

France: 1.5 million strike against Sarkozy's policies

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Some 1.5 million out of a total of 5 million public service workers participated in a one-day strike called by the French unions on Tuesday to oppose President Nicolas Sarkozy's policies of job cuts and attacks on public services, and to demand higher wages to compensate for sharp rises in living costs.

Participation by teachers in the strike, over 60 percent, was especially high and reflected widespread anger at the government's plans to axe 11,200 teaching jobs next year alone.

Some 700,000 public service workers participated in demonstrations all over the country. They were joined by large numbers of university and high school students who are opposing a regressive university law, and by rail and local transport workers, who have been on strike for seven days in defense of their pensions.

The biggest demonstration, involving some 70,000 marchers, took place in Paris. About 35,000 demonstrated in Marseilles and the same number in Toulouse, while 20,000 marched in Lille and 10,000 in Grenoble.

The demonstration in Paris graphically reflected the extent of the popular opposition to Sarkozy and his policies. Despite the cold and drizzle, tens of thousands assembled in the Place d'Italie and remained for hours. The demonstration stretched over several kilometers. The tail of the march set out a full three hours after the head of the procession.

Virtually all types of public service workers took part in the protest: nurses, teachers, local council workers, police and many others. Some air traffic controllers also joined the strike, leading to delays in air travel.

Slogans and banners directed against President Sarkozy could be seen everywhere. A group of nurses from the hospital Simone Veil in the Oise valley chanted: "Sarko, resign! Our strength lies in unity."

World Socialist Web Site the that her fellow nurses had received no increase in wages for seven years. The take-home pay of a nurse at the peak of her career was around €1,700 per month, and the pension was €1,100.

When asked if she thought the president would back down, she said, "I hope so, but Sarkozy is firm, he doesn't concede so easily." She doubted if things would be much better if the candidate of the Socialist Party, Ségolène Royal, had won the presidential election held last spring.

Large contingents of striking railway men and employees of the Paris Metro were present at the Paris demonstration. Participation in the rail strike was higher on Tuesday than the day before.

When asked how he thought the dispute should proceed, Silvain, who works in rail maintenance in Choisy-le-Roi, answered, "Stay out until the government backs down."

Silvain had mixed feelings about the tri-party talks between the trade unions, management and the government planned for Wednesday. "When it comes to a deal, that would not be bad," he said. But he stressed there could be no concessions by the unions on the government's demand to increase the work years required to receive a full pension beyond the current 37.5. The government wants to impose a minimum of 40 years.

A delegation of workers from the Renault auto factory in Flins also took part in the demonstration. They were there to show their solidarity, they said. "If the special pensions for the railway workers are done away with, we will be the next to suffer," one said. "Then the work years will be increased to 41 or 42 years."

Prominent at the demonstration were large numbers

of high school students. Many of France's universities have been closed or blockaded by student action for the past two weeks, but the students' campaign against the government's education law has only recently spread to lycées, or high schools. Many high school students came to the demonstration to express their solidarity with the striking railway workers.

The WSWS spoke with Isabel, Barbara, Anna und Elie from the lycée Gustave Monod in Enghien-les-bains. They all spoke in angry terms of Sarkozy. "He plays off people against one another, defends the interests of the bosses, awakes the most obnoxious instincts in people and only makes thing worse," were some of their comments. "He has only the interests of Medef (French Employer's Federation) in mind," one added.

They all hoped the rail strike would continue and were dismissive when asked about the Socialist Party: "They are not at all active and just argue amongst themselves instead. They are not really any form of opposition party."

The stance taken by the trade unions is in stark contrast to the determination of those who took part in the demonstrations.

The leader of the Socialist Party-oriented CFDT (French Democratic Labor Confederation), François Chérèque, has ridiculed the fight of the railway workers. On Monday he attacked them on television for "thinking that they could continue to work for 37.5 years when everyone well knows that 40 years is ineluctable in our country." His union has called for an end to the strike.

Chérèque, who was marching at the head of the Paris demonstration, was hissed and booed and finally had to flee the march.

The general secretary of the trade union UNSA (National Union of Autonomous Syndicates) also attacked the railway workers. He told Radio BFM that the rail workers' movement "was legitimate, but served to exclude all other demands."

The demands of state employees for an increase in purchasing power, he said, remained "unheard because there is a very powerful movement for the defense of special pensions in the sphere of transport."

On Wednesday, all six of the unions with representation amongst railway workers are due to meet representatives of the government and the railway

management for negotiations. Up for discussion is not the "reform" proposals of the government—an increase in the retirement age, increased deductions for those taking early retirement, indexing pensions to price increases instead of wage increases—but possible financial compensation to sweeten the pill of the pension cuts. The railway management has indicated it is prepared to concede, among other things, a small increase in income for older workers.

The danger is that the unions will present such token payments as a concession and use them to break off and sell out the strike. This would represent a victory for Sarkozy, which he would exploit to take on other sections of the working class.

Following a period of silence after the beginning of the rail strike, Sarkozy used a congress of mayors on Tuesday to reaffirm his position. He claimed to speak on behalf of the "millions of French people who return home exhausted after a workday without buses, Metro or trains, and have the justified feeling that they are being held hostage." He declared, "I remain determined to carry this out to the end. The reform will be implemented. Nobody should have any doubts about it."

Despite the clear danger of the unions betraying the strike and handing Sarkozy a much needed victory, there was little political discussion on the demonstrations. None of the political parties, including the parties of the "radical left" such as Lutte Ouvrière (Workers Struggle) and Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Communist League), made any public appearance or sold their newspapers. Instead, their members concealed their party affiliation and marched as ordinary trade union members.

There was, on the other hand, considerable interest in the statement of the WSWS with the title "French workers need a new political strategy," which was distributed in Paris and other cities and warned of the danger of a sellout by the unions.

The WSWS will feature further reports and interviews from Tuesday's demonstrations tomorrow.



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