

Two million protest in France against government austerity policies

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As many as two million people, according to trade union estimates, took to the streets in 200 towns and cities on Thursday in France's day of action in defence of pensions. The numbers considerably surpassed the one million mobilized on May 27, reflecting rising popular resistance to the austerity programmes being imposed at the behest of the banks in France and by governments all over Europe.

The protests, however, called by the trade unions, were designed to contain and dissipate this mass opposition. In this, the unions are supported by the bourgeois left Socialist Party (PS), the Communist Party (PCF), the Left Party of Jean-Luc Mélenchon (PG) and the ex-radical New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) of Olivier Besancenot.

The pension cuts are part of measures required by the European Commission to reduce France's budget deficit of 8 percent of gross national product to 3 percent of GDP by 2013, which will involve €100 billion in cuts. Sarkozy aims to raise the pension age from 60 to 63.

However, on the day of the protest *Le Monde* published an interview with Socialist Party deputy Didier Migaud, who chairs the Court of Accounts, the fiscal watchdog. He presented the body's latest report on the state of the country's finances, which stresses that €100 billion will not be enough. Migaud is a member of the national secretariat of the PS as an adviser on finance and fiscal policy to Martine Aubry, the first secretary of the party.

He urged: "It's necessary to act on all parameters, age, pay-in period, level of pensions, cost of contributions and the fund base. ... But pensions are not the only issue. We have to scrutinise social funding globally. "

In this Migaud is fully in line with the IMF director general and PS heavyweight Dominique Strauss-Kahn, who is the frontrunner for the nomination as PS candidate in the 2012 presidential elections. Strauss-Kahn has been instrumental in imposing the Greek austerity programme, among others, which have cut wages and pensions by up to half.

The Socialist Party, despite Martine Aubry's pledge in January to collaborate with the government in reducing the budget deficit and public debt though austerity plans and raising the age of retirement by two to three years, now promises to repeal such legislation if elected. The fraudulent nature of such a promise was demonstrated by the

party's vote for France's participation in the €110 billion bailout of Greece, with draconian austerity measures to be carried out by Prime Minister George Papandreou's PASOK government.

The aim of the organisers of the French day of action was to channel the rising popular discontent behind the Socialist Party and the parliamentary timetable. This comes at a time when the working class is losing confidence in the unions and the traditional left and seeks to break from their dominance and consider the general strike. The organizers direct this policy in preparation for a "left" government in 2012 to carry out the austerity programme dictated by the banks.

The NPA appeal for participation in the day of action, published on its site June 24, fully supports this perspective and its hope to be part of such a government—"to build for a general strike" with the unions and the left "to maintain and increase a climate of general mobilisation so as to be ready for the parliamentary debate which will begin on September 7."

Some 130,000 demonstrated on Thursday in Paris (43,000 according to the police), while estimates of participation in Bordeaux ranged from 25,000 to 80,000; 16,000-130,000 demonstrated in Marseille. The figures were up in virtually every city from May 27.

The rate of participation in strikes was also significantly higher than May 27. Official figures, traditionally conservative, gave 19.35 percent of state civil servants on strike (up from 11.6 percent on May 27), local government workers 15.9 percent (up from 7.5 percent), hospitals 12.5 percent (up from 8.3 percent), and education 18 percent (up from 12-16 percent). This suggests that well over a million government workers struck, under the threat of increased pension contributions, reduced pensions, a longer working life, a pay freeze until 2013 and the loss of 32,000 jobs per year.

The state railway company SNCF announced that nearly 40 percent of its employees participated in the action. The Swiss national railway firm SBB stated that up to 60 percent of trains between France and Switzerland were cancelled as a result of the stoppage.

A strike by air traffic controllers resulted in 15 percent of flights being cancelled between 7 a.m. and 2 p.m. at Paris's main international hub, Charles de Gaulle airport, and at Orly, its other main airport.

Workers employed at the postal service, gas and electricity providers, some hospitals, power workers as well as private firms, including plane manufacturer Airbus, also participated in the action.

The power workers' stoppage resulted in a 7,000 megawatt cut in power capacity by midday. EDF, the state energy company, said 16 percent of its workforce joined the action.

Newspaper production was halted as print workers supported the action. As a result, Friday editions of *Le Monde*, *Liberation* and other dailies were affected. Employees also struck at the state-owned France Inter and France Info radio services.

Bernard Thibault, general secretary of the CGT (General Confederation of Labour, France's largest union confederation), asserted that the success of the mobilisation meant that "The present bill reforming pensions must not be submitted to the cabinet on July 13." A CGT statement called for the "opening of a real cycle of negotiations with the unions."

Minister of Labour Eric Woerth told the press: "It was quite a strong mobilisation ... of course it in no way changes the will of the government to save the pension system and notably to do so by raising the legal age of retirement."

WSWS teams covered demonstrations in several cities and distributed the WSWS statement For revolutionary socialist opposition to Sarkozy's austerity.

The Paris demonstration was largely dominated by delegations bearing the banners and flags of the Socialist Party-aligned CFDT and Communist Party-aligned CGT unions and participants were largely middle-aged. As with reports from other cities, it was virtually impossible to find any demonstrators who believed that the spaced-out mobilisations being organised by the unions would protect them from austerity. There were few political parties of the left in view, and despite the NPA's occasional references to a general strike on its site, the party issued no leaflet and had no placards or banners calling for one.

John Recayte, a public sector worker at the tax office, said, "The left is badly organised and the PS and the PCF are in great difficulty." He added that the "the revolutionary project has lost much of its credibility since the fall of the Berlin wall."

Mme. Offredo Marypol, 58, has been unemployed for three years, though she has a state diploma as a teacher of children with learning difficulties: "I've got three handicaps: I'm old, I command a high salary and I have a lot of experience." She said government legislation obliging employers to take on older workers, "the senior contract", was useless: "The boss prefers to pay a fine rather than to employ a senior," she said. With the reform of pensions she would have to wait another four years to have a pension.

Lionel teaches French at a Paris secondary school. "I'll be on strike from after the holidays in September," he said. "Of course I agree with a general strike, I hope it continues until a general strike."

Paul, 71, opposed the pauperisation of the population. "We absolutely need an international party, independent of the unions. Capital works at an international level and the trade unions just react at a national level. It doesn't work."

Some 10,000 demonstrated in Nice, in the south of France, with delegations from the unions and "left" parties. These forces distributed no serious political leaflets, providing only statistics and attacking Sarkozy and explaining nothing about the situation in other European countries or internationally.

Demonstrators told the WSWS that they were angry with Sarkozy and agreed with a European-wide strike and unity with all other countries' workers, but did not know how to proceed to do this.

None expressed any confidence in the Socialist Party or the unions. They wanted to continue the strike to put pressure on the government and expressed fear for the future of their children.

In Tours, in central France, demonstrators told the WSWS that, though the demonstration was large, the unions had no policy. They were disappointed that there was no rally at the conclusion of the march and that people just dispersed with no perspective. One woman commented, "The unions have no answer. I'm bitter; this is nothing. These days of action are pure protest, nothing else."

Some 6,000 demonstrated in Amiens. Hakim, a CGT shop steward, and Sylvie, Chrystelle and Mario, public sector workers from the CROUS service looking after the social needs of students, said that it was always the workers who were paying for the crisis. Sylvie and Chrystelle, both canteen workers, complained that their conditions of work gave them a painful skeletal muscular disorder.

Reacting to the statement of Jean-Claude Trichet, president of the European Central Bank, that the economic and political situation was the worst since 1939 or even 1914, Hakim was dubious that the trade unions or pressure from the streets could provide a solution for the working class.

Delphine, an entertainment industry worker, said, "What we are going through is very violent."

Referring to the recent sacking of two France Inter political satirists by their Sarkozy-appointed boss, she said, "They want to force us to be silent. The government wants to crush all critical voices. We need to build up forces that can fight this."

Patrick, a teacher at a vocational college, and his son Maxim, studying science in his second year of the high school, were protesting against pensions being pushed back to age 62. Patrick said, "I'm fed up with everything in general: job cuts, large classes, salaries decreasing—they think we're idiots. This situation cannot be changed by the present actions and organizations. Perhaps not by a revolution, but by something tougher than this."

"I agree that all public enterprises should be nationalized—it's the only solution. But you need honest people. The world cannot be allowed to exist as it is anymore."

Maxime agreed: "It's very hard to live in such a world."



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