

Strikes continue as French government defends pension cuts

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Strikes continued in France yesterday after the October 12 national day of action against French President Nicolas Sarkozy's pension cuts, with high school students joining striking port, shipyard, oil and transport workers. Police attacked striking high school students in several cities. There were reports of gasoline shortages throughout France.

Sarkozy has made clear that he will not back down on the reform that increases the retirement age for a full pension from 65 to 67, and the minimum retirement age from 60 to 62. This will allow the state to assess substantial financial penalties on the many workers forced to retire before the pension age because of health or layoff. According to some estimates, this will produce at least a 15 percent cut in pension spending by the state.

At a cabinet meeting on October 13, Sarkozy provocatively vowed he would "make cuts until the last minute of my term in office".

Visiting the Laser Mégajoule plant near Bordeaux yesterday, Sarkozy shrugged off youth protests, noting that such protests had not stopped the "reform" of the university system: "Who could have imagined that in three years, the French university system would have voluntarily, magnificently evolved towards autonomy without any drama or ideological quarrels?" Despite "a few strikes", according to Sarkozy, "our university system brilliantly passed the test and changed itself".

Sarkozy is imposing his reform anti-democratically, over the opposition not only of protesting youth but of the majority of the population. CSA polls show that 69 percent of the population supports strike action against the pension measure, and 54 percent of the population wants the unions to organize a general strike if the government does not withdraw it.

BVA pollster Gaël Sliman told AFP that it is "clear and certain that if there was an outright struggle, public opinion would support it for a long time". He said that many people who are not "formally hostile" to the cuts "would be sympathetic to a social struggle".

Sarkozy clearly expects that the unions will keep workers' protests under control, and allow the cuts to pass, as they did in the 2007-8 pension cut demonstrations and the 2009 strikes against the bank bailout. However, workers demanding industrial action against the cuts are growing increasingly frustrated with the trade unions' inaction.

The unions refuse to organize a serious struggle against the pension cut, which they helped negotiate with Sarkozy during the winter and spring. CGT union secretary Bernard Thibault recently attacked calls for a general strike as "abstract" and "abstruse".

Asked about a general strike, Jean-Dominique Simonpoli, the head of the Dialogues Association, a foundation that brings together CGT officials and leading corporate human resources managers, said only, "We talk about it, but no one wants to go to it".

In a concession to popular demands for strike action against the cuts, a joint meeting of France's trade union federations yesterday called a further day of action on Tuesday, October 19. They had already called a one-day demonstration for tomorrow. CFDT leader François Chérèque explained, "People are asking us to continue".

Increasingly large numbers of workers realize, however, that such one-day actions have not halted Sarkozy's cuts. As one trade unionist put it before the October 12 day of action, workers are "fed up with simply strolling through the streets".

The unions have therefore allowed a few particularly strategic industrial sectors to strike, without attempting to organize broader industrial action against the cuts. At the SNCF national railways, most workplace assemblies decided to continue strike action. According to press figures, 4 in 10 TGV high-speed trains, 50 percent of Paris regional trains, and 40 percent of non-TGV long-distance trains were running.

Strikes are also hitting ports, oil terminals, and refineries. Tug crews are on strike, shutting down the docking of all vessels—tankers, bulk freighters, and container traffic—which remain off French ports.

With 11 of mainland France's 12 refineries affected by strike action, particularly around the strategic Fos-Lavéra oil center in the southern port city of Marseille, there are reports of gasoline shortages throughout France. These are widespread in Corsica and southern France, but are also taking place sporadically around the country in cities including Nantes, Amiens, and Paris. Several gasoline depots have also gone on strike, blocking delivery from Fos, Bassens, and Le Havre facilities.

Yesterday Alexandre de Benoist, an official of the Union of Petrol Importers (UIP) that represents major retailers including Carrefour, Casino, Cora, and Auchan, told *20 Minutes*, "We are worried that our stations are closing because they are running out of supplies". He cited panic buying from drivers, which has increased demand by 50 percent.

It is widely expected that serious gasoline shortages could appear next week, if the strike lasts.

On LCI the Junior Minister for Transport Dominique Bussereau said, "We have discussed the situation with [Ecology Minister] Jean-Louis Borloo, with the Prime Minister [François Fillon], and with aides of the president of the Republic". He said France had supplies for "at least a month" if drivers did not engage in panic buying. Officials are exploring how France's strategic petroleum reserve might be used to smash the strike.

The strike is also cutting off supplies to refineries in Switzerland and leading to shortages in Germany. However, according to International Energy Agency official Aad Van Bohemen, replacement crude is being pumped through the Transalpine pipeline connecting the Italian city of Trieste with Karlsruhe, Germany. He added that this also allows oil to be pumped to France "from all over the west coast" of Europe, helping the government to evade the strike.

Of particular concern to the government was the rising wave of high school student demonstrations. Yesterday roughly 900 of France's 4,302 high schools were on strike, of which 550 were occupied. At the same time, demonstrations with hundreds or thousands of students took place throughout France. In Toulouse 10,000 students marched; 8,000 in Rennes, 7,000 in Bordeaux, 5,000 in Brest; 4,000 in Reims; 2,000 each in Orléans and Tours; 1,500 in Montpellier; and 1,000 in Caen.

Pollsters are warning that a turn to prolonged mass protests by the youth could transform the political atmosphere. Demands for a general strike against Sarkozy's cuts are particularly popular among French youth, with 68 percent of the 25-to-34 age bracket supporting a general strike.

ViaVoice analyst François Miquet-Marty told *Le Monde*, "The question is what might provoke public opinion to supporting lasting social protest. The entry into struggle of

the youth could provoke a lasting break between the population and the government".

The state is brutally targeting youth protests. With roughly 30 high schools were on strike in the Paris area, police attacked students in two high schools in the Paris suburbs: Paul-Eluard high school in Saint-Denis, and Jean-Jaurès high school in Montreuil. Seine-Saint-Denis school inspector Daniel Auverlot threatened that the state would not guarantee the safety of striking students: "Once students occupy their schools, we can no longer be responsible for their safety, as some occupations threaten to become urban riots".

One high school student in Montreuil was hospitalized after police hit him with a rubber bullet to the face, in violation of police rules on the use of rubber bullets. Despite initial claims by police that he was lightly wounded, reports soon emerged that he has three major fractures to his face and may lose an eye. Authorities confirmed that the student did not have a police record.

CRS riot police were also caught on video beating Canal+ TV reporter Thierry Vincent, as he held out his press card and informed them that he was participating peacefully in the demonstration. This was after the October 12 demonstration in Paris.

Students also demonstrated in front of Medef (Movement of French enterprises, the main business federation) headquarters in Paris. They reportedly left alone, after waiting for a trade union delegation to arrive. A Twitter feed explained, "We've had enough of the unions, we've been up since 5:30 a.m.".

There are signs that university students may join high school students in protesting the reform. The university administration shut down Université Rennes-2 "for security reasons" amid fears of an occupation. According to *Le Monde*, students from Jussieu University in Paris met in a general assembly and hundreds of Jussieu students participated in demonstrations around Paris.



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