

Fall n Paris Journal

October 12 – the Grève

About 11 a.m. I heard noise and looked out the window. At our intersection people were frantically putting up flags and setting up tables, flags and more flags.



Ernie came back from errands about 12:30. We had lunch – baguette, left over string beans, Olivia had tapenade and paté de campagne from the Saturday market.



After lunch we went out on the street to wander and watch. It was a festival. It reminded me a little of the Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena. People are excited and happy. There is a huge amount of street food being prepared. There are grills and trucks serving essentially hot dogs and others are grilling onions or a combination of onions and sliced peppers. They put them onto a baguette and then top it with a thin grilled sausage or kabobs that are already grilled. I was sorry we had eaten already. There is no alcohol on the street. Only soft drinks are being sold. The sidewalk tables of the restaurants are doing a brisk business, as are the crêpe makers on the street. There are so many people and it is lunch time.



Yum. The smell of frying onions and charcoal fires is everywhere.

Here is a small group marching. We later realized they were going toward their start up position in the march. We had a bird's eye view of the massive demonstrations all along Blvd Montparnasse, from the train station all the way to l'Observatoire. Olivia took dozens and dozens of pictures from our apartment windows.





Young women carrying signs saying “Because I’m worth it!” They are surrounded by photographers and have stopped marching and chanting, to pose.

There was a group condemning Israel for building in Palestine. There are all kinds of other causes piggy-backing on the main cause a protest to the change in the retirement age.



There is a man inside wearing a Sarkozy mask. There were lots of anti-Sarkozy chanting, signs etc. in the demonstration.

Everyone is handing out leaflets and newspapers and stickers, and asking us to sign petitions. There are a bunch of dark skinned women carrying a newspaper that says something about shelter for children. Ernie took one and then the lady, who had some kind of picture ID hung around her neck, chased him wanting money for the paper. He gave it back to her! After a while I noticed they looked similar. They were short women, dark skinned and wearing long skirts – Gypsies? Some of the signs criticizing Sarkozy referred to his treatment of the gypsies (which has been widely condemned by other European countries.)

One stall was of CDs. I looked at the titles – they were of chants, union songs, including some from the US and South Africa; some were Red Army (USSR) songs.

Usually Parisians don't eat on the street but today is an exception.

PCF means Parti Communistes Francaises (French Communist Party). One guy was carrying a red flag with the hammer and sickle. I haven't seen a flag like that in a long time. There was a very large PCF presence in the demonstration.

It all seemed very disorganized but then at 2 p.m. the demonstration started in earnest. They began to march in groups.



There are groups of nurses, of artists, every imaginable union – Air France employees, interpretive artists, graphics artists, electricians. I tried to photograph the banners that identify who they are. Also, there are groups from lots of different cities around France.

Here are the nurses and anaestheticians.



It is now after 4 p.m. and the energy and marching isn't over. There is no way I can do anything else because of the level of the noise. But this was fascinating to watch from amongst the crowd and from our apartment windows.



The smoke is from flares the demonstrators light and carry. The “M” is our Vavin metro stop.



People are chanting and singing over public address systems and drumming. There is recorded music and then groups singing. Right now there is a drum corps doing an exercise under our window.



Lots of people have whistles and are blowing them in rhythm, or not. Someone below our window is blowing a horn. The energy level is incredible. This is an impressive show of force.



The fellow is writing on the street with the flare. I can't read upside down so I can't see what he is writing.

The chanters are roasting Sarkozy. There is one photo of a man in the back of a truck wearing a mask. I think it is meant to be Sarkozy. There are signs with photos of Sarkozy and his second saying, "Throw them out, they are nothing!"

At 4:50 p.m. the marchers are still coming.



One group did a formation with flares.



The CGT – Confédération générale du travail - is a union of salaried workers and appears to be a unifying and coordinating body of for many different unions (syndicats). CGT appears on many of the signs and balloons in the demonstrations. The CGT was founded in 1895 and plays a major role in French politics.

It is now 5:30 and the clean up is happening. The demonstration went on for over 3 hours ending finally about 5:20. The green trucks went right to work sweeping the street and picking up and dumping piles and piles of trash! All while traffic is flowing around them.





I'm sure there were hundreds of thousands of people in this demonstration. A very rough estimate for our street was 1000 people passed by under our windows every 10 minutes which would then total about 180,000. There were other demonstrations in Paris, at least one we know of on Blvd Beaumarchais (where Olivia's cello teacher is). One estimate was about 300,000+ in Paris.

There are other demonstrations happening in other cities as well. The numbers are all over the place. The unions estimated that this time 3.5 million people (in all of France) demonstrated, slightly more than the last demonstration (in September.) I think this is the 4th demonstration against raising the retirement age (at which one can get a full pension) from 60 to 62. (still lower than most other European countries). The police estimates, city by city, total about a 1/3 of that!

[note added – there was another strike and demonstration on Saturday, October 16, and one has been called for Tuesday October 19, the day before the Senate votes on the changes in the retirement age]

It is a real power struggle between the French government and the unions. A NY Times article this morning speculated that the power of the unions in France (as elsewhere) is waning. I found this quote from the NY Times article interesting “at 7.7 percent, the rate of trade union membership in France is second-lowest in the 30-member O.E.C.D., just above Turkey at 5.8 percent and well below the United States at 11.9 percent.

The demonstration was impressive and quite exciting to witness.