

Millions march in France against pension cuts

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An estimated 3.5 million workers and students marched nationwide in France yesterday in a day of action called to oppose pension cuts demanded by President Nicolas Sarkozy. Though the most critical provisions of the pension “reform” have been passed—a two-year increase in the retirement age and a corresponding increase in the pay-in period—the law has yet to be formally voted on by the Senate.

The turnout testified to the determination of workers and young people to fight Sarkozy’s policies. Strikes and protest actions have been building for more than a week.

While it had been reported that the Senate would postpone its final vote on the bill until Thursday, and possibly delay the vote even further, some media outlets were reporting that the vote could take place today, as originally scheduled.

The strikes have spread to oil refineries, oil depots, ports and trucking firms, resulting in a growing gasoline shortage across France. The response of prominent union leaders to the upsurge in working class militancy and the widening economic impact of the strike wave—and opinion polls showing more than 70 percent of the population supporting the strikes—has been to indicate that the mass movement should be ended once the Senate has passed the pension bill.

The union leadership has from the onset sought to use the strikes and protests as a lever to obtain some cosmetic concessions from the government, while accepting the major cuts in the “reform.” They have rejected any struggle to bring down the Sarkozy government, insisting that the movement be limited to applying pressure on the president and the parliament.

They hoped that repeated one-day protests would wear down and exhaust the opposition of workers and students, but to date the intensity of the movement has only increased.

Sarkozy is moving to use the police to break numerous blockades of depots by oil workers. Last week, a large force of riot police was used to end a blockade at a strategic depot near Marseille. As of this writing, the union confederations have organized no public defense of workers occupying the oil depots.

Demonstrations in France’s largest cities were as big or bigger than the record turnout on October 12, the previous day of action. According to estimates by the unions, 330,000 marched in Paris, 240,000 in Marseille, 155,000 in Toulouse, 140,000 in Bordeaux, 60,000 each in Clermont-Ferrand, Rouen,

Le Havre and Caen, 50,000 in Rennes, and 45,000 in Lyon.

Smaller regional trade union federations are pushing for broader strike action. In the Ardennes, the all trade union alliance passed a resolution calling for a renewable general strike “in all sectors of economic activity,” with rail workers and Peugeot auto workers voting in large numbers for the resolution.

Speaking to France3 television, Ardennes CGT (General Confederation of Workers) official Patrick Lattuada explained that his members had “completely had it” and were “fed up” with the fact that “the government pays no attention to the population’s demands and expectations.” The October 12 demonstration at Charleville-Mézières, with 10,000 people, was the largest in the region since the May-June 1968 general strike.

Student protests were at record levels, according to statistics provided by high school student unions. The FIDL (Independent and Democratic High School Student Union) said 1,200 of France’s 4,302 high schools were on strike, with 850 schools blockaded. At ten universities students met in general assemblies and voted to blockade their institutions. Youth marching in demonstrations chanted: “Unemployed at 25, exploited at 67, no, no, no!”

Police clashed with demonstrators across the country. In Lyon, police fired tear gas and fought with demonstrators at Bellecour Square and neighboring downtown areas. Dozens of cars were overturned and store windows smashed during the confrontation. Police blamed “1,300 violent protesters.”

The administration of Université Lyon-2 closed the institution “indefinitely” after students voted to blockade it. Similarly, the administration closed Toulouse-Le Mirail University after 75 percent of the 2,000-strong general assembly voted a blockade. Rennes-2 was also closed.

Youth clashed with riot police throughout the Paris suburbs. In Argenteuil, police attacked youth in a confrontation apparently planned in advance by city authorities. City official Nicolas Bougeard told *Le Parisien*: “It could have been worse. Incidents like that take six months of work to prepare. We put 20 very experienced people in place [official mediators wearing official vests, according to the newspaper] who know the youth and the area very well.” Police helicopters flew overhead to monitor the fighting.

Speaking yesterday morning in the beach resort of Deauville, where he was attending a summit with German Chancellor

Angela Merkel and Russian President Dmitri Medvedev, Sarkozy said he would “see with law enforcement that public order would be maintained.” Sarkozy indicated his concern over the situation, but said he would not modify the cuts: “Do I fear excesses? Of course, it’s not with a light heart that I confront them. However, the greatest excess would be to not do my duty, which is to arrange for the financing of pensions.”

He threatened workers occupying refineries and oil depots, saying that “there are people who want to work and who must not be deprived of gasoline.” Upon his return to Paris, Sarkozy met with Prime Minister François Fillon, Interior Minister Brice Hortefeux and several other leading officials. He explained that the meeting aimed to “unblock a certain number of situations.”

The government acknowledged yesterday that France is in the grip of a growing gasoline shortage, with Ecology and Transport Minister Jean-Louis Borloo admitting that 4,000 of France’s 12,500 gas stations are running dry. Prime Minister Fillon said it would take four or five days for gasoline supplies to return to normal.

Trucking company federations warned that numerous enterprises were running out of fuel and might shut down and furlough their workers. According to Agence France-Presse, the Caen Chamber of Commerce and Industry released a report yesterday stating: “There is currently no more fuel available on our territory... We are currently witnessing a slowdown of economic activity, which could halt completely in 48 hours if supplies are not re-established.”

An open struggle is looming between the working class and the state, as police forces try to break the oil strike and resupply businesses, taking away the workers’ most powerful weapon against the passage of Sarkozy’s cuts. In addition to the strike-breaking action by CRS riot police against oil workers outside of Marseille, workers at Grandpuits were formally “requisitioned” and forced back to work under threat of 5-year prison terms.

According to one report, managers secretly arrived by boat at a struck oil depot in Le Havre to restart kerosene shipments to Roissy-Charles-de-Gaulle airport. Workers warned that they could not guarantee that the managers would be able to safely operate the equipment to produce kerosene. At a Caen oil depot police broke through workers’ barricades with a bulldozer, after which trucks arrived to haul away supplies.

The press is citing in threatening terms the legal measures available for use against blockades. *Le Monde* cited lawyers claiming that workers could face immediate dismissal without severance pay. According to the press, high school students could face immediate suspension, 3 years imprisonment and €45,000 fines if they participate in a blockade at a school that is not their own.

The national trade union leaderships have not responded with any campaign to defend striking workers. They are undoubtedly in talks with the government over the terms of a sellout. The

major union federations are set to meet Thursday to discuss their next moves.

At yesterday’s protest march, Bernard Thibault, leader of the CGT, which is linked to the Stalinist French Communist Party, appealed to Sarkozy, saying, “Please be reasonable, accept discussion with the trade unions. Do not close yourself off from us with a unilateral choice.”

Thibault vaguely declared that the size of the demonstrations “will allow us to consider other initiatives.” However, unlike on previous days of action, the all trade union alliance did not announce a date for the next day of action.

The CFDT (French and Democratic Labor Confederation), which is France’s second most influential union and is politically close to the Socialist Party, is signaling that it will oppose further action against the cuts if the law is passed by the Senate. CFDT officials told business daily *Les Echos*: “If strikes continue and broaden, we will have to pursue them. But if they become hard conflicts in a few isolated industrial sectors, we will not be able to give it our approval indefinitely.”

The officials added that they expected this would not lead to a break with the CGT, as Thibault supports their positions: “The situation is challenging for us, but it is for the CGT as well. Bernard Thibault is pushing, but he can’t do too much to bolster his more activist wing, which is contesting his leadership inside the union.”

Thibault’s right-wing record has provoked considerable opposition among workers, including those in the CGT. He was publicly criticized last year by CGT auto delegate Xavier Mathieu for not assisting auto plants targeted for closure. Mathieu said that people like Thibault were “scum” who “are only good for chatting with the government and calming people down.”

Thibault was also criticized for negotiating pension cuts for public sector workers with Sarkozy in 2007, and for mobilizing CRS riot police and CGT thugs against striking undocumented workers occupying CGT offices in Paris last year.

The unions are effectively acting as counselors to Sarkozy on how to impose the cuts. They are warning the government not to move too rapidly in passing the pension bill so as to avoid provoking uncontrollable opposition in the working class.

CGT official Nadine Prigent told Agence France-Presse: “It’s not a done deal that a Senate [vote for the cuts] will calm things down.” The UNSA (National Union of Autonomous Trade Unions) warned: “No one knows what effect that vote will have.”



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