

## **“Social issues should be at the heart of the presidential campaign”**

**Article by Laurent Berger**

March 15, 2022

With the first round of the French presidential election just weeks away, the tone of the campaign so far has been largely set by the candidates of the far right, with the issues of identity and security dominating the debate. As the cost of living finally begins to emerge as a topic of debate, against a backdrop of galloping inflation in energy and commodity prices, we look at how the social question is being addressed in the campaign with Laurent Berger, general secretary reformist trade union (CFDT) and president of the European Trade Union Confederation.

**Benjamin Joyeux: Before the pandemic, Macron’s presidency was marked by social struggles such as the Yellow Vests movement and the wave of strikes against his proposed pensions reform. As a trade union leader, would you say the social question is being addressed during this presidential campaign?**

**Laurent Berger:** First, I must point out that the social question is not limited to the rise of tensions such as the Yellow Vests or around pensions. The social question is a reality anchored every day in the lives of millions of workers. It should always lie the heart of the democratic debate and thus at the heart of the presidential campaign.

Until December 2021, there was a sort of groundswell around identity, notably due to the rise of one of the far-right candidates. Social issues were barely addressed at that time. Since January, we have managed to establish the cost of living and shared wealth creation as campaign issues. In the CFDT, we take part in the “Power to Live Pact” (*Pacte du Pouvoir de Vivre*), an alliance of 66 organisations that addresses issues of social inequality, housing, wages, and work. Even if it is often treated in a simplistic way, the social issue is beginning to emerge. In any case, the candidates will have no choice. What strikes me is that almost all of them used the phrase “power to live” (except those on the far right). This means that the ground has been broken. But it’s true that we don’t address the questions of inequality, its roots, and wealth distribution deeply enough.

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**Would you agree that the far right positions itself quite successfully on social issues, while we don’t hear enough from the Left and the Greens?**

It would be unfair to say that the left-wing and ecologist candidates don’t deal, or deal

insufficiently, with the social question. The fact that the far-right Rassemblement National takes up social issues is nothing new. When making a democratic choice, you have to go by degrees. The first step is to determine whether the values of the candidates are consistent with the ideas of society, democracy, and republican values that a trade union such as the CFDT defends. For the far-right candidates, the answer is clearly no. Even if the far right were to propose a 50 per cent increase in salaries, retirement at 55, or a reduction in working hours to 28 hours a week, I would still oppose them. Because they are the far right, and the question of values and democracy counts most of all. I wouldn't want a government like that of Poland currently, which is quite active on social issues but discriminates against LGBT minorities.

### **Inflation is driving up the cost of living. What can candidates propose for struggling working-class households?**

The cost of living is emerging as an issue as a result of three phenomena. First, inflation. Many households are really struggling to get by. Second, the "Covid and lockdown" effect made many workers visible who were previously overlooked. We began to notice that there are people who are not paid or treated well enough, even though they are indispensable in our society. The CFDT helped to put them in the spotlight. Third, companies have received a lot of support in the recent period and many have made big profits. So workers can see the real structural problem in the distribution of the wealth.

Populistic proposals, such as saying that all wages will be increased by 10 to 15 per cent in one go, do not work. Candidates have to make promises they can keep. They have little room for manoeuvre when it comes to increasing wages: there is the minimum wage, for example, but that does not constitute a wage policy as such. But they can act via subsidies paid to companies. Candidates should say, for example, how they will make public aid to companies conditional on the genuine redistribution of wealth. Will they take measures to make companies introduce wage scales, for example? Or force certain sectors to have minimum wages above the baseline minimum wage? There is also the question of housing, consumption, and energy. The question over the cost of living often revolves around figures when what is needed is a structural change to how wealth is distributed, how companies receive support, and how support is provided to the economy.

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### **On one hand, profits are exploding among the big CAC 40 French companies (the top 40 listed companies listed on the French stock exchange). On the other, fixed costs keep rising for workers. What are your proposals on inequality?**

With the Power to Live Pact, we have made 90 proposals to reduce inequality, including within the framework of the ecological transition. The first part of Macron's five-year term

was marked by a fiscal policy that enriched the richest and did not solve the problems of the most needy. It was a policy that increased inequality. Whereas, during the pandemic, there were policies designed to maintain employment and support salaries. But, at the end of the presidential term, we see that it is the poorest who have suffered the most. It depends on the figures, but the overall poverty rate has not increased, while extreme poverty has gone up.

The balance sheet is not all negative – for example, unemployment has gone down – but inequality has not been reduced. For that we need policies that target those who need them most. Among our proposals, we are calling for an increase in minimum social benefits, a universal youth guarantee through the roll-out of the youth employment contract (a scheme promoting education and employment), and branch-level agreements on wages. We also want to see targeted aid when it comes to energy and support for the green transition, such as home insulation offered at zero cost for the poorest households.

**Despite the supposed French passion for equality - the second word in the republican triptych - and despite the, admittedly relative, failure of Emmanuel Macron in this area, he is not dropping in the polls. A left-wing candidate could make a breakthrough in public opinion on this specific issue, but it has not yet happened. How do you explain this?**

We must remember that polls don't make the election, but I think that there has been a Covid effect. During the pandemic, we lived through a period that [housing association general delegate and sociologist] Christophe Robert calls the "golden parenthesis". The economy was very much supported, but so were households. We were even able to make sure that there were no more people sleeping under bridges or in metro stations, with shelters and accommodation provided for people on the street. We were shown that we were capable of much more solidarity. The outgoing government also benefits from this period and the social and economic management of the crisis. But all this effort would not have been possible without [non-governmental] associations and trade unions. We raised awareness, worked hard, and made proposals during this period. I don't know how to explain it any more than that.

For the parties on the Left to gain support, it's not so much the words they say as their ability to build networks and stay in touch with reality on the ground. It's not by shouting "equality" every morning that you get the support of citizens.

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**So Macron's "whatever it takes" social policy during the pandemic was a success. What about his aborted pension reform?**

Compare France to our European partners: the Czech furlough scheme in the first lockdown covered 30 per cent of the net salary. In France, we had the means to do much more, and we did much more. This is to the credit of the government as well as the economic and social actors. But there have been no structural policies to reduce inequalities. From 2017

to 2019, tax policies benefited the richest. Look, for example, at reports by the government think tank France Stratégie on the first half of the Macron's presidency: the average income of the richest 10 per cent increased by 17 per cent, compared with 3 per cent for the poorest.

On pension reform, the reform that the CFDT supported would have helped frontline workers. Supermarket cashiers or food industry workers are short-changed when you compare the pensions they receive to what they pay into the current system. Women's pensions are on average 30 per cent lower than men's. People who start working early may have long careers, but there is no mechanism for them to make up for their longer contribution period relative to others. So there are deep inequalities in the current pension system that we want to address. I don't know how Macron's pension reform would have turned out, but since Covid arrived in March 2020, we have found ourselves in an exceptional situation that has reshuffled the cards. Our job now is to ensure that the solidarity that prevailed in spring 2020 continues.

**Another crucial subject is the ecological transition. Before the pandemic struck, the revolt of the Gilets Jaunes (Yellow Vests) dominated the agenda throughout 2019, which was triggered by an attempt to introduce a carbon tax...**

It was not for lack of warning. The carbon tax – necessary for a successful ecological transition and a radical change in our production model, habits, and transport systems – cannot be done on the backs of the poorest and most vulnerable. If part of this tax is not redistributed so that people change their habits, we will never succeed. This is what the Gilets Jaunes crisis showed us. We made people believe that “the end of the world” and “the end of the month” were opposed to each other. But they are not opposed – on the contrary, they work together. We have not gone far enough in the ecological transition during this presidency, and stronger actions are needed. This will require green taxes, but it must not penalise the most vulnerable. The most modest households are no less environmentally aware than others, but when they are struggling to make ends meet from month to month, this is their priority.

The European Trade Union Confederation also supports the idea of a carbon tax at the borders of the European Union. In France, the CFDT and the Power to Live Pact argue that taxes on labour and capital should be aligned. We are proposing that a fund to finance the ecological transition be set up with an exceptional and progressive tax on financial assets. We also advocate renewed taxation on wealth, inheritance, and an ambitious carbon tax. The poorest 10 per cent of households pay 2.6 times more in carbon tax than the richest 10 per cent of households. A carbon tax is needed to meet the Paris Agreement, but it must be redistributive towards low-income households.

**What are your main questions for the various candidates?**

We question the various candidates on two points: first, on their proposals on the environment and the reduction of inequalities. Second, on the way they intend to exercise power and their vision and proposals with respect to the three elements of democracy: representative democracy, citizen participation, and social democracy.

Sometimes the Left gets lost in a shopping lists of proposals when what we have to show is

a model, a timescale, and a vision. A vision of a society that chooses the ecological transition, that invests into reducing inequalities, that is much more democratic, and that integrates the complexity of society through true civil society participation – an open society that cultivates living together rather than retreating into itself. Too much time is spent trying to break down the measures. We have to start by creating the desire. I am convinced that a very large number of citizens want a more peaceful, more open society that is in line with the major challenges of tomorrow.

**Doesn't the era of social networks and 24-hour news channels make it harder to develop a vision during a campaign?**

Yes, it does. Today's democracy is obstructed by an emphasis on the short term and the immediate reaction. The democratic debate is only about conflict and the disqualification of one's interlocutor. Complexity has been abandoned. This is not what democracy should be about; many of the subjects we have just mentioned are complex and non-binary. They require debate and confrontation. If confrontation simply consists of mudslinging on social networks, we won't get very far. We have many candidates who, whatever their side, have proposals that deserve to be listened to and debated calmly. The debate is not only about the issues at stake, it is also about the form.

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**The personalisation of the campaign is also linked to the hyper-concentration of French presidential power. Do you have any institutional demands?**

Our main demand is for proportional representation in parliamentary elections. We have proposals on the subject of democracy. We think that civil-society involvement must be strengthened in the development of public policies. We need to strengthen participation and make participatory and deliberative processes work. What is certain is that we need to get away from the idea that democracy is about the elected representatives who win elections once every five years on one side, and the people on the other. Democracy is much more complex, much fuller than that.



Laurent Berger is a French trade union leader, who has been involved in the trade unionism since the early 1990s. Since 2012 he has served as the general secretary of the French Democratic Confederation of Labour. As of May 2019 he was also elected president of the European Trade Union Confederation.

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