

France: Millions join one-day strike against pension cuts

A WSWS reporting team
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French government workers, joined by sections of private-sector employees, disrupted or halted public transport, the postal service and other basic services in a massive one-day strike on June 10. The strike—the third such one-day labour mobilisation in the past month—was called to coincide with the opening of debate in the National Assembly on the government’s bill to slash pension benefits for millions of workers.

The measure would require government employees to work 40 years before retirement, rather than the 37.5 years required now. This would be further extended after 2009 to 42 years. The impact on pension benefits is estimated to be a reduction of 30 percent or more.

Tuesday’s action was called by all of the main trade union federations with the exception of the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour), which has signed onto the pension “reform” drafted by the right-centre government of President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin. The CFDT is traditionally linked to the right wing of the Socialist Party. The CGT (General Confederation of Labour), which has long-standing ties to the Communist Party, and the FO (Workers’ Power), which has links with the Socialist Party, are officially opposing the government measure.

Postal workers, rail workers, state bank employees, telecommunications operators, nurses, teachers, gas and electricity workers, and employees in justice, defence and customs offices joined in the nationwide strike. Police officers also participated.

Traffic in Paris was virtually paralysed, and traffic jams stretched for miles outside of the capital due to the crippling impact of the strike on public transport. Urban transport was disrupted in many other towns and cities as well, including Marseilles, where the shutdown was near total. Internal air transportation was much reduced.

In numerous towns, rubbish had not been collected for several days. Many newspapers did not appear, and some radio and TV stations were disrupted.

Well over 30 percent of teachers in primary and secondary schools participated in the strike. Education employees are very much at the forefront of the strike movement, as they are also fighting staff cuts and plans to transfer 110,000 non-teaching staff from the national public education service to local government jurisdiction. Thousands of teachers, joined by railwaymen and other sections of workers, have been on continuous strike for a month, and some since early March.

An estimated 200,000 people demonstrated in both Paris and Marseilles, although police and union estimates vary widely. Some 50 towns had demonstrations of more than 5,000 people, with as many as 50,000 in Toulouse, Clermont-Ferrand, Grenoble, Montpellier and Rouen; 8,000 rallied in Amiens.

The huge Paris demonstration went from the Place de la Bastille to the Place de la Concorde and comprised all age groups, from school and university students to a wide range of adult workers from the public and private sectors. The largest contingents were teachers, but many workers from the tax offices, the EDF-GDF (public electricity and gas sector) and other departments were in evidence. Large groups marched with the banners and flags of the FSU (the main education federation), the CGT and other unions.

Despite the disruption caused by the strikes, the government workers have broad support in the general population. A poll published June 7 by *Le Figaro* reported that 66 percent of respondents supported or sympathised with the strikers.

While officially supporting the strike movement, the

CGT and FO leadership have been working assiduously to limit its scope and head off a more generalised mobilisation that would pose a direct political challenge to the Chirac-Raffarin government. The centre-right coalition has a large majority of deputies in the National Assembly, and Prime Minister Raffarin has repeatedly declared that he intends to push the pension bill through.

Nevertheless, the line of the unions is that the opposition movement is not “political” and has no desire to bring down the government. Its aim, according to union officials, is merely to pressure the government to either drop its pension “reform” or amend it.

The political parties of the “plural left” parliamentary opposition, led by the Socialist Party and the Communist Party, have kept their distance from the movement of strikes and protests. Leading figures in the Socialist Party, including former Prime Minister Michel Rocard, have openly come out in support of the government bill.

A key event on Tuesday was a meeting of ministers involved in education and the education unions, called to preempt any disruption of the baccalaureate examinations, which secondary students must pass in order to study in France’s universities. More than 600,000 students were slated to begin the exams on June 12 with written tests in philosophy. Many striking teachers hoped to disrupt the exams in order to increase the pressure on the government.

At a June 10 meeting of some 400 education strikers from the Somme department, which includes Amiens, the main discussion concerned the most effective means of organising pickets of the baccalaureate examination centres and preventing the exams from going ahead. A statement posted on the web site of the main union of teachers in secondary education, the SNES, which is the largest union in the FSU, provoked a great deal of anger. The union statement repudiated an article in *Le Monde* reporting that the SNES planned to call a strike on June 12.

The outcome of the June 10 meeting between the education ministers and unions was a *quid pro quo*, in which the minister of the interior, responsible for local government, agreed to let 20,000 school doctors, psychiatrists and social workers remain in the education service in return for a public statement from the unions

guaranteeing there would be no disruption of the baccalaureate exams.

The statement declared: “Concerned for the interests of the young people, the trade union organisations reaffirm their opposition to any form of boycott, obstruction or action of any kind to disrupt the examinations.” For his part, Education Minister Luc Ferry reaffirmed the government’s intention to shift tens of thousands of education workers out of the national education service, saying, “In no way have any of the reform plans been withdrawn.”

Teams of WSWs supporters at the Paris and Amiens demonstrations handed out thousands of updated versions of the May 24 *World Socialist Web Site* statement, “A political strategy for the defence of workers’ pensions in France.”

(Editor’s note: Over the next several days the WSWs will post interviews with strikers who participated in the Paris and Amiens demonstrations.)



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