

French strikes continue as parliament approves pension cuts

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Strikes continued yesterday against President Nicolas Sarkozy's pension cuts, despite the National Assembly's approval of the final pension bill passed Tuesday by the Senate.

Polls showed that 63 percent of the population approves continued mobilization against the pension "reform," which is widely viewed as an illegitimate attack on working people carried out in the interests of the wealthy. Nonetheless, the trade union leadership is isolating the strikes and moving to negotiate further concessions with employers' groups.

There is a powerful and continuing oil and port strike, which has led to massive gasoline shortages despite repeated police raids to break up blockades of depots. Though five refineries of a total of 12 have voted to go back to work—La Mède, Port-Jérôme-Gravenchon, Fos-sur-Mer, Petit-Couronne, and Reichstett—the rest are still entirely or partially on strike.

The reopening of the five refineries is not sufficient to end gasoline shortages. The ongoing port strike at oil terminals in Marseille and Le Havre has virtually halted the flow of crude to the refineries. According to press reports, only one refinery is operating due to the lack of crude oil. The government is reportedly trying to supply the refineries with crude from France's strategic reserves.

Government officials say 20 percent of France's gas stations are still out of fuel and refuse to give an estimate as to when the gas shortage will be over. It appears the government is understating the impact of the oil shortages. The web site *Carbeo.com*, a popular gas consumer web site widely cited in the press, listed 3,936 of France's 12,300 gas stations (32 percent) as closed or out of fuel yesterday.

Further strikes were also reported in public transport and municipal services such as garbage collection,

though municipal workers in several smaller southern cities, such as Pau and Agen, voted to return to work.

The strike is having an international impact. On Tuesday, workers of the Setca social democratic union blockaded two oil depots in Belgium, at Feluy and Tertre, after they concluded that trucks from France were seeking to evade the strike there by re-supplying in Belgium. The Setca union issued a statement declaring the actions to be in "solidarity with French workers on strike."

Also on Tuesday, a protest against the pension cuts called in Guadeloupe, a French overseas territory in the Caribbean, mobilized 25,000 demonstrators.

In the run-up to today's national day of action, public transport networks in 29 cities nationwide gave strike notices. The General Directorate of Civil Aviation (DGAC) instructed airlines to cut the number of scheduled flights by 30 percent nationwide, and 50 percent at Paris' Orly airport.

The numbers who participate in today's protests will likely be reduced since many high school students and workers have time off for the All Saints Day Week holidays.

An important part of the campaign to discourage workers' opposition was yesterday's extensive coverage of a relative formality: the National Assembly's approval of a final version of the pension-cutting bill incorporating changes previously made by the Senate and the National Assembly.

The bill is expected to be promulgated around November 15, after going for approval to the Constitutional Council, as demanded by opposition Socialist Party (PS) lawmakers.

The bill increases the minimum retirement age from 60 to 62, and the age to retire with a full pension from 65 to 67. Similarly, the pay-in period will increase to

41 years by 2012 and then to 41.25 years in 2013, after which it will be indexed to increases in life expectancy. The bill also makes it more difficult to retire due to work injuries, requiring certification of 20 percent incapacitation in most cases, though 10 percent is maintained in others.

The bill is expected to cut pension payments by €18 billion per year. *Le Monde* applauded the measure as one that would “preserve France’s credit rating” by cutting its social spending and debt.

Prime Minister François Fillon issued a statement demanding that all opposition to the bill cease. “The law of the Republic must now be accepted by all,” he declared.

Other officials of the ruling conservative Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) were somewhat more careful not to provoke public opinion. National Assembly President Bernard Accoyer said that the vote should not be seen as a “victory,” as “it is the job of the Parliament to examine legislative texts.”

The daily *Libération* noted that the UMP “was avoiding triumphalism at the National Assembly” because “the government has not yet seen the end of the movement contesting its reforms.”

These statements testify to the cynical character of the media campaign portraying all opposition to the law as a lost cause. In fact, the government is profoundly concerned that mass anger over the deeply unpopular measure could explode.

This underscores the rotten role played by the unions and their supporters in the “left” parties, who are refusing to mobilize the working class to defeat the Sarkozy government.

The union leaders have refused to call broader strikes or organize protests against police raids on striking oil workers. *Le Point* commented yesterday: “For several days now [General Confederation of Labor union leader] Bernard Thibault has not encouraged strikes, and Monday on France2 television he abstained... from explicitly supporting those who are engaged in such movements.”

In fact, the unions are rapidly moving back to the negotiating table with the Movement of French Enterprises (Medef), France’s main business federation. The General Confederation of Labor (CGT) and the French and Democratic Labor Federation (CFDT) are proposing to make further modifications on

conditions of work for young workers and workers nearing retirement. Underscoring the right-wing character of the talks, the CGT proposes to fund changes by cutting corporate taxes that go toward social spending.

The unions face another growing controversy over the presence of undercover policemen in protests against the pension cuts. Witnesses claim the undercover policemen attacked marchers and damaged nearby buildings in order to discredit the demonstrations in the press. In a *Libération* interview yesterday, Thibault criticized “police with CGT badges that we had found,” who “ended up being rescued” by riot police in Paris and Lyon.

However, officials allege that the CGT leadership was well aware of police operating at its rallies.

Claiming that police infiltration of peaceful demonstrations was “not shocking,” Synergy-Officers union leader Mohamed Douane told France2 television last night: “These methods are known to all political and trade union leaders, and when some of them feign to be unaware and to get offended, that is pitiful and ridiculous.”

Jacques Gérard, chief of police for the Rhône département around Lyon, told a press conference: “There is a tradition of the police infiltrating the population. They do it quite commonly.” He added that when he heard reports that undercover Lyon police were wearing CGT badges, “[he] called the CGT department delegate to tell him, but he already knew.”

Whatever the truth of the police allegations, it is clear that the unions are turning their backs on seething popular opposition to the pension cuts in order to collaborate with the employers’ organizations in carrying out further attacks on the working class. This highlights the importance of the *World Socialist Web Site’s* call for workers to form committees of action independent of the unions and the “left” parties to extend the strikes and prepare for a general strike to bring down the Sarkozy government.



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