

Millions strike, demonstrate in France to defend pension rights

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France today witnessed the greatest workers' mobilisations since the mass strike movement of 1995 which forced Prime Minister Alain Juppé to rein in his assault on pensions and social security and which precipitated the early electoral ouster of his government in 1997. The action, which is officially a one-day strike called by all the trade union federations and confederations, will be continued indefinitely by many workers.

According to the CGT (General Confederation of Labour), 2 million were on the streets in demonstrations in 115 towns in France today in opposition to the right wing government's plans to introduce drastic reductions in pensions for public and private sector workers. Vast contingents of workers marched bearing the banners and flags of their unions. The largest groups identified with the CGT and Force Ouvrière (Workers' Force), but there were also large contingents from the CFDT and Sud. Many people without trade union affiliation were also on strike and on the streets.

Thousands of demonstrators from outlying areas of Ile de France, the Paris region, came in hired coaches which started arriving at 8.30 am for the scheduled Paris demonstration, due to leave from Place de la République at 11 am. At 6 pm the estimated 250,000 demonstrators were still on the streets. 200,000 demonstrated in Marseilles. Teams of WSWS supporters distributed thousands of copies of the WSWS statement in Paris and Amiens. It was especially well received by students and younger workers, many of whom said they were readers of the World Socialist Web Site.

The strike movement had already started to make itself felt from 8 pm on Monday, when the strike call by all the railway workers' unions, which is due to last

till 8 am Wednesday, took effect. Management reports 59.3 percent of the work force on strike. Rail traffic is largely at a standstill throughout France.

In Paris public transport is almost nonexistent: one bus in five is running. Many Metro underground lines had no train service and the few working were minimal. In 15 provincial towns, including Bordeaux, Dijon and Nice, public transport was totally paralysed, and in 50 others it was functioning at below 50 percent.

80 percent of internal flights were cancelled due the strike of air traffic controllers. At the Paris airports of Roissy and Orly traffic was down by 50 percent.

The FSU, the majority union federation in education, put the participation in the strike in the service at 80 percent, whereas the Ministry of Education put it at between 55 percent and 74 percent, according to the sector. According to official figures, 57 percent of government workers—some 3 million—joined the strike.

The post was largely not delivered, with an official total of 46 percent of workers on strike. No national newspapers came out and many local and regional papers were not published. Some TV programmes were disrupted.

Gas and electricity workers of the EDF-GDF also walked out. Earmarked for job losses through privatisation, they created a crisis for Raffarin and the unions earlier this year by voting down the union-management plan to prepare for privatisation, which involved important attacks on pension provisions, including a 50 percent rise in workers' contributions.

Figures have not been given for other sectors, but this reporter also saw on the massive demonstration which took place in Amiens large delegations of hospital staff, firemen, factory workers—even archaeologists. The radio reported delegations of car workers from Citroën and Renault. 25 percent of Michelin workers in

Clermont-Ferrand struck.

Many schools all over the country have been on extended strikes for days and many more will join them from today. A key development has been the decision of the RATP Paris public transport workers to continue the strike, along with many railway workers.

In response to the mass mobilisation François Fillon, Minister of Social Affairs and Labour, has said he is willing to discuss “improvements” as long as they do not compromise the financial equilibrium of the scheme. In other words there will be no more money for pensioners. He will be meeting the main trade unions’ representatives on Wednesday.

Bernard Thibault, leader of the CGT, avoided answering the interviewer’s question on France 2 TV as to whether he would demand the withdrawal of the government plan, and said that negotiations had to be on “another basis.” He was also asked whether he disapproved the decision of the RATP workers to continue the strike and answered that the next action was on May 25 and that if the government did not yield harder action was envisaged for June.

The conscious attempt to isolate workers already on long term strike will not be lost on workers in struggle. Indeed, the union representatives of the CGT, FO and the SNES-FSU of the Friville-Escarbotin lycée (high school) in the Somme department sent a letter to their national leaderships yesterday (12 May) saying:

“We strongly deplore the absence of a national and unitary call in relation to this indispensable mobilisation. We consider this absence of any clear stance on demands and the means of achieving them as a form of desertion and isolation. We receive from our national leaders neither the support nor the calls or the perspectives necessary for our action.”



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