

French workers speak out against social welfare cuts

A reporting team
20 October 2007

Hundreds of thousands of French workers and others marched in protest October 18 against the attack by the government of right-winger Nicolas Sarkozy on public workers' retirement benefits, part of a massive assault on social rights and living conditions. A WSWS reporting team interviewed demonstrators in Paris.

Jamel works at the Suez energy company:

“The special regime retirement pensions of workers is what makes me want to fight back. The government wants us to go from 37.5 years of salary contributions to 41, then 42 years. These are our social rights that the government wants to wipe out. Afterwards it will be the ‘minimum service’ for transport, that is, the right to strike, that they want to eliminate.

“If people wake up, the government can be forced to retreat. On the CPE [First Job Contract] struggle in 2006 they retreated because people mobilized massively.

“The money due to the retired people, the old and sick must not be touched. Just look at the tax reductions for the bosses. That is where the money should be taken. The Socialist Party and President [Nicolas] Sarkozy are the same thing. It is the same policy.”

Alain, a teacher:

“What makes me want to fight back is the inequality. Perhaps the government will retreat. People must unite for different motives. Five months after taking office the government put homeless people onto the streets. People are not against reforms, but they don't want just anything.

“The economy can be made competitive without reducing the standard of living of people. But the government prefers shareholders to workers' salaries. Competitiveness is all right, it encourages progress, but it must be fair competition. The rules are not the same for all countries. It's a jungle.

“All wars have always shown us that it is the weak who pay the price, never the leaders, they are the ones who profit.”

Carl, a railway worker:

“I am against the policy of Sarkozy. This is the smashing of all social gains since the Second World War. Why are ordinary people always asked to make sacrifices while companies are filling their coffers? Competition, fine, but a human competition. We can't talk of competition with countries like China. Just look at how people live there. We must not be systematically against big companies, we need a social policy for the big companies.

“A party which unifies workers' parties of all countries, that I agree with. We have hoped for this for years. Its construction is difficult. But we have to be united in the same struggle.”

An unemployed worker:

“The reason why I have decided to fight back is the capitalist free market policy. We are going straight to rack and ruin. In order to make this government retreat, we need an indefinite general strike. It worked in 1995, we need the same now.”

Juan Aliart, a railway worker interviewed at Paris' Gare du Nord on Friday morning:

“Management is saying that workers are going back to work. There are on-going discussions about continuing the strike at mass meetings. Already two maintenance workshops for the TGV, Thalys and Eurostar [high-speed trains] have voted to continue the strike. The Moulin Neuf workshop too.

“The drivers and the ticket inspectors are discussing in mass meetings. We'll know their decisions at midday. A lot of drivers in the FGAAC [*Fédération générale autonome des agents de conduite*—the independent train drivers union, which has accepted a compromise deal with the government] do not agree with the document signed by their union, nor with their call to end the strike. They are bawling each other out right now. They are going to have to work until 55. Their complementary pension is

going to be based on investment. They've sent their Gare du Nord representative to have it out with the national leadership.

“Here the rank-and-file CGT [*Confédération Générale du Travail*—Communist Party-led union federation] members have voted to continue the strike in the workplaces, the ticket office staff and others: there's a split between the bureaucracy of the CGT and the FGAAC and their membership. They are in a real rebellion.

“We are afraid that the government will negotiate with [CGT General Secretary Bernard] Thibault and that the bureaucracy will try to get out of the crisis with a few minimal concessions. If it goes wrong, then there will be no more confidence in the trade unions and the CGT. The government has got the FGAAC, and now the CGT is going to give itself some pretexts to slow down the struggle even more than they are doing now.

A WSWS reporter asked why Juan thinks the CGT is doing that. He gave three reasons:

“First, the leadership of the CGT is like that of the CFDT [*Confédération Démocratique du Travail*—Socialist Party-allied union federation]. I was in it in 1995. It lined up with Juppé [Alain Juppé, the then Gaullist prime minister] and then dodged out of the fight. That's what led to the creation of the SUD trade union.

“Second, there are a lot of murky things, the question of the Medef [employers federation] slush fund, supposed to finance the unions. The CGT has an enormous costly apparatus and needs a lot of money to keep it going.

“Third, the CGT wants to get in on the joint management bodies such as the UNEDIC and ASSEDIC [joint employer-union funds to distribute unemployment benefits].”

Juan told the WSWS that teams of strikers spent the night in the workshops to prevent management surreptitiously getting them back to work.



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