

Mass protests follow failed attempt to ban opposition to French labor law

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Hundreds of thousands marched across France against the Socialist Party's (PS) regressive labor law yesterday, amid explosive anger over the PS' failed attempt to ban the protest in Paris. Workers participating in the demonstrations stressed they were determined to continue fighting the labor law, including initial attempts by the corporations to impose massive givebacks in contracts negotiated under the terms of the labor law, as well as the PS' escalating attacks on democratic rights.

In Paris, some 70,000 people marched in a small, tight circuit around Bastille Square laid out at the demand of Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve. Though the entire length of the march was only 1,600 meters, the government deployed over 2,100 heavily-armed riot police to guard the protest. They sealed off the square, searching everyone who attended, and deployed water cannon and squads armed with pistols and guns firing rubber bullets.

Police confiscated scarves, masks, helmets, bottles, or any object they considered demonstrators could use to protect themselves against tear gas rounds or baton charges, or to hide their identity. Though there were no clashes during the Paris march, police arrested 95 people, largely for having objects that could be used for clashes with police.

Smaller, undeclared protests took place at the Paris Stock Exchange, the *Gare de Lyon* train station, and near Republic Square.

There were large protests in most of France's major cities. In Marseille, trade union sources counted 45,000 demonstrators at the march and said that anger over the PS' threat to ban the Paris protest played a major role in the turnout. They also rejected the PS' attempts to blame protesters for isolated acts by unidentified rioters.

In Normandy, thousands of workers and youth marched in the port city of Le Havre, in Rouen, and in Caen, and 8,000 people marched in Lyon.

In Rennes, there were violent clashes between protesters and police, who drew an unusual public rebuke from police prefect Christophe Mirmand for detaining, searching, and illegally verifying the identity of journalists even after they were shown the journalists' press cards. "I have just reminded the local directorate of public security of the guidelines" regarding proper treatment of journalists, Mirmand told the press.

In Limoges, hundreds of people marched, including Camille Senon, the 91-year-old survivor of the fascist massacre at Ouradour-sur-Glane in 1944, who has refused a decoration from Prime Minister Manuel Valls and said that the PS' labor law is "unacceptable."

Faced with a continuing radicalization of oppositional sentiment among workers, the PS, still reeling from its sudden climb-down from the attempt to ban the protests, is escalating its attacks on basic democratic rights. It responded yesterday with threats to ban left-wing organizations critical of the government.

"Each time we can dissolve organizations that are involved in violence, we will do so. We did so with groups tied to radical Islam, we did it for far right groups. And if needed, we will obviously do so for the ultra-left," Valls said. He added that he is "worried about the rise of this ultra-left, which opposes the institutions of the Republic and represents hundreds of individuals."

Valls said he was responding in particular to those who "cast doubt on police and the government, as if we were organizing this violence ourselves to discredit social opposition."

It is not only "ultra-left" groups that are criticizing

the PS government and the security forces, however. As ever-broader layers of people attend the demonstrations, they are raising questions about the complicity between the PS, the security forces, and the unidentified groups of rioters whom the PS is seizing upon as a pretext to try to ban the demonstrations.

Even Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) leader Philippe Martinez felt compelled to raise questions on this issue, after the PS accused trade unions of complicity in the actions of rioters who damaged the Necker Hospital during protests last week. “I am not blaming the policemen. They have orders not to intervene against rioters,” Martinez said, adding: “Why are no orders given to the police to prevent rioters from attacking?”

Yesterday it was announced that the CGT, together with other unions and human rights groups, is calling for investigations into the security forces’ handling of the protests.

WSWS reporters spoke to protesters at the Paris demonstration around Bastille Square. Fred, a railway worker, and his son, a student, both criticized the PS government and called for a broader mobilization of the working class in struggle.

Fred’s son, who also participated in the demonstration, insisted that the workers and youth were determined to oppose the law, whose consequences would be disastrous: “We would work a lot more and we wouldn’t necessarily make any more money ... The bosses will get to thinking they are better than we workers, which is already the situation. But it will get even worse if this law passes.”

“The government pretends like we’re the same as rioters, they say we are being used by the rioters, but it’s the reverse, they are the ones who are using the rioters. ... I really wonder where the rioters come from. I think the government pulled them out of a hat,” Fred said.

Fred recalled the last major revolutionary struggle of the French working class, the 1968 general strike. He said there should be another general strike, adding: “It would have the same magnitude as in 1968, and it would spread to other countries. Governments would fall one after the other.”

Fred added that he was angry about inequality in society. “When I see the wage levels in France, I find them unacceptable given the work that we do. ... The

bonuses, the stock options [that CEOs get] are unacceptable.”

The WSWS also spoke to Yannick, an auto worker with PSA Peugeot-Citroën in Paris, who said he was opposing both the labor law and ongoing contract negotiations based on the law at PSA. “So we are fighting on two fronts, against the labor law and the agreements implementing the labor law at our company,” Yannick said.

He criticized the PS for “using denigration and provocation. They even provoke situations to try to turn public opinion against the demonstrators.”

He added, “I can’t believe that the bosses can crush the workers for decades, or forever—maybe some of them think so, or hope to do that. But sooner or later, there is a reaction. You can’t heat a pressure cooker forever, there is a maximum capacity, afterwards it explodes. Sooner or later, the bosses—they are the same everywhere on the planet—sooner or later they will provoke a social explosion. Today we are mobilized in France, there are mobilizations in China, in every country in the world where there are workers. Everywhere there is oppression by the bosses, exploitation, there is a reaction.”



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