France: Strikes, mass demonstrations to oppose attacks on pensions

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More than a million workers struck on June 3 and took part in demonstrations throughout France. They were opposing proposed pension reforms involving the lengthening of the working life and reductions of income for retirees of 30 percent and more, proposed by the government of President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin.

The strike call was particularly well followed in Marseilles, with over 71 percent of primary school teachers taking action. The national figure for the education sector was just over 40 percent, less than the 59 percent that took part on May 13.

There were strikes in all areas of the public sector and the CGT trade union federation (Confédération Générale du Travail) reported a good response from the private sector. The 24-hour strike was called by the CGT (France's largest union confederation, traditionally linked to the Communist Party), Force Ouvrière (linked to the Socialist Party), UNSA (civil service union, with Socialist Party links), the FSU (the main teachers union federation) and the Group of 10 Sud confederation.

Many unions affiliated to the CFDT (linked to the right wing of the Socialist Party), whose leader François Chérèque has backed the government, also participated in the strike. On June 4, many thousands of workers had not returned to work and much of France's transport and education system is still disrupted.

This represents the fourth mass mobilisation organised by the unions this year against the severe reductions in pension rights that will be presented to parliament on June 10, and the tenth one-day strike called by the education unions. Throughout the year, however, the unions have stepped up their efforts to contain and break workers' opposition to the Chirac-Raffarin programme of attacks on social services by limiting mobilisations to one-day protests and an ineffectual perspective of pressurising the government.

Many thousands of education workers have been on continuous strikes for more than three weeks now against staff cuts, casualisation and the transfer of 110,000 non-teaching staff from the national education service to local government ("decentralisation" or "regionalisation"). The education unions have announced yet another one-day strike for June 10 and are considering disrupting the baccalauréat, the national school-leaving diploma and qualification for further education taken at age 18, whose written examinations start with 500,000 candidates sitting the philosophy paper on June 12.

The June 3 demonstration indicated how the trade union leaders have succeeded in sowing frustration amongst their members. While a significant mass mobilisation, it was well down from that of May 13—which saw some 4 million strikers and 2 million demonstrators—and was not the broad upsurge that many were hoping to become the start of a general strike against the government.

The CGT actively encouraged strikebreaking in the RATP Paris urban transport system, as workers sought to continue the May 13 strike indefinitely. Marc Blondel, leader of Force Ouvrière, has expressed repeated opposition to a general strike because it will make the strike political and called for all trade union protest to stop as soon as the pension proposals were put before the Council of Ministers on May 28. He has said he is against the government's pension reform, but not against the Raffarin government itself.

The Paris demonstration started from the Gare du Nord rail station, where demonstrators staged a sit-down in the street before moving off. Many leaflets of the *World Socialist Web Site* statement "A political strategy to defend workers' pensions in France" were distributed and read with interest. A team of WSWS supporters gave out 5,000 copies on the march.

Estimated at over 210,000, the protest was made up largely of teachers, but there were also contingents of Renault and EDF (Electricité de France, the state power company) workers. The largest union contingent was from the FSU teaching union, but Force Ouvrière, mainly representing public sector workers, was well in evidence. Lycée (high school) and university students were on the march in some numbers.

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At the back of the demonstration there were contingents marching behind the banners of the left radical groups Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Communist League) and Lutte Ouvrière (Workers' Fight) and also the French Communist Party.

The mood of the demonstration was very serious and teachers, many of whom have been on strike since the May 13 mass mobilisation and before in hundreds of schools throughout Paris, manifested a grim determination. A sports teacher said: "We shall have to continue, but this is a very right-wing government on the way to fascism. I'm not too hopeful." Several teachers said they were tired but did not want to give in now.

In Amiens an estimated 8,000 demonstrated, over half of whom were teachers—a large demonstration for this northern industrial town of 110,000 inhabitants but well down on the 20,000 of May 13.

The clear demand of the strikers and demonstrators is for the complete withdrawal of the pension reform, the staff cuts in education and the plan to decentralise education. But Bernard Thibault, leader of the CGT, had a conciliatory message for the government on the 8:00 p.m. news. He is not calling for the withdrawal of the pension reform and wants to negotiate on it. Emboldened by the union leaders' treachery, Raffarin declared, "Neither withdrawal, nor postponement, nor amendment."

Gérard Aschiéri, general secretary of the FSU, that same evening told Agence France Presse that the four education unions—the CGT, FO, UNSA and his own—were "ready to hold firm until the holidays and beyond" and denied any weakening of the struggle. Referring to the postponement of the decentralisation and the university reform, he asserted: "We've got a foot in the door, now we must push it open."

At 3:00 p.m. a mass meeting of 200 railwaymen met behind Amiens station in the SERNAM yard and voted to renew the strike with only two voting against. The union speakers reported 47 percent of the workforce on strike.

After the vote the WSWS spoke to Philippe, a researcher for the SNCF national railway company. He said, "I'm soon going to be retired myself. I've got three children, all of whom are now teachers. I'm on strike for them. I think, in order to win this, we're going to need a general strike. It might have to go as far as bringing the government down."

Asked what he would replace this government with, he replied, "This is a very difficult question. Well, it could only be a government of the left. But the left will need reforming."

A group of maintenance workers who had just voted to continue the strike spoke to the WSWS. Thierry said he was striking in opposition to the government's programme: "work longer and earn less".

Willy said, "The government is trying to split us all up."

Thierry added, "In 1995, the railwaymen led the struggle. If we don't mobilise now, they'll attack us when we are isolated. We've had letters from the CEO of the SNCF telling us that for the moment our pensions will not be changed. They just want to isolate us in order to pick us off more easily. We gave Juppé [Alain Juppé, prime minister at the time] a hard time, so this time they're not starting with us. Around 49 percent of the population was against Maastricht [treaty]. The policy of Brussels is to bring people down to the lowest level. We think pensions should be raised to the level of our pensions."

Willy said, "What Europe is doing is trying to compete with the United States by imitating and importing their social conditions. They went into the war against Iraq to assert their presence in the world. Europe, in coming into conflict with them, is imitating them."

Thierry added, "Look at the Enron disaster. In America you're only OK if you've got money. Here we've got a certain protection. What we still have here, we must fight to keep."

Willy pointed out: "Next thing they're after, in September, is sickness benefits and the health service. There has been talk of people abusing the National Health Service, so now the main drive is to economise. The reimbursement for many medicines has been reduced."

Thierry said, "We're going to have to be even more determined than in 1995. They've learnt their lessons. Raffarin is a better communicator than Juppé was. And Chirac feels stronger than he did in '95, with his 82 percent vote in the second round of the presidential election. [The first round of the presidential elections of 2002 left only a choice of two right-wing candidates: Chirac and the fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen. All the left parties and unions immediately called for a vote for Chirac and rejected the WSWS call for an active boycott.]

"We've seen what privatisation has done with the railways in Britain," Thierry added. "The system isn't perfect here. In France you may not be sure that a train will always arrive on time, but there you don't even know if the train will actually arrive."

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