

May Day in France: Trade union calls to support Macron fall flat

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Around 140,000 people marched yesterday in demonstrations across France for May Day, in the run-up to the second round of the presidential elections between former Socialist Party (PS) Economy Minister Emmanuel Macron and neo-fascist National Front (FN) leader Marine Le Pen.

Fifty thousand people marched in Paris, 10,000 in Toulouse, 5,000 in Lyon, Marseille, and Rennes, 4,000 in Bordeaux and Nantes, 2,000 in Strasbourg and over 1,000 in Lille. Protests drawing several thousand people took place in several mid-sized cities. In many demonstrations, groups of marchers chanted slogans opposing both candidates, such as “Neither Macron nor Le Pen” or, as in Rennes, “Le Pen, Macron, we don't want them.”

The French media expressed surprise at the relatively small May Day protests this year, compared to the massive demonstrations against Jean-Marie Le Pen in 2002, the other time that the FN reached the second round of the French presidential elections. The trade unions also failed to agree on a common demonstration and organized separate marches or gatherings. The largest trade union in the private sector, the PS-linked French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT), mobilized virtually none of its forces.

The lack of a response in the working class to the unions' lukewarm calls to protest on May Day is yet another reflection of the broad collapse of the French political system. After the elimination of the candidates of France's two main big-business parties, the Socialist Party (PS) and The Republicans (LR), workers and young people are demonstrating their lack of faith in the union bureaucracies.

The relatively small size of the protests cannot be attributed to satisfaction by workers and young people with political or social situation. On the contrary, class

tensions are explosive. One poll found 69 percent of the population is hostile to both candidates in the second round. Similarly, two-thirds of the French people said that the class struggle is a daily reality of life for them.

The powerful sentiment of opposition that exists in the working class in France and across Europe can find no expression, however, in the reactionary operations of the French unions to back the militarist candidacy of Emmanuel Macron, the free-market former Rothschild banker. Masses of workers and youth sense that the calls to “block” Le Pen issued by the bulk of the political establishment are barely disguised appeals to vote Macron, and that he will attack the social and democratic rights of the workers no less than Le Pen.

Among a large section of protesters, there was broad hostility to both candidates and anger at an election between two openly reactionary candidates.

In Paris, members and sympathizers of the *Parti de l'égalité socialiste* (PES) distributed leaflets calling for an active boycott of the second round, and for participation in the successful public meeting the PES organized after the march to explain its active boycott call. They met a warm response from the marchers, apart from pro-Macron union officials.

The union bureaucracies tried to de-politicize the rallies, putting forward demagogic slogans such as calls to “impose social progress,” which are empty and false if they do not give a perspective for a struggle against the social onslaught the next president will launch against the workers. Or they called for a “social third round,” as if the presidential elections had no real significance.

When they took a position, they called in one way or another to vote for Macron. In Paris, the main banner of the CGT, which has supported President François Hollande's PS government since the beginning of his

term in office, declared: “Put an end to the social retrogression that benefits the far right.”

The CFDT held a common rally with the UNSA (National union of autonomous unions) and the Federation of Student General Assemblies (FAGE) in Paris. Its banner, featuring France's blue-white-red tricolor flag and an effigy of Marianne, the symbol of the republic, stated: “For Marianne, vote against Marine” Le Pen.

The CGT called for an anti-Le Pen vote without mentioning Macron, but with the same intention as the CFDT. “Our slogan is clear, we must defeat the FN to obtain social progress. The FN is a racist, xenophobic, anti-woman and free-market party,” declared CGT General Secretary Philippe Martinez.

The FO trade union, one quarter of whose members voted for Marine Le Pen in the first round according to one recent poll, did not specify whom it was endorsing.

Martinez's call was echoed by many pseudo-left political parties at the demonstrations. The NPA, which called for demonstrations together with the trade unions, also indirectly called for a Macron vote with its slogan, “National-sexist, homophobic and racist, fight the National Front!” Lutte ouvrière (LO, Workers Struggle) issued a call, “Against the racist Le Pen and the banker Macron, make the camp of the workers heard,” intending to steer the workers, as LO inevitably does, behind the trade unions, which openly support Macron.

The Paris protest included many youth and unorganized students who marched without banners and wanted neither Le Pen nor Macron. There were cries of “Neither capitalism nor fascism” and, in response to accusations from the political establishment that anyone not voting for Macron is a neo-fascist supporter, “Siamo tutti antifascisti” (“We are all anti-fascists” in Italian).

Many of the protesting youth were manifestly continuing on May Day the protests against both second round candidates organized a few days before, with blockades of high schools and spontaneous unauthorized demonstrations across Paris.

The PS government set up a massive security and surveillance deployment around the May Day protests. According to the police prefecture, more than 9,000 policemen, paramilitary police, and soldiers of Operation Sentinel (the army's ongoing deployment

inside France) were officially mobilized for the occasion.

After a few groups of masked protesters at the head of the march threw objects at the riot police, a large, heavily-armed police detachment assaulted the entire protest, launching repeated volleys of tear gas.

Defeated Unsubmissive France candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who has left his voters only with the perspective of a call to vote Macron or to abstain, called on the former PS minister to make “a gesture” to his supporters. He raised the PS' unpopular free-market labor law, which it imposed last year in the face of overwhelming popular opposition and mass protests. Macron responded by declaring at a meeting held in Paris that he did not support retracting the law.



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