Born to revolt: Why the French go on strike

PARIS: France, it sometimes seems, is either in the throes of a major strike or facing the looming shadow of one. Workers in the country go on strike more than most nations in Europe. The current open-ended stoppages, which began on December 5, have halted most public transport in Paris and inter-city trains.

Why do the French strike so much? The reasons, analysts say, are multiple and complex, and touch on the French republic's revolutionary origins, its educational philosophy, union traditions and even the electoral system.

"I cannot say if France is the most strike-prone country in the world but it is certainly a country ... that is above the European average, and always near the top," researcher Kurt Vandaele of the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) told AFP. Into its fourth week, the transport strike against planned pension reforms is the biggest work stoppage in decades, outlasting the 22-day strike of 1995 that ultimately saw the government capitulate. France has had a rail strike every year for 72 years since 1947, according to the state-owned SNCF railway company.

Demonstrators in Paris during protests in 1968 that paralysed France's economy And figures from the labour ministry show that from 2005 to 2017, 118 work days were lost to strike action per 1,000 private sector workers on average per year. The analysis included strikes at state-owned transport companies SNCF, RATP and Air France, but not the public sector where workers are much likelier to down tools.

Among 23 countries for which the International Labour Organization counted "days not worked per 1,000 workers due to strikes and lockouts" in 2016, France came second after Argentina. An ETUI chart of average strike days in Europe from 2010 to 2017 lists France second after Cyprus, though data for "strike-prone" Greece and Italy was not included.

A comparison of OECD countries by the Hans Boeckler Foundation saw France top a list of working days lost per 1,000 employees from 2008 to 2017 - beating Denmark, Belgium, Canada, Spain, Norway, Finland, Britain, Germany and the United States, among others.

"Yes, one can say there is a real strike culture in France" - closely tied to a long history of revolt, according to Jean Garrigues, a historian at the University of Orleans. "Modern France was built on revolt," Garrigues told AFP, pointing to the 1789 revolution that toppled the monarchy and gave rise to the first French Republic in 1792. "There is a general conviction that revolt is necessary, that violent means or at least forceful means are necessary" when you do not agree with the government, he said.

Police make an arrest in a 1995 Paris demonstration during the national strike movement against cuts Police make an arrest in a 1995 Paris demonstration during the national strike movement against cuts to welfare and pensions systems AFP/Jack GUEZ Polls show a majority still sympathise with the current strikers, despite millions of commuters having to get up earlier, walk further, and jostle for space on infrequent and overcrowded trains and buses.

"The French spirit, if there is one, is one of scepticism," Jean-Pierre Durand, a professor in labour sociology, told AFP. "Rene Descartes' 'I think, therefore I am' can easily be translated for the French as 'I question, therefore I am'," he argued. "This means that as soon as any reform is announced, a large number of French people start questioning ... where the traps are."

Garrigues also pointed to France's system of direct presidential elections. "It implies a somewhat irrational attachment to one man - a near religious belief in the ability of one man to change everything," he explained. "And necessarily, such focus on one person. **—Reuters**

Brewing discontent with trade, one step to restoring faith in globalisation

SINGAPORE: It was supposed to be an optimistic year of a 1.5 to 3.5 per cent boom for the Singapore economy. Instead, the country veered close to a potential recession. It now looks to get by with 0.7 per cent growth instead.

The uncertain environment has also prompted employers, particularly in trade-related sectors witnessing job losses, to be more cautious in hiring, according to the Monetary Authority of Singapore. As the year draws to a reflective end, hope springs eternal that the Singapore economy will bottom out and turn around in 2020. But is the worst really over?

"Whether we tip into a recession or not depends a lot on external factors," said Prime Minister Lee Hsien Long in November after ASEAN summits ended. The World Trade Organization (WTO) sounded the warning bells in October, when it more than halved growth projections for world merchandise trade, in what will be its weakest year since 2009, the height of the global financial crisis.

The WTO also highlighted the wider implications of weaker trade sentiments for global growth for 2019 and 2020.

The global economy has seen synchronised slowdowns and weaker business sentiments this year, including in China and the Eurozone, according to the Brookings Institution and Financial Times' Tracking Index for Global Economic Recovery. Worryingly, there is a growing economist consensus that this sluggishness is here to stay, and may not be resuscitated even after a US-China phase 1 trade deal is reached. Export growth simply has not returned to pre-2008 levels, WTO historic data shows. It also declined relative to GDP growth over the 2010s. These figures reversed a decades-long trend where world trade has been one of the strongest engines of global prosperity and outstripped global growth by at least two times.

They also suggest that the origins of the current trade slowdowns predate US President Donald Trump's election win and Brexit.

Why has trade taken such a beating? Has the world lost its love for globalisation? The reality is that after decades of furious lowering of trade barriers and multinational conglomerates spreading supply chains across the world to take advantage of comparative national advantages, the pace of globalisation was bound to slow at some point. But that swing has been accelerated by rising inequality, and a sense in many countries coping with regressive redistributive effects that control must now be wrestled back by the nation-state.

America First is a symptom, not a cause of our global economic woes. Societies are grappling with powerful underlying economic forces and reacting with a political pushback against trade. But this surge in inequality caught most by surprise. Many countries haven't had time to react in a more comprehensive manner to this new disruption. Successful global institutions, like the WTO and the continuation of multilateral trade, are fundamentally built on the backs of strong states that enjoy huge levels of trust with their populace.

Retreat and defensiveness can become the default response when trust is eroded and the benefits of trade seem to be shared less equitably. Admittedly, the writing was on the wall when the world could not summon the political will to conclude the 2001 WTO Doha round of negotiations that dragged on for more than a decade. There are bright sparks where trade continues to flourish during these tricky times.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has managed to maintain movement in deepening economic cooperation and connectivity with big countries, especially China and India. The signing of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) without the United States, as the new Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for TPP (CPTPP), and signals that the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is close to the finishing line bode well.

Some would argue that the US's completion of the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) that replaces the 26-year-old North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is another positive step showing trade is still the beating heart of many economies.

But its terms and conditions instead suggest a more targeted tightening of the faucet. For example, the new USMCA agreement imposes higher standards to pull manufacturing back to North America and shift the balance of benefits of trade. Among many changes, it now requires 75 per cent of a vehicle's parts to be made in one of the three countries – up from 62.5 per cent in NAFTA – and a minimum portion of the average vehicle to be made by workers earning at least US$16 an hour (which will mostly benefit Canada and the US, and not so much Mexico). If this example is anything to go by, countries are jostling with each other to get the best deal, but is that where we should be looking to fix the world's discontent over trade?

The 2010s was not just the story of slowing global trade expansion but also a tale of the explosive growth of Big Tech titans, which has fueled a surge in services and data flows that do not require the crossing over of goods over national borders, and can produce much more with way fewer people. But what do platform giants do with that value captured? Facebook generated S$55 billion in 2018 revenue, but only paid 13 per cent in effective tax rate and employed 40,000 people.

Silicon Valley has been accused of avoiding almost a hundred billion in taxes over the last decade by British organisation Fair Tax Mark.

America's 400 biggest firms also paid an average of 11.3 per cent taxes on profits last year, according to the US Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy. US President Trump's 2017 tax cuts had some role to play. But this three-decades-long decline in corporate tax rates is not unique to the US, then IMF Managing Director Christine Lagarde pointed out in a March 2019

Footfall slumps as experts blame Black Friday and bad weather

LONDON: Black Friday discounts and bad weather have been blamed for a decline in Boxing Day shoppers, with retail analysts reporting a fall in the number of people heading for the sales.

Springboard, which analyses customer activity in stores, said footfall had seen the largest decline since 2011, dropping by 8.6%.

It said Boxing Day was becoming less important as a trading day.

But there were still queues for some shops from as early as 04:30 GMT. However, the retail data analyst, which examines information from UK High Street and shopping centre cameras, said more people were waiting until later in the day to head to the shops in search of a bargain. Diane Wehrle, insights director at Springboard, said: "It is clear that consumers visited high streets more in the early evening than during the day."

By lunchtime on Boxing Day, footfall was 10.6% lower than last year, its biggest annual decline since 2010, when Springboard first published its data. Commenting on the disappointing morning for retailers, Ms Wehrle said many consumers were still celebrating Christmas with their family on Boxing Day, while the rainy weather, online shopping and increased Black Friday spending were also possible factors for the drop in footfall.

"Boxing Day is indisputably a less important trading day than it once was," Ms Wehrle said. Some bargain-hunters did brave the rain, with some shoppers on London's Oxford Street waiting for stores to open at 9am.

Others queued outside Selfridges in Greater Manchester's Trafford Centre at 4.30am. As the doors to Next opened in Liverpool at 06:00 GMT, more than 150 people were waiting outside the store.

A total of £3.7 billion was expected to be spent in the Boxing Day sales, according to Barclaycard, with four in 10 UK adults predicted to spend an average of £186 each.

But environmental concerns were also expected to drive down buying, with shoppers also predicted to spend £200 million less in post-Christmas sales this year compared to last year. Opinium Research surveyed 2,002 UK adults online for Barclaycard between 29 November

Amazon probed over plan to buy Deliveroo stake

BERLIN: The UK's competition watchdog is investigating Amazon's bid to buy a stake in food delivery firm Deliveroo. Earlier this month, the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) gave the two firms a week to address worries that the deal could affect competition.

But, on Friday, the regulator said Amazon had failed to deal with "initial concerns that their investment in Deliveroo could be bad for customers, restaurants and grocers". The review could last up to six months. The CMA has been looking at the £440m deal since it was announced in May. However, the regulator said Amazon and Deliveroo had failed to offer any undertakings to address its concerns by a December 18 deadline.

Why is the takeaway war hotting up? The in-depth investigation threatens to jeopardise Amazon's attempt to break into the UK food delivery space.

The CMA is worried that Amazon's plans to invest in Deliveroo could stop it from launching a rival company, which would increase competition and potentially lower prices for consumers.

Announcing that it was considering a thorough probe into the deal, the CMA's executive director, Andrea Gomes da Silva, said: "Millions of people in the UK use online food platforms for takeaways, and more than ever are making use of similar services for the same-day delivery of groceries. "There are relatively few players in these markets, so we're concerned that Amazon having this kind of influence over Deliveroo could dampen the emerging competition between the two businesses."

She said that if the deal were to go ahead in its current form then there was a "real risk" that customers, restaurants and grocers would face higher prices and lower quality services. In a statement, Amazon said the deal would lead to more innovation and allow Deliveroo to remain competitive. Meanwhile, Deliveroo said: "We are confident that we will persuade the CMA of the facts that this minority investment will add to competition, helping restaurants to grow their businesses, creating more work for riders, and increasing choice for customers."

It is not the first time Amazon has tried to enter the food delivery market in the UK. The online retailer briefly ran its own delivery venture, Amazon Restaurants UK, which it started in 2016 but closed just two years later. It was previously reported to have made approach. **—AFP**

The rise and rise of the sneaker

SYDNEY: In June this year, hundreds of Australian shoppers queued – some overnight – to buy a pair of Yeezy Boost 350 V2 Black Static Adidas sneakers the moment they went on sale.

Before lining up, customers had to register and go into a draw to determine whether they could buy a pair. The shoes sold for a few hundred dollars but are now being traded for up to AU$3,000 (US$2,070). This quest to obtain limited edition sneakers designed by rapper Kanye West is not an isolated phenomenon. People have long gone to extreme lengths to get their hands on the latest kicks.

There have been reports of sneaker violence since the 1980s. For those wishing to form a more orderly queue, the internet has responded with news services and dedicated message boards to help people get the latest kicks. Other sites treat sneakers like stock market commodities. But how does society's sneaker love tally with our awareness of the environmental and human cost of consumerism?

The first sneakers appeared in 1830s England, when Liverpool Rubber bonded a canvas outer onto a vulcanised rubber sole, creating the original sand shoe for the Victorian middle classes to wear on the beach. Different styles of the shoe were developed in the UK and the US throughout the 19th century to respond to athletic pursuits like running, tennis, jumping and sailing.

The term "sneaker" was coined in the US in the 1870 to describe the shoe because it was noiseless. Athletes in Paris wore sneakers at the first modern Olympic Games in 1900.

The American pro-basketball player Charles H Taylor, passionately promoted the sneakers designed by Marquis M Converse in 1917. By 1923, Taylor's improvements had been incorporated into the shoe, his signature added to their design, and Converse "Chucks" have remained unchanged since. Adidas was founded by the Dassler brothers in Germany in 1926, and Puma was founded in 1948 when the Dassler brothers split. Onitsuka Tiger (ASICS) were founded in Japan in 1949 and Reebok started making sneakers in 1958.

New Balance started creating their "Trackster" sneakers in 1961, and Nike was founded in 1972. At every point, sneakers were created to support athletes, but also to promote lifestyles that connected leisure with physical activity.

Since the 1970s, sneakers have been linked to skateboarding and hip-hop culture, including break dancing; urban pursuits that require a high degree of comfort and ease of movement.

The explosion of hip-hop from the mid-1980s and its global dominance in the 1990s meant that sneakers quickly became a visual symbol of hip-hop and a symbol of its separation from the mainstream. Run DMC's 1986 track, My Adidas was as much about the band's love for sneakers as it was about how quickly people judged youths who wore sneakers to be troublemakers.

Likewise, when rave culture blossomed in the 1980s and 1990s, sneakers became the footwear of choice for the 24-hour party people who dressed to sweat. The current nostalgia in sneakers extends to design imagery, styles, and colour combinations. In April this year, Adidas issued a limited edition version of the My Adidas Superstar 1986 sneaker. Luxury brands have also taken note, capitalising on historical references, status concerns and a relaxation in social dress codes.

Leading high-fashion brands, including Chanel, Louis Vuitton and Balenciaga now consider sneakers a must-have fashion item in their collections. Balenciaga's recent Triple S sneakers (priced at around AU$1,300) echo the platform sneaker trends of the 1990s, with the company's CEO Cedric Charbit, noting "sneakers … blend nicely with the way we live".

Where once 1980s women swapped their commuter sneakers for power heels at the office, people now wear their sneakers all day.

Charbit believes the sneaker has become, "very versatile, it goes from day to night, it goes for the weekend, it goes for work".

While many sneaker fans continue to prioritise style over environmental concerns, others are demanding transparency around the ethics and impact of production, leading to the rise of the sustainable sneaker.

Adidas Executive Board Global Brands member Eric Liedtke holds the new Futurecraft shoe at an unvei Meghan, The Duchess of Sussex, favours Veja sneakers made from wild Amazonian rainforest rubber.

Adidas has been making sneakers using recycled ocean plastic since 2015, but says it wants to go further. It launched the Futurecraft Loop in April, a sneaker made exclusively from 100 per cent reusable Thermoplastic polyurethane that can be recycled again and again.

Adidas, Brooks, Reebok, and Salomon showed positive working conditions at their factories in a 2018 survey, but there was still a problem with low wages.

Sites like the Good Shopping Guide can help customers make more informed choices. But sustainable fashion expert Mark Liu notes, "Sneakers are still extremely problematic because of all their toxic petrochemical components, glues and the amount of greenwash in the industry". One key to enduring sneaker love is scarcity. Adidas only released 1986 of their limited-edition My Adidas Superstar 1986 shoes.

West also generates exclusivity with low production numbers – only 40,000 pairs of Yeezys are made worldwide for each drop and shops in Australia may only have 25 pairs of each incarnation. A model wears a pair of Adidas Yeezy