

Opposition mounts to French labor law in new national day of action

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Yesterday's day of action against the Socialist Party (PS) government's labor law, the first national protest held since last month, revealed a growing determination among workers to fight the austerity policies imposed by the ruling class across the European Union (EU).

Despite the government's efforts to smash strikes and demoralize workers, marches in several cities were noticeably larger than in previous mobilizations. About 50 protests were scheduled throughout France.

Workers traveled to the protest in Paris from across the country in trains and convoys of buses chartered for the occasion. While police estimated that 75,000 people participated, trade union sources claimed that more than 1 million took part.

According to press reports, between 6,000-20,000 people marched in Toulouse and 4,000 in Rennes. In France's second city, Lyon, between 3,800 and 10,000 people gathered.

Workers defied repression organized by the PS and the security forces in the context of the French state of emergency. The media and politicians have insisted that workers halt their struggle to avoid disrupting the Euro 2016 football cup. The Paris prefecture issued restraining orders banning 130 people from participating in the protests.

Riot police attacked the Paris protest, breaking the marchers in two in order to isolate and face off against a few hundred demonstrators. Clashes broke out between the protests and riot police, and security forces fired tear gas and water cannon. In Paris, at least six protesters as well as some 20 policemen were wounded, and there were 15 arrests.

Even more than the swelling of the protest marches, the strength and the sweep of the demands being advanced by workers testifies to the broad

radicalization of the movement in the working class against the PS government.

The demands raised in the protests against the labor law go well beyond the retraction of this one reactionary measure. Workers are increasingly hostile to all the PS' policies: austerity, the state of emergency and imperialist interventions overseas.

The gulf is growing between workers' opposition and the perspective of the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT), which is seeking to contain the demonstrations. CGT General Secretary Philippe Martinez is trying to negotiate a deal with the PS on the law that would supposedly meet workers' demands. As the PS leadership insists that they will tolerate no significant modification to the labor law, workers are insisting that they will accept nothing less than its retraction.

WSWS reporters spoke to protesters in Paris and Marseille. In Paris, Solène, a worker in the psychiatric hospital of Ville-Evrard, said: "I came to protest the labor law, against all these ministers who listen to no one but themselves, who do not listen to the opinions of the people. We've had enough and it's getting impossible.

"Already we are doing so much overtime, we don't get enough rest, they want to even increase the amount of overtime they give us. We don't intend to work until we drop. Life is not just work, there is family life after all. We've had enough. Today I went onto the streets to say no to [Labor Minister Myriam] El Khomri's law, she must withdraw this rotten law, period."

Solène also opposed the government's attack on democratic rights and particularly the state of emergency. "The state of emergency, what a convenient excuse that is. They would really like us to quit protesting, but we will continue to protest,

whatever it takes, and whatever comes of it.” She denounced the PS’ decision to force the labor law through the National Assembly without a formal vote, using emergency powers in Article 49-3 of the constitution.

Referring to the French Revolution, she added, “We are back to 1789, they think they can act like kings. They want to ignore the workers, they just railroad everything through. ... They don’t know what to do anymore, they don’t know how to do anything right, in any case they are incompetent and irresponsible people, and they use the 49-3 to say to all of us, shut your mouths.”

WSWS reporters also met Badjindé, a local CGT official born in Mali. He said, “Today we are here for a cause, a cause that is real and serious. We are here because of the the labor law that the Socialist government wants to impose on us. It is very serious for us, our children, and our grandchildren.”

He also criticized the military intervention in Mali launched by France, the former colonial power, and its NATO allies in 2013: “This war, it is a political affair. It is the Westerners and other countries that set up this war against us, against our country. ... We will struggle also, and with God’s help, the war will end.”

According to the CGT, 150,000 people protested in Marseille, although police sources claimed the figure was only 5,000. Protest marches by workers from the ports, the oil sector, gas firm Air Liquide and the public service all joined the demonstration.

Julien, an educator specialized in children’s services, told the WSWS that he is demanding “the withdrawal of the El Khomri law. The government will not listen to the people, who reject the destruction of job security. We demand that the government take into account what we are doing and the turn of events. We are going into a dead end, we will give up nothing, and they will have to listen to the fact that 70 percent of the French people oppose the law.”

He stressed that the mobilization was not a symbolic protest. “Today is a big test, I think there are more of us here than the last time, that shows the real relationship of forces. This is not a protest that is one noble last stand before we give up.” Julien added that he expected the struggle to become tougher, a situation he did not welcome but that he thought was inevitable.

On the ending of the refinery strike in Normandy, he

said: “After 25 days of striking, of course our comrades need to eat and they have to stop striking. There was a big mobilization today, the refineries will not be operating fully. The struggle on fuel is not lost, at the Fuel Depots of France there are three strategic strike days, and not a single fuel truck is leaving.”

Many people without formal party or union affiliations participated in the Marseille protest. Julia, a preschool assistant, explained that she was protesting everything that is happening in France. She criticized the media for claiming the strike was winding down: “The protesters are still here, not everyone can be on strike all the time because you need money to feed the kids, but we are here. It is not the problem of the workers, they have no choice but to resume work.”

She added, “We are here to say that we will not give up despite the Euro cup. It’s not because someone is trying to frighten us that we will give up protesting in the streets.”

When WSWS reporters raised the necessity for French workers to unify their struggles with European workers in a fight against austerity across the continent, she replied: “That is what we need. Their pillaging operation is international.”



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