

French protesters speak out on pension cuts

A WSWWS reporting team
14 June 2003

Millions of French government workers, joined by private-sector employees, participated in a one-day strike June 10 to protest a government bill to cut pension benefits for millions of workers.

Postal workers, rail workers, state bank employees, telecommunications operators, nurses, teachers, utility workers, and public-sector employees joined in the nationwide strike, which disrupted public transport, postal and other basic services.

The proposed measure, being debated in the National Assembly, would require government employees to work 40 years—instead of the currently required 37.5 years—before retirement, to be extended to 42 years after 2009. The potential impact on pension benefits is estimated to be a 30 percent reduction or more.

Although estimates vary, some 200,000 people turned out for the protests in both Paris and Marseilles. As many as 50,000 demonstrated in Toulouse, Clermont-Ferrand, Grenoble, Montpellier and Rouen and 8,000 rallied in Amiens. [See “France: Millions join one-day strike against pension cuts”]. The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to protesters in Paris and Amiens.

Demonstrators expressed a loss of confidence in the trade unions and uncertainty as to the outcome of the strike. Many felt it would be difficult to make the government yield and spoke of the need for a general strike.

Nadia Saiye, a primary school teacher, said, “I’m a teacher and I agree entirely with this strike. I think the public sector is very important. I also think there are ways of obliging ‘the upper orders’ to make a greater contribution than ‘the lower orders.’ For the last 10 years, wages have counted much less than the bosses’ profits.

“So I understand what this strike is all about and I support it. I hope this movement will develop worldwide because there is also a danger for the Third World. It’s this pyramid-shaped structure: the big ones at the top eat those at the bottom.”

While Nadia expressed scepticism that the government

would listen to the people who had taken to the streets, she said, “But we have to carry on the struggle, otherwise it’ll be primitive capitalism; they will destroy all social rights. It will be global slavery. I don’t mind if we lose and I’m determined to fight on.”

Asked why there had not been a call for an unlimited strike, she responded, “Because the unions are not honest. I think that my union does not do what it should to turn this strike into an unlimited and general strike. I think the unions keep people in check.

“The aim is for people who do not work in the public sector to understand what is at stake. As far as I’m concerned, as long as we carry on, the movement can spread, catch on. People are beginning to think. We have to resist, that’s all we’ve got.

“Those who have intelligent solutions to propose are the intellectuals and sociologists writing in *Le Monde Diplomatique*. I’m not sure they’ll get a hearing. Honestly, I don’t think the unions will defend us properly. For example, Marc Blondel [general secretary of the CGT-FO (Confédération générale du travail/Force Ouvrière—General Labor Federation/Workers Power)] did not call for an unlimited general strike—there’s something wrong here. I have been on strike since April 25, four weeks. They just don’t care about us up there.”

Commenting on the differences between today’s demonstrations and the mass strikes of 1995, Nadia said, “It’s the same thing. We in the public sector can strike. The problem for the private sector is that they could not defend themselves. I hope this movement will bring the private sector down to 37.5 annuities like us.”

The 2002 French presidential elections produced a second-round runoff between two right-wing candidates: Chirac and the fascist Jean-Marie Le Pen. All the left parties and the trade unions worked for a vote for Chirac, refusing to mount a campaign for a boycott. Expressing her opinion on this topic, Nadia said:

“I think we should not have voted Chirac. We should have cast a blank vote and cancelled the elections. Here we can see the trap of democracy. It’s not transparent

enough. I think that today this government believes they can do anything they want, although only a minority really voted for them. Everybody wanted to save the Republic and nothing more.

“Indeed, the whole system, left and right, complies with the same marching orders and the marching orders of the OECD (Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development). If we don’t keep them under check, soon it won’t make a difference if left or right are in. We’ll have the IMF and the World Bank and the OECD in charge.

The WSWs spoke to Jean-Pierre Ducos, who also participated in the Paris demonstration. He commented on the policies of Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, “The government obtained 82 percent because there was Le Pen. When Raffarin says that the street does not rule, he should not forget that the street brought him where he is. So, in relation to this, there should be a little bit more modesty and things should be put into perspective. The street may not rule, but nevertheless people vote. So people have their say.

“People say we need reforms. The problem is that the reforms put forward by the government are not necessarily the right ones. So people have to be listened to and things have to fall into place. The problem is that those who take all decisions are the ‘upper orders,’ the politicians. They are out of touch with the public. They don’t even know the price of a loaf of bread. Just look at [former Gaullist prime minister Alain] Juppé. He got his retirement—and got it at 55! Some things don’t make sense.”

In Amiens, the WSWs interviewed three young English teachers from an Amiens lycée—Véronique, Juliette and Frédérique—who had been on strike for a month. They had just come out of a mass meeting of education workers.

Asked why they were on strike, they said they wanted to defend education, fight against the deterioration of working conditions, and stop the transfer of staff out of the national education service. Frédérique added that she was opposed to the growing tendency for curriculum content to diminish and be replaced by skills, and that head teachers were becoming more and more like managers.

Véronique emphasized the increasing workload. “We haven’t won anything yet,” she said. “What we have gained is a sense of solidarity and many discussions.”

Frédérique continued: “My eyes have really been opened about the media. They manipulate the news, they twist it, they omit information. For example, they

concentrate on the non-strikers and the ‘good strikers,’ in other words, the ones who act in order to create as little disturbance as possible, such as making sure the baccalauréat goes ahead. They’re always saying that the strike is dying out.”

Speaking on the role of the trade unions, Véronique said: “They started by encouraging people to protest, but now they’re holding things back. They’re too timid when it comes to putting forward our demands and organising the action.”

Juliette added: “They’ve left it to the rank-and-file to mobilise, so as not to make a bad impression on the general public.”

Asked if they thought it was possible to win this struggle with the Chirac-Raffarin government still in power, Juliette said, “I don’t think so. I hope they’ve just been bluffing right from the start, but I’m dubious.”

Commenting on the Chirac-Raffarin government, Frédérique said, “At first I was quite pleased to see new faces in government. Raffarin seemed to be an open-minded person. A year later, we can raise the question of his resignation.”

Véronique interjected: “I was never pleased because I knew he could not be good for us, being a right-winger. I think we might be able to make the government back down.”

“I think there are a lot of people in the left parties who are in agreement with this government,” Juliette said. Frédérique added: “Nobody speaks for us.”

Juliette continued: “What worries me is that France is just one small nation and the problems we’re confronted with are global. If the government backs down now, they’ll only come back at us later. We’re a small country; we can’t take on these problems alone.”

Véronique added: “The movement will have to broaden at least to a European scale. There, it’s worse even than here.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact