

# French public sector workers demonstrate against pension cuts

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13 February 2003

As many as half a million people in over 100 French towns demonstrated February 1 in defence of their pension rights against the Raffarin government's proposed reforms. This comes after gas and electrical workers firmly rejected the proposals—backed by a majority of their unions, the management of the public utility companies and the government—in a consultation ballot on January 9. The proposals involved a 4 percent rise in pension contributions as part of preparations for the privatisation of the gas and electrical industries.

Despite bad weather conditions, the numbers demonstrating were far in excess of the 300,000 who had protested in 2000 against the Jospin Plural Left government's plans to increase the years of contributions needed to obtain full pension rights.

The bulk of the demonstrators were workers under immediate threat from the government—teachers, social service workers and other civil servants from the public sector; local government workers; workers from public corporations and industries (gas, electricity, post). But there were also delegations from the private sector. In Amiens, factory contingents marched behind banners identifying them as workers from Valeo and Whirlpool, whose plants were recently hit by downsizing.

In Paris, where 35,000 marched, there were large contingents of EDF (gas) and RATP (Paris bus and underground) workers as well as some smaller delegations from the private sector.

The main thrust of the demonstrators' demands could be summed up by the figures 60—75—37.5: maintain the retirement age at a maximum of 60, pensions to be a minimum of 75 percent of final wages, and 37.5 years as the maximum requirement for eligibility to a full pension for both the private and public sector. This was aimed at countering the confusion created by the statement of the seven main trade union organisations

calling the demonstrations, which had omitted to mention the 37.5 years demand, had spoken only of 40 years and had been vague about the pension levels.

Some of the slogans seen and heard on the demonstrations were: "Pensions, like Juppé, at 57 for everyone" (Alain Juppé, chairman of the government party, the UMP, has just taken his civil service retirement), "Private, public, 37 and a half years and not a day longer", "Cash for pensions—not for war".

In Amiens, Bruno Delvas, secretary of the Somme section of the small "Groupe des 10 Solidaires" trade union confederation, commented: "We did not sign the joint declaration, because they are basing themselves on the 40 years of contributions. We are for the 37.5 for everyone, public and private."

A Paris bank worker in the Crédit Lyonnais said, "We already had to make our sacrifice, in 1993. With the Balladur reform, I've reckoned that I was losing 30 to 40 percent of my pension. They should pick on someone else."

The day after the demonstrations Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin launched the campaign to begin the reform of the pensions, which he intends to have carried out by August of this year. He made it clear that the first objective was indeed the lengthening of the civil servants' contribution period in line with that of the private sector, declaring, "The recognition of the specific nature of the civil service should not be an obstacle to the requirements of equity, which signify that the situation of people in comparable situations should be harmonised."

Baron Seillière, boss of the employers' association, was more specific on Fr 3 TV on February 3: "We say, of course, that, if the government re-establishes equity over a few years, it will have accomplished something fundamental which will have lessened the cost for the

taxpayer, more often than not a private sector worker.”

He went on to assert the need to “carry out a reform of the pensions of all workers in the private sector”.

Both Raffarin and Seillière, with the help of a pliant press and trade union leadership and silence from the old Plural Left, are attempting to stampede people into accepting a severe reduction of their pension rights by claiming that without such measures there will be a “catastrophe” in the pension financing system. The catastrophe the employers wish to avoid is an increase of the percentage of their profits, already enhanced by large tax concessions, going to maintain the pensions of their workers.

The cynicism of Raffarin’s homilies about justice, equality and care for one’s fellow man were revealed for the viewers of TF1 television on February 4 when he tried to soothe the anxieties of this year’s retirees, inadvertently admitting that the aim was to “penalise” pensioners. “People who are taking their retirement this year are not going to be penalised,” he declared. And next year?

The nervousness of Raffarin and his wish to avoid a mass movement like the one which foiled Alain Juppé’s attempts at dismantling the welfare state in 1995 is recognised by all commentators. *Libération* quotes a friend of Raffarin who says that if he can pose as the man who saved the pension system, it will be a big boost to his career and comments that in the event of failure “he can kiss goodbye to other ambitions”.

Far from intending to mount any defence of pension rights, the real concern of the trade union bureaucracies has been to be part of the process of developing the counter-reforms and to be recognised as an essential force for their imposition. François Chérèque of the CFDT spoke for all the unions when he asked: “Does he want to carry out a reform on his own or a reform with the unions?”

Bernard Thibault of the CGT added, “We don’t want to be sidelined in the role of spectators.”

Marc Blondel’s confederation Force Ouvrière has appeared to take the hardest line on pension rights, but signed the joint platform of the seven union organisations. *Libération* wrote of Blondel: “Sign of the times: Marc Blondel discreetly made his peace on Friday with François Chérèque. They agreed to avoid sniping at each other” (February 3).

The role of the trade unions in dividing and holding

back the movement against Alain Juppé’s plan in 1995, and above all in opposing any politicisation of the strikes, has now developed into open collaboration with a right-wing government with a profoundly reactionary agenda.



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