost of living and workers' economic security, the *Gilets Jaunes'* chief accomplishments have been more discursive than policy-related, reframing public debates about the legitimacy of French capitalism

In much the same vein, many Yellow Vest activists, in addition to pointing fingers at the French state and Macron, criticized French capitalism and liberalization writ large:

This is, for me, a real anti-capitalist movement...the economy is above our social life and it's dominating people. The problem is the financialization of the economy, the problem is neoliberalism. But the deeper problem is capitalist structures, the problem of the market economy. If we're not working to produce, we are basically starving.

-Interview, Jeff (pseudonym), Journalist and Yellow Vest Activist, Paris.

The social fabric has been destroyed by capitalism for more than fifty years. That is to say the life of neighborhoods was broken, small businesses are forced to close in favor of large companies, etc., etc. And it's powerful. And there in the roundabouts or in the houses of the people, or in the protests, people find a social link. There, they have rewoven social ties.

-Interview, Jean (pseudonym), Airport worker and Yellow Vest Activist, Paris.

Protestors' frequent invocation of "*anticapitalisme*" as a theme constituted a sharp contrast to their perception of the unions, which protesters saw as "de-radicalized and co-opted by elites" and whose involvement in the protests entailed efforts to "piggy-back" on demonstrations that they had little role in initiating or maintaining.

In this context, unions have shifted away from representing the grievances of the broad working class, becoming instead followers of broader social manifestations of workers' sense of the inequities of French capitalism. Two highly-placed officials in the CFDT blamed unions' representational weakness on declining membership and decades of state-led decentralization of collective bargaining, characterizing the *Gilets Jaunes* as "very strong, but ultimately sterile," with few tangible results to show for their efforts. At the same time, they viewed the movement's

scale as the result of citizens' failure to understand the benefits of the French "social model" and the unions' role in sustaining it.⁶⁷

Whatever the reason, many French citizens clearly believe that unions no longer represent their interests, increasingly reduced to ineffectual observers of the erosion of the French social contract. In this respect, it is no accident that the genesis of the *Gilets Jaunes* protests lay, in echoes of *Poujadisme* though in a slightly different key, in a revolt against a fuel tax, exacerbated by Macron's refusal to reinstitute taxes on very high earners. For one long-time observer of French politics, the combination of high tax burdens and declining living standards means that tax increases act, and are perceived, as "Keynesian multipliers in reverse."⁶⁸ As unions' role is relegated to firm-level bargaining, their positions on national-level policy debates have become ever-more disconnected from the sources and possible remedies to worker discontent and unrest. In the words of one French government official, though unions' approval is often required to legitimate national-level bargains, it does little to weaken worker resistance, and the broad social basis of the protests reflects "a crisis of representation" of which the unions have been both authors and victims.⁶⁹

Conclusion: From a Crisis of Representation to a Crisis of Capitalism

This article has analyzed the evolution of French industrial relations over the past four decades, emphasizing the shifting relationship among collective bargaining, the contested role of the state in managing French capitalism, and the changing character of workers' claims against employers and the state. We have argued that shifts in French protest reflect a double closure of representational channels. As the French state has become ever-more a handmaiden of neoliberalism, shifting its focus from facilitating social bargaining and negotiating change to

imposing it, French workers have sought to contest the capitalist system as a whole rather than merely to alter its distributional effects, with an anti-systemic posture redolent of the crisis-ridden 1960s and 1970s. The grievances of recent protest movements reveal a great deal about the nature and substance of the movements themselves as well as their structural contexts.

In the process, trade unions have been placed ever more on the defensive, seeking to preserve their institutional prerogatives and relevance, even as doing so has undermined their effectiveness at representing the concerns of French workers generally. Although unions remain relevant agents, the remit of their grievances reflect an increasingly parochial orientation, focusing on state initiatives that directly affect their largely public-sector membership and strategies reflecting what Karel Yon calls a growing “ideological obliviousness.”⁷⁰ Against this background, high unemployment, growing inflationary pressures, rising economic inequality, and the emergence of new anti-systemic forces on the populist far Right⁷¹ are likely to deepen the crisis of representation and exacerbate the French dilemmas of capitalist governance.

In this context, the *Gilets Jaunes* protests, unlikely to be the last of their kind, suggest a significantly altered dynamic of social conflict that questions French capitalism’s potential to deliver both equitable economic outcomes and social and political stability. Ironically, as the state has sought to foster social dialogue and privilege decentralized and firm-level bargaining, “a profound culture of centralization” has been reinforced, deepening the “incapacity of the political system to manage modernization” and the “need [for] a new form of mass democracy,” in the words of one journalist.⁷² The likely long-term prospect, in our view, is intensifying instability in French capitalism and political contestation on a systemic level, with the future of the social contract and the viability of French capitalism itself at stake. Of course, anti-systemic postures are nothing new among French trade unions. But the breadth and scope of the

grievances have moved well beyond the relatively regularized bargaining channels for which unions have acted as gatekeepers since the 1970s. French labor politics seems to have travelled full circle back to 1968, when worker and student protests coalesced into a coherent, if short-lived, assault on the very foundations of French capitalism and the state.

Some students of French politics lay the current crisis at the feet of the ideological vacuity and electoral decline of the *Parti Socialiste* (PS) in particular and of the political left more generally.⁷³ Our view is that this explanation is not so much incorrect as incomplete. Social democratic parties across Europe have embraced liberal policies in recent decades. Although it is true that radical right parties across the continents are reaping the political rewards from this move, widespread anti-systemic sentiment remains more muted. A brief comparative analysis helps clarify the political contexts that make French-style combination of labor marginalization and anti-system contention more or less likely.

The French case, we have shown, represents the marginalization of labor in a context of contested neoliberalism. Although precipitated by distinct proximate causes, the common thread uniting various post-2008 protest movements has been hostility toward neoliberal principles. Moreover, the French public has largely supported these protest movements, despite their attendant economic disruptions. The resilience of anti-neoliberal sentiment in France stems in part from the country's history of inter-union rivalries, whereby competing, ideologically oriented, class-based unions worked to reproduce skepticism about the social value of labor market flexibilization and welfare austerity among the working class; even as unions weakened over time, this ideological legacy endured.⁷⁴ Given widespread popular ambivalence about the merits of *laissez-faire*, the marginalization of French labor—the central channel for voicing

societal opposition to liberalization—has provided an opening for more radical movements like the *Gilets Jaunes* to flourish.

This dynamic of labor marginalization, contested neoliberalism and anti-systemic popular contention is not confined to France. Consider, for instance, the recent experience of Spain, another country with a history of a divided left where neoliberal norms remain deeply contested. As in France, Spanish unions long functioned through a form of “virtual unionism” but were largely sidelined by the government during the past fifteen years. Today, as in France, the Spanish public is simultaneously suspicious of neoliberalism and distrustful of unions, whom they view as ineffectual and part of the unresponsive political establishment.⁷⁵ Thus, when the Spanish government implemented cutbacks in government services and wages in the wake of the financial crisis, there existed a political space conducive to the emergence of new popular movements. The most famous of these was the powerful *Indignados* uprising, but also relevant were a series of successor protest groups such as *Mareas Ciudadanas* (Civic Tides), *Podemos* (We Can) prior to its transformation into a political party, and the *Marchas por la Dignidad* (Marches for Dignity). Although each movement’s objectives have varied, like their French counterparts, they all advocated for new forms of economic and democratic regeneration in order to counter austerity and liberalization, and most have self-consciously distanced themselves from the traditionally dominant union confederations.⁷⁶ In a final parallel with the French case, as Spanish society has fragmented, so too has its party system. Rising popular support for radical anti-capitalist (and in some cases, anti-democratic) parties has echoed developments in the social arena, disrupting the status quo of bi-partism and creating new challenges for governance.⁷⁷

In contrast, although neoliberal policies are also contested in many northern European political economies, Germany, and Austria and Scandinavia, labor movements in these countries

have retained access to institutionalized channels of representation. Here, work is viewed more as a collective good predicated upon partnership between capital and labor, rather than a burden imposed by employers, borne by workers, and periodically mitigated by the state in response to social unrest, as in France. In Germany, for example, industrial workers enjoy both more representative and systematic collective-bargaining institutions and co-determination arrangements that provide them with input into shopfloor and production strategies, the state has retained, and in many instances expanded, forms of compensation for workers, not in response to periodic social and political crises, but rather in consistent and institutionalized ways. The use of the *Kurzarbeitergeld*, or “short-term work” program, whereby the state pays most of workers’ wages during economic downturns in order to avoid costly and productivity-draining layoffs, constitute an excellent example of such arrangements.⁷⁸ In such a context, social protection is not deployed merely as a way of pacifying labor, but rather as an investment in cooperative labor relations from which both labor and capital benefit. It is thus no accident that the past two decades have witnessed no anti-systemic social movements in Germany of the amplitude of the *Gilets Jaunes*, or that anti-capitalist groups have not enjoyed the same level of support as their French counterparts. Of course, this relative labor quiescence has coincided with the erosion of support for mainstream parties of the center-Left and center-Right and the fragmentation of the party system, as seen in the 2021 *Bundestag* elections. But even as Germany faces new challenges for governance, trust in national institutions remains substantially higher than in France, and the prospects for successful—and peaceful—adjustments to the challenges of late capitalism are significantly brighter.

If France and Spain represent cases of contested, anti-systemic liberalization, and northern European countries cases of negotiated, labor-embedded liberalization, there exists a third

possible context mediating the relationship between labor disembedding and contentious politics: one of relatively hegemonic neoliberal capitalism. In liberal economies such as the UK and the US, unions have, as in France, been pushed to the margins politically, but radical anti-system movements have not arisen to replace them. The absence of popular anti-systemic sentiment in these cases, we argue, stems from the widespread consent to neoliberal practices. This lack of opposition to neoliberalism has both historical roots—the absence of national-level labor confederations capable of socializing workers into anti-capitalist worldviews, for example—and more proximate causes, such as the effective use of “Third Way” discourses in framing rights and responsibilities of social citizenship. As a result, efforts in both the US and the UK to demean alternatives to low-wage work have been met with relatively little organized societal resistance.⁷⁹ Marketizing reforms to labor markets and welfare state faced some pushback, to be sure, but rarely did protests emerge to challenge the underlying social and economic order. Instead, with a few notable exceptions such as Occupy Wall Street, opponents of neoliberalism focused on incremental reforms, such as extending targeted, often market-conforming income supports to particularly vulnerable groups. These cases highlight the fact that labor marginalization—and even decimation—alone is no guarantee of widespread, anti-systemic protest. All in all, hegemonic neoliberal forms of capitalism and the ideologies that accompany them may significantly constrain possibilities for anti-systemic protest movements.

The unsettling French experience thus offers lessons for other countries in an era of exploding income inequality and a younger generation increasingly disenchanted with the shopworn promises of capitalism with seemingly little to offer. If social movements such as the *Gilets Jaunes* and *Nuit Debout* are of distinctively French vintage and character, therefore, they nonetheless offer potential cautionary tales for policy makers in other advanced industrial

societies, whose neoliberal policy and institutional strategies marginalize labor at their peril. As elsewhere, if French authorities are unable to restore some measure of trust and legitimacy among the electorate, we are likely to witness a continued social unrest, political instability, and a disintegration of the political center, with darkening prospects for democratic politics.

Notes

¹ John Ruggie, “International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order,” *International Organization* 36, no. 2 (Spring 1982), 379–415.

² Chris Howell, “Neoliberalism, Capitalist Growth Models, and the State: An Agenda for Industrial Relations Theory,” *Journal of Industrial Relations* 61, no. 3 (May 2019), 457-74.

³ Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1986).

⁴ Frank R. Baumgartner, “The Politics of Protest and Mass Mobilization in France,” *French Politics and Society* 12, no. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 1994), 84–96.

⁵ Marcos Ancelovici reports, for example, that historically unions organized 40-50% of demonstrations in Paris, and some 70% of protests outside of Paris. Ancelovici, “In Search of Lost Radicalism: The Hot Autumn of 2010 and the Transformation of Labor Contention in France,” *French Politics, Culture & Society* 29, no. 3 (December 2011), 121–40.

⁶ In this respect, such movements echo other episodes of petit-bourgeois mobilization in French history, including the revolt of shopkeepers against the expansion of supermarkets in the 1970s. For a discussion, see John T.S. Keeler, Philip G. Cerny, and Martin Schain, “Corporatist Decentralization and Commercial Modernization in France: The Royer Law’s Impact on Shopkeepers, Supermarkets, and the State,” in Philip Cerny and Martin Schain, eds., *Socialism, the State, and Public Policy in France* (London: Frances Pinter, 1984), 265-91.

⁷ See Robert Boyer, *The Regulation School: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), for an overview.

⁸ Marshall Ganz, “Resources and Resourcefulness: Strategic Capacity in the Unionization of California Agriculture, 1959-1966,” *American Journal of Sociology* 105, no. 4 (January 2000), 1003–62.

⁹ David Snow, Daniel Cress, Liam Downey, and Andrew W. Jones, “Disrupting the ‘Quotidian’: Reconceptualizing the Relationship between Breakdown and the Emergence of Collective Action,” *Mobilization* 3, no. 8 (March 1998), 1-22.

¹⁰ Francesca Polletta and James M. Jasper, “Collective Identity and Social Movements,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (January 2001), 283–305. Robert D Benford and David A. Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000), 611–39.

¹¹ Hannah Fenichel Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972), 8. The book’s exegetical investigation of the concept of representation is richer than we have scope to describe here.

¹² *Ibid.*, 209.

¹³ For a classic explication, see Milton Friedman. *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962). More modern interpretations, focusing on union practices, can be found in OECD, *OECD Employment Outlook* (Paris: OECD, 2010) and European Commission, *An Agenda for New Skills and Jobs* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the EU, 2011).

¹⁴ For example, see Evelyn Huber, Jingjing Huo, and John D. Stephens, “Power, Policy, and Top Income Shares,” *Socio-Economic Review* 17, no. 2 (2000), 231-53; and John Ahlquist, “Labor Unions, Representation and Economic Inequality,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 20 (2017), 409-32.

¹⁵ Gabriel Hetland and Jeff Goodwin, “The Strange Disappearance of Capitalism from Social Movement Studies,” in Colin Barker, Laurence Cox, John Krinsky, and Alf Gunvald Nilsen, eds., *Marxism and Social Movements* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 83–102; and Donatella della Porta, “Political Economy and Social Movement Studies: The Class Basis of Anti-Austerity Protests,” *Anthropological Theory* 17, no. 4 (December 2017), 453–73.

¹⁶ Interviews with activists were held in the fall of 2019. Activists were located through participant observation at protests and meetings, chain-referral sampling, and online news searches. All Yellow Vest interlocutors are de-identified save Priscillia Ludosky, who chose to be identified.

¹⁷ Jonah Levy, *Tocqueville’s Revenge: State, Society, and Economy in Contemporary France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

¹⁸ The classic statement of the logic of the developmental state is Alexander Gerschenkron, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1962).

¹⁹ Andrew Shonfield, *Modern Capitalism: The Changing Balance of Public and Private Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 130–1.

²⁰ Chris Howell, *Regulating Labor: The State and Industrial Relations Reform in Postwar France* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); Mark I. Vail, *Recasting Welfare Capitalism: Economic Adjustment in Contemporary France and Germany* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010).

²¹ Bob Hancke and Tim Vlandas, “The Politics of Disinflation,” SSRN Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, December 12, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3086569>.

²² For a review of other tax-justice movements in France, see Alexis Spire, *Résistances à l’impôt, attachement à l’Etat* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2018); and Nicolas Delalande, *Les batailles de l’impôt. Consentement et résistances de 1789 à nos jours* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2014).

²³ By 1956, the movement garnered enough support to win 11.6% of the vote and fifty-two deputies in the National Assembly. Stanley Hoffmann, *Le mouvement Poujade* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1956); and Jean-Pierre Rioux, “Des clandestins aux activistes (1945-1965),” in Michel Winock, ed., *Histoire de l’extrême droit en France* (Paris: Seuil, 1993), 222, 226.

²⁴ Levy, 1999.

²⁵ For discussions of this economic liberalization and social-policy expansion, see Jonah Levy “From the Dirigiste State to the Social Anaesthesia State: French Economic Policy in the Longue Durée,” *Modern & Contemporary France*, 16 (November 2008): 417–35; and Vail, 2010, chs. 5-7. See also Mark I. Vail, *Liberalism in Illiberal States: Ideas and Economic Adjustment in Contemporary Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), ch. 2.

²⁶ “Accord national interprofessionnel: de la loi négociée à la loi contestée,” *Civitas Europa* N° 33, no. 2 (2014), 73.

²⁷ Chris Howell, “Virtual Trade Unionism in France: A Commentary on the Question of Unions, Public Opinion, and the State,” in Herrick Chapman, Mark Kesselman, and Martin A. Schain, eds., *A Century of Organized Labor in France: A Union Movement for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 205-12.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 206. Original italics.

²⁹ The tensions between unions’ largely public-sector membership and their claims to represent the broader working class is nothing new. See Christopher S. Thompson, “A Century of Organized Labor in France: A Union Movement for the Twenty-First Century?” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 50 (Fall 1996), 157-60.

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- ³⁰ Chris Howell, “The Transformation of French Industrial Relations: Labor Representation and the State in a Post-Dirigiste Era,” *Politics & Society* 37, no. 2 (June 2009), 229–56.
- ³¹ Sara Watson and Raj Arunachalam, “Firms and Social Protection: An Event Study,” *Comparative Political Studies* 51, no. 14 (December 2018), 1974–2021.
- ³² See Leroy, “Accord national interprofessionnel”; René Lasserre, “La réforme du dialogue social en France: Les enseignements de l’expérience allemande,” *Regards sur l’économie allemande* n° 116-117, no. 1 (July 29, 2015), 29–42.
- ³³ The Jospin administration’s best-known labor-market reform, the *Aubry Laws* that created a norm of 35 hours per week, likewise sought to create jobs through employer subsidies and changing rules on overtime and part-time work. See Vail, 2018, 92-4.
- ³⁴ MEDEF controlled over 70% of the votes required to oppose the extension of any collective agreement.
- ³⁵ “Hollande: conférence sociale dès 2012 et nouvelles règles de la négociation,” *Le Point*, June 14, 2011.
- ³⁶ Daniel Muraz, “Fini de chômer,” *Courrier Picard*, February 26, 2019.
- ³⁷ Bernard Vivier, “Emmanuel Macron et Le Paritarisme,” *Institut Supérieur Du Travail* (blog), December 11, 2017, <https://www.istravail.com/11213-emmanuel-macron-et-le-paritarisme.html>.
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- ⁴¹ “Accord donnant-donnant et principe de faveur,” *Actualités Du Droit* (blog), <https://preprod-cloud.actualitesdudroit.fr/browse/social/irp-et-relations-collectives/45770/accord-donnant-donnant-et-principe-de-faveur>; “Accords de compétitivité, accords de maintien de l’emploi: L’affaiblissement de la résistance du contrat de travail,” 2015, 5; Josepha Durringer, “Comment mettre la négociation collective,” n.d., 4.
- ⁴² Alexandre Carlier and Antoine Naboulet, “Négociations collectives et grèves dans les entreprises du secteur marchand en 2007,” *Dares Analyses* 18, no. 2 (April 2009), 1–8.

⁴³ Étude Harris Interactive, “Le regard des Français sur les organisations patronales,” February 15, 2018, https://harris-interactive.fr/opinion_polls/le-regard-des-francais-sur-les-organisations-patronales/.

⁴⁴ The CEVIPOF survey asked: “When you think of unions, what word or phrase immediately comes to mind?” Some 60% of the responses were negative; positive assessments of unions pertained more to their role than their nature: “defense of employees,” and “actors of struggles or *combatatifs*” Luc Rouban, “La Double Fracture Du Dialogue Social” (Paris: CEVIPOF, 2018).

⁴⁵ Mark I. Vail, “The Better Part of Valour: The Politics of French Welfare Reform,” *Journal of European Social Policy* 9, no. 4 (November 1999), 311–29.

⁴⁶ See, *inter alia*, John Ambler, “Trust in Political and Nonpolitical Authorities in France,” *Comparative Politics* 8, no. 1 (October 1975), 31–58; Simon Rogers, “Do We Trust Our Government? See How Your Country Compares,” *The Guardian*, January 24, 2012; and Richard Wike, Jannell Fetterolf, Shannon Schumacher, and J.J. Moncus, “Citizens in Advanced Economies Want Significant Changes to Their Political Systems,” *Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project* (blog), October 21, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/10/21/citizens-in-advanced-economies-want-significant-changes-to-their-political-systems/>.

⁴⁷ Rouban.

⁴⁸ This contention echoes the argument of Jonathan Hopkin, who frames contemporary populist movements as Polanyian counter-movements against neoliberal hegemony. See Hopkin, *Anti-System Politics: The Crisis of Market Liberalism in Rich Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁴⁹ Cole Stangler, “These Pension Strikes May Be Historic, but French Unions Are Weaker than They Seem,” *The Guardian*, January 28, 2020.

⁵⁰ Sylvie Contrepois, Nick Parsons, and Marco Ancelovici, for example, document an increase in forms of direct action during this period, which they interpret as the result of worker weakness. See Ancelovici; Sylvie Contrepois, “Direct Action in France: A New Phase in Labour-Capital Conflict,” in Gregor Gall, ed., *New Forms and Expressions of Conflict at Work* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 152–70.

⁵¹ Sarah Pickard and Judith Bessant, “France’s #Nuit Debout Social Movement: Young People Rising up and Moral Emotions,” *Societies* 8, no. 4 (December 2018), 100.

⁵² Catherine Vincent, “A Nuit debout, la qualité du débat démocratique est l’enjeu prioritaire,” *Le Monde*, April 14, 2016.

⁵³ Gaël Brustier, “Mais pourquoi Nuit Debout ne rejoint pas les 'gilets jaunes'?” *Slate.fr*, January 28, 2019, <http://www.slate.fr/story/172776/nuit-debout-gilets-jaunes-jonction-mouvements>.

⁵⁴ “Sondage exclusif: Un nouveau Mai-68 en France?” LCI, 2016, <https://www.lci.fr/societe/sondage-exclusif-un-nouveau-mai-68-en-france-la-jeunesse-y-pense-1508146.html>.

⁵⁵ Interview, Paris, July 11, 2022.

⁵⁶ Aurelie Dianara, “Happy Birthday, Gilets Jaunes,” *Dissent*, November 17, 2019, <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/11/gilets-jaunes-yellow-vests-movement-protests-anniversary-france>.

⁵⁷ The *Gilets Jaunes* also learned from the 2013 *Bonnets Rouges* or “Red Caps” movement, which opposed a tax on transport trucks.

⁵⁸ Wikipedia, *Le Vrai Débat*, https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Vrai_Debat.

⁵⁹ Mattia Zulianello, “Varieties of Populist Parties and Party Systems in Europe: From State-of-the-Art to the Application of a Novel Classification Scheme to 66 Parties in 33 Countries,” *Government and Opposition* 55, no.2 (July 2019), 329.

⁶⁰ Interview, Thierry Pech, Directeur Général, Terra Nova, Paris, March 4, 2019.

⁶¹ Daniel Driscoll, “Populism and Carbon Tax Justice: The Yellow Vest Movement in France,” *Social Problems*, no. spab036 (August 18, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spab036>.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ For a quantitative discussion of the political disengagement of the French working class, and its contribution to the political dominance of a “bourgeois bloc,” see Stefano Palombarin and Bruno Amable, *The Last Neoliberal: Macron and the Origins of France’s Political Crisis* (London: Verso, 2021).

⁶⁴ Cole Stangler, “Macron’s Attack on Workers,” *Jacobin*, February 2, 2018, <https://jacobinmag.com/2018/02/macron-labor-reform-cgt-melenchon>.

⁶⁵ Pech.

⁶⁶ “Macron Pension Reform: France Paralyzed by Biggest Strike in Years,” *BBC News*, December 5, 2019, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50643323>.

⁶⁷ Interviews, Paris, July 12, 2022.

⁶⁸ Interview, Sophie Fay, *Le nouvel observateur*, Paris, March 1, 2019.

⁶⁹ Interview, official, Ministry of Defense, Paris, March 7, 2019.

⁷⁰ Karel Yon, “Holding Its Own: Labour among Social Movements in France,” in Stefan Schmalz and Brandon Sommer, eds., *Confronting Crisis and Precariousness: Organised Labour and Social Unrest in the European Union* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 88.

⁷¹ These include the neo-Vichyite writer Eric Zemmour, whose injected a level of venom into 2022 Presidential election that made Marine Le Pen’s far-Right *Rassemblement National* look moderate by comparison.

⁷² Interview, journalist, *Les Echos*, Paris, February 25, 2019.

⁷³ See Palombarin and Amable.

⁷⁴ Sara E. Watson, *The Left Divided* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁷⁵ A 2013 survey of public trust in sixteen institutions showed that unions came in third-to-last, slightly ahead of political parties and the government. CIS, *Barómetro de abril de 2013 del Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas. Estudio n° 2984*. (Madrid: CIS, 2013), 7.

⁷⁶ There was some coalition-building between public-sector unions and *Mareas Ciudadanas*. Holm-Detlev Köhler and José Pablo Calleja Jiménez, “Social Movement Unionism in Spain?” in *Social Movements and Organized Labour* (London: Routledge, 2018), 128-48.

⁷⁷ Whether Spanish unions will be able to overcome their marginalization remains to be seen. The 2022 labor reform, which represents the potential renewal of tripartite bargaining, reinstated some previously derogated labor rights and added protections for precarious workers, offering cause for cautious optimism.

⁷⁸ Vail, 2018, ch. 3.

⁷⁹ In arguing for the existence of a hegemonic neoliberal model, we are not claiming that neoliberalism is universally embraced; instead, the point is that critiques of the neoliberal order have tended to be muted.