

French workers' protests say 'No!' to pension reform

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Massive strikes and protests took place May 22 throughout France against the government's decision to increase workers' contributions from 40 to 41 years for a full pension. The effect will be a sharp fall in retirees' incomes. The minimum state pension at present is €628 euros a month per person (€1,127 for a couple).

The CGT (General Confederation of Labour) announced 700,000 protesters demonstrated in 153 cities and towns across France (the police estimated 300,000). In Paris 70,000 workers, youth and undocumented immigrant workers protested to oppose the government's plans to lengthen, in practice, the working life. In Nantes 25,000 marched to defend pensions; 12,000 turned out in Lyon and 25,000 in Bordeaux. Marseille saw one of the biggest protests, with 60,000 mobilised to protest the pensions reform and to fight against privatisation of the port facilities.

Although the unions issued strike notices, they did not call outright for strike action on the day. Despite this, many sectors of the economy were hit by stoppages and walkouts to join the demonstrations.

One in two trains were cancelled on the SNCF national railways, with 24.9 percent of workers coming out on strike. Strike support was 11.33 percent among postal workers, 19.5 percent at France Télécom, 20.8 percent at EDF electricity, and 16.2 percent among gas workers. Local government, hospital and state employees registered 8 percent participation.

Only 7.5 percent of teachers took part, compared to 34 percent who had participated in the May 15 protest over job cuts. This followed a deliberate move on the part of the unions to separate the issues of jobs and pensions in order to keep control of the movement and prevent it from politically challenging the government's right to destroy social gains.

Support in the general public for the action to defend pensions was reflected in the latest opinion poll by CSA, which showed 58 percent in favour of the action with 24 percent opposed.

The response of workers this week was greater than the first pension protests in 2003, when 500,000 took part. That

movement was consciously betrayed by the CGT, CFDT (French Democratic Federation of Labour) and FSU (United Federation of Unitary Unions, representing workers in the education sector), which agreed to accept an increase in contributions for pensions for state employees from 37.5 to 40 years. This was a major regression, bringing public sector workers in line those in the private sector.

A WSWWS reporting team in Paris observed a large spontaneous participation on the demonstration and great anger against the government's social cuts. Participating were students, railway workers, many teachers and hospital workers as well as important contingents of *sans papiers* (undocumented workers). A contingent of those occupying the CGT building in the 3rd arrondissement, demanding that the union take up their applications for residency rights, received much support. Many people signed their petition and donated money.

After the May 22 mobilisation, the unions announced no follow-up action but relied on the good will of the government to change its policy. The CGT said, "The ball is now in the government's court." Force Ouvrière (Workers Force) General Secretary Jean-Claude Mailly insisted the government would be guilty of "denial of democracy" if it did not listen to the protest. CFDT union leader Francois Chérèque said, "The day's demonstration is a success. After a relationship of forces of this type, the government will be obliged to receive us and we will put our proposals on the table."

However, Minister of Labour Xavier Bertrand immediately made known the government's intransigence on the 41 years' contributions. The project, he said, was "balanced" and the role of the government "was not to count numbers of protestors but to protect the pensions of all the French." Bertrand declared: "We agree with the social partners [employers and unions] and unions in saying that the heart of the problem, the priority of priorities, is the employment of older workers, how to keep older workers employed by companies."

In effect, the unions have been in constant negotiations

with President Nicolas Sarkozy's government on how to get the pension changes accepted by workers in exchange for an agreement by employers to keep older workers on the payroll. Currently, 38.1 percent of workers between 55 and 64 stay on the job. The EU aims to bring this figure up to 50 percent in Europe by 2010.

Another concession the minister of labour is prepared to 'negotiate' to get union approval for the 41 years is a rise of 25 percent in the minimum pension over five years, and an increase from 54 to 60 percent in a deceased person's pension transferred to the surviving spouse.

The leader of the employers' organisation MEDEF, Laurence Parisot, indicated where big business thought the government should be going. In a speech on the day of the protests she angered many workers by calling for the legal age of retirement to be increased to 63.5 years from the present 60. This was the "only scenario" in conjunction with the 41 years contributions that would permit the financing of pensions, she claimed. The unions adhered to this principle in 2003 when abandoning the defence of 37.5 years contributions for state employees and preparing the dismantling of the special pension scheme defended by the strike of rail workers last year and betrayed by the unions.

While the trade unions continue to collaborate on a weekly basis with Sarkozy's government in order to calculate how to manage the anger and frustration building in the population over jobs, education and purchasing power, many are questioning the way forward. Jacky Wagner, a local CGT representative in Strasbourg, noted: "I am satisfied that we said we would be stronger than the last mobilisation, and we were.... But I think it will be necessary to come back again and again, because Sarkozy doesn't seem to be listening to what the street is saying. Workers have just had enough in general, we see work stoppages nearly every day in the region."

The WSWS interviewed demonstrators on the Paris protest.

Stephan, 22, has been working at the SNCF since September. He said that more and more work was being imposed on workers and that the conditions of work were declining. "We are going to have to fight to defend what our grandparents fought for. That's why there are a lot of people in the street. We want 37.5 annuities for a full pension for everybody. Economists say that this is possible. If all the unions get together, I think we can make the government back down.

"During the 10 days of strike last year," he went on, "we were really motivated. Now they want us to back down but we don't intend to. We're not here to bring down the government. We must convince the government that we're not milch cows. Across Europe we're trying to get a

common front. There has been a common European demonstration with the CGT and other unions. Youth must mobilize. They should see the situation for the homeless and the *sans papiers*. It gives you a real shock. The unions are here to defend them. At the moment, I don't think there is any party for us. There is no real left candidate that has emerged. They haven't got any programme."

Jean, 54, works for the SNCF in Seine-Saint-Denis. He will soon be retiring. He told the WSWS that things are getting worse and worse and all rights are being taken away. "We must all keep together. The 2007 strike was a flop; I'm very disappointed. The trade unions didn't take notice of the demands coming from the rank and file. We're not out to bring down the government, but it's certain that 24-hour strikes are not enough. Sarkozy is acting like governments all over the world. All rights are being taken away in the name of globalization. We're being taken back to zero where there are no rights, like the Stone Age. Sarkozy is copying Thatcher and the United States: these things are not only happening in France."

Jean added: "A tiny percentage of people impose their law and the wealth is not redistributed. France sends boats and interferes with people in other countries. The future for the young is very grave. The high school kids and people in general are afraid for their future. We need to put all our ideas together, to work out a programme to go forward together. We shouldn't gather behind flags. We should get rid of the Maastricht Treaty. It's very dangerous, it means shutting schools in order to make profits. The left and right parties should get together."

Danièle, 59, also works in Seine-Saint-Denis. "Our rights are going down the chute and we're only at the beginning of it," she said. "People must get together, especially those who are in difficulty. What does it mean to win? I can't say. I'm thinking of the Palestinians and people in Gaza. The future is in the struggle, the struggle of all the oppressed."



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