

# Millions march in France against pension cuts

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Millions of workers and students took to the streets across France Thursday to protest final approval by the National Assembly of President Nicolas Sarkozy's pension "reform" bill. The French economy was still crippled by gasoline shortages due to ongoing refinery and port strikes.

The General Confederation of Labor (CGT) estimated that about 2 million people participated in the day of action, down from 3.5 million in the previous national mobilization, held October 19. The government, which has given lowball estimates of previous days of action, said the turnout was 560,000 as compared to 1.1 million on October 19.

The demonstration had overwhelming popular support, with 65 percent of the population approving it, according to the most recent *Le Parisien* poll. The Sarkozy government, on the other hand, has fallen in recent polls to a record low 29 percent approval rating.

In line with numerous statements by government and media officials aimed at discouraging strike action, Labor Minister Eric Woerth said the "significant slowdown of the mobilization" meant there could be "an exit from the crisis in coming days or weeks."

Yesterday's nationwide protest was the seventh national day of action called by the unions against Sarkozy's pension package since September 7. The bill raises the minimum retirement age from 60 to 62, and the age to retire with a full pension from 65 to 67.

According to the unions, 170,000 marched in Paris, versus 330,000 on October 19. The turnout was similarly lower in most other cities, including Marseille (150,000), Lyon (32,000) and Toulouse (120,000). Despite the All Saints Week holidays, many students joined the protests, although in somewhat reduced numbers than in previous days of action.

Both private- and public-sector workers struck. Strikes hit air transport, with 50 percent of flights

cancelled at Paris Orly Airport and 30 percent cancelled at the remaining metropolitan airports. Public transit was also affected by the strike movement. Workers at the national railway company (SNCF) and the Paris region railway system (RATP) walked out. According to company figures, four in ten regional trains did not run.

The CGT-Energy union said striking workers at France's electricity monopoly EDF cut energy production by roughly 6,250 megawatts. It suggested strike action would continue, stating: "The two methane terminals at Fos are still out of operation... There is no doubt that, whatever form they decide on, workers will continue to mobilize against the pension bill. On many sites, plans to continue action are already organized."

Workers at four of the country's twelve refineries continue to block fuel shipments, and five of the six domestic refineries of French oil firm Total remain on strike.

In many refineries that have voted to end the strike, it is impossible to resume production due to continuing strikes at oil terminals located at major ports, such as Fos-Lavéra near Marseille. The Marseille port reported that 79 ships were anchored offshore, including 58 oil tankers—38 with crude oil and 20 with refined petroleum products.

One in five gas stations still faces supply problems. According to the Zagaz web site, which is widely used to compare fuel prices online, "20 percent of gas stations still lacked one or several types of fuel Thursday, compared to 27 percent Wednesday afternoon."

*Le Parisien* commented, "The situation Thursday was identical to the day before, that is, striking port terminals blocking crude supplies to most French refineries. This is the case with the oil terminals at Fos, Le Havre and Donges."

Although garbage collection workers in southern cities like Marseille, Nantes, Pau and Agen have voted to return to work, garbage collectors in the Paris region and Toulouse are still in striking. Some 15 percent of the 7,000 municipal garbage collectors, along with workers from private garbage companies, are on strike. Workers continue a blockade, which began October 19, of the incineration center of Ivry-sur-Seine on the outskirts of Paris.

Many press accounts spoke of an angry mood at the demonstrations, with protestors dismissing government claims that the strike movement was over and criticizing the unions for not organizing more effective action.

*Le Monde* cited a psychologist, Jean-Noël, in Paris, saying, “There are plenty of people anyway, it’s good and we should continue. The supposed collapse of the demonstrations, that’s a bunch of speeches that are being repeated by the media.”

The newspaper quoted several workers who bitterly criticized the unions. A hospital employee said, “There was no real will to fight on the part of the union leaders. They let themselves get overrun by their base.” Another said the unions “allowed industrial action to proceed, but without really supporting it.”

*Le Monde* worried about what strategy the union bureaucracy could pursue to wind down the protests, writing: “In this context, what to do? Continuing as if nothing had happened seems difficult, but so is winding things down. The union leaders must surely know that they could take a wallop from the most motivated protestors.”

Yesterday’s protests show that large sections of the working class do not accept the cuts, even after they have been voted into law. Their determination to continue the fight poses starkly the need for a new leadership and new strategy to carry through a political struggle against the Sarkozy government.

The policies proposed by the *World Socialist Web Site*—organizing committees of action independently of the unions and preparing a mass political strike to bring down the Sarkozy government and fight for a workers’ government—flow directly from the logic of the political situation.

The unions have shown they are hostile to the struggle against the cuts. They have isolated strikers, refusing to mount sympathy strikes to protest police

strikebreaking against oil workers, and have refused to call for a general strike.

Now, they are limiting themselves to appeals for Sarkozy to renegotiate the cuts with them. Such appeals are cynical and impotent, as Sarkozy has already obtained passage of the law, making clear that he will not negotiate.

The CGT said yesterday’s protest was an “exceptional event in the social history of our country,” yet it did not call for the repeal of the cuts. Instead, it repeated its demand for talks: “The president of the Republic must finally listen to the message of the great majority of the population,” and “open real negotiations with the unions.”

French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT) Secretary François Chérèque said the law is not “fair,” adding, “Vast majorities of workers are against this law, and our duty is to continue to say it.” He then suggested postponing opposition to the indefinite future, suggesting that “after the promulgation of this law” the “fight” might take the form of the “discussion of 2013.”

Such a “fight” would, in fact, lead only to more social attacks on the workers. Chérèque is referring to a provision of the current pension bill specifying that in 2013 there will be talks between the unions and the government on passing to a “points-based” pension system. This would allow the authorities to change—that is, cut—pension payments based on various factors, including life expectancy.



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