

# French day of action: Millions march against pension cuts

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Between 1 and 3 million people—the upper figure provided by the trade unions, the lower by police—demonstrated on Thursday in 232 French towns and cities against President Nicolas Sarkozy’s pension cuts.

The cuts will increase the legal retirement age from 60 to 62, and increase from 65 to 67 the age at which retirees can claim their pension without paying a penalty (*décote*). This was the second mass mobilisation this month on the issue.

According to *La Croix*’s estimates, the pension “reform” will allow the government to claw back €4 billion annually from working people.

Both days of action this month were the largest so far against Sarkozy’s pension cuts, surpassing by 40 percent the previous record turnout last June. On Thursday, according to the unions, 55 percent of primary school teachers and 45 percent of secondary teachers walked out, as did 50 percent of railway workers. According to official figures, 20 percent of France’s 5 million government workers went on strike at hospitals, local government services, education and other government departments.

The marches reflected rising opposition to Sarkozy’s policies. Polls registered 68 percent support for the protests in the general population, rising to 80 percent for the 18-to-24 age group. *Libération* quotes a poll that finds that 45 percent of French people are “revolted” by the economic and social state of the country, with only 18 percent feeling “confident” in the present situation and only 29 percent supporting Sarkozy.

There is rising anger not only against Sarkozy’s austerity measures, but also against his policy of persecuting Muslims and deporting Roma.

The unions estimated that 300,000 marched in Paris and 220,000 in Marseille. There were hundreds of other demonstrations in smaller cities—including 35,000 in Nice, in southern France, and 10,000 in the northern town of Amiens.

The day of action, like the previous ones, was called by the Stalinist-linked CGT (General Confederation of Labour) and the Socialist Party-linked CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour). It was supported by the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the Greens, and the New Anti-Capitalist Party and other so-called “far left” parties, and even by supporters of the dissident Gaullist ex-prime minister, Dominique de Villepin.

The protest was called, however, on the bankrupt perspective of pressuring the conservative-dominated Senate to modify the reform, passed in the National Assembly on September 15. The Senate is debating the legislation and votes on it in mid-October.

There is a vast chasm between the working class’s desire to struggle and the treacherous policies of the trade union federations and their political backers.

Despite widespread primary school shutdowns, there was no serious attempt by the unions to halt public services and government operations. *Libération* commented: “The government won’t budge (or merely marginally), as it has made of the raising of the legal age for retirement...a question of principle. The unions know this full well, and that is partly why they didn’t take the risky road of an indefinite strike. A senior minister confirms this: ‘If the CGT had wanted to, it could have stopped transport. They have the means to do it. But they have a tacit pact with the Elysee [presidential palace] because they’ve understood that

the president will not back down.’ ”

In Paris, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters saw homemade placards far more radical than the official union banners. These included “Thieves of Democracy,” “Let’s All Demand to Lose Our Nationality,” “Sarkozy the Racist—Retire,” “Wife and Mother Condemned to Forced Labour Until 67.”

Brutus, a nurse, said, “I don’t think there is any difference between the French left and right. They are all the same in my view. We have to break with them to find the common basis for all.”

The WSWs spoke to Hasan, an electrician with 40 years’ work experience, who said it was the first time he had attended a day of action against Sarkozy’s policies.

“I came from Morocco in 1971,” he said. “I was 19 years old, in school.”

He noted that French employers wanted only the strongest workers: “For the interview, they took us to a garage and stripped us naked and looked us all over. A lot of people were turned down. Then we took a train through Spain to France—I was 19 and I was young, so I thought France was Paradise and Freedom.”

He added that in Morocco, “people thought that people in France have beautiful cars and beautiful shirts, that all of life here is like that. It’s a false image.”

He recalled his arrival in France: “We were real foreigners. In 1971, there weren’t a lot of people from North Africa. Also, we met real racists. There were nasty comments. The café owner told us he didn’t serve Arabs. Our boss, who was Italian, forced him to serve us coffee.”

He explained that his bosses were very happy when he worked the longest hours in the firm as a youth, but that recently, as he got older, they had become more demanding. He said he hoped the pension cut would not go through.

He said of Sarkozy’s anti-Roma and anti-burqa policies: “It’s rotten. He’s hiding his politics. With the [neo-fascist] Front National, at least one knows what one is up against. But Sarkozy always wants more.”

In Marseille, the WSWs spoke to Jean-François, 42, who works at the CNRS: “I’m not immediately affected by the crisis, but there’s no policy for it.

“Society is degenerating. They don’t care about people’s well being. Government jobs are going. There is a link between the anti-immigrant campaign and austerity policies. They say ‘bastard immigrants’ and pick on them instead of querying the system.”

With people like Dominique Strauss-Kahn running for president, he added, he could well imagine a Socialist Party government using the army against striking workers, as in Greece and Spain

Germain, a tree pruner, said “We should all unite across the borders. We must make a revolution. The money’s there, and they ask us to work longer and longer.

“I feel the effects of austerity. We are losing our freedom, especially in the big towns like Paris, Lyon and Marseille. There are cops everywhere. It’s like we are going back to the time of rule by kings.”

In Amiens, Thibault, Jordan, Jeremy, Yohan and Rafaël , young students at the vocational section of La Hotoie high school, were on strike from their classes. They spoke of their fear of unemployment. Asked about how they saw their future, one said: “Working longer and earning nothing.”



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