General strike in French Polynesia against undermining of pensions

Tom Peters
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Thousands of workers in Tahiti and other parts of French Polynesia joined what was originally called an "indefinite" general strike on February 15 against the government's plan to raise the pension entitlement age from 60 to 62 by the year 2020 and increase employee contributions. The proposal also requires workers to contribute to social security for 38 years, up from the current 35, to receive a full pension.

The remote South Pacific French colony, with 67 inhabited islands and a population of 280,000, has been wracked by political crises and social unrest for more than a decade. There were four strikes last November and December, by staff from the *Depeche de Tahiti* newspaper, Air France workers, hospital workers, and kitchen workers who prepare school meals.

The general strike is the latest manifestation of widespread anger among workers over the austerity measures imposed by successive governments in Papeete and Paris, including repeated attacks on jobs, wages and conditions.

Reports indicate that telecommunications, electricity and postal workers, some hospital and school employees, among others, joined the strike, which was called by five trade unions: O oe to oe rima, CSIP, Otahi, CSTP-FO and COSAC.

Local media reported that about 3,000 people protested outside the territorial assembly in the capital Papeete to demand that the government withdraw its regressive pension "reform" bill. The unions said there were 8,000-10,000 demonstrators. The legislation is due to be submitted for debate at the end of the month and passed into law on March 1.

The trade union leaders called an end to the "indefinite" strike at 5 p.m., following an hour-long meeting with Assembly President Marcel Tuihani behind closed doors. Details of the talks were not revealed. The unions declared they would call further strike action unless the legislation was withdrawn.

President Edouard Fritch, leader of the ruling Tapura Huiraatira party, has refused to back down. In a statement on February 13, he said raising the pension age had been a topic of discussion by different governments for the past 10 years, but no action had been taken and "sacrifices" were now required.

"We have waited enough," Fritch declared. He noted that the five trade unions, along with business organisations, had been involved in negotiations over the new law and the text had been modified to take their views into account.

Fritch threatened that pensions would be cut off unless spending was reduced. He warned the unions: "The day that a pension is not paid to someone who worked 35 years, who saved money for 35 years, there will be a revolution."

The president stated that neither his government nor Paris was prepared to keep spending at current levels. Last August, Fritch made clear that he approved of deeper austerity measures planned by French President Emmanuel Macron. According to Radio NZ, Fritch "said he was aware that the French state needed to tighten its belt as do French Polynesians." Fritch will campaign on the pension cuts in the elections, to be held in April.

The French Polynesian economy went into recession in 2006. Like the entire Pacific region, it was severely affected by the global economic crash of 2008 and remains heavily indebted. Between 2007 and 2012, tourist arrivals plummeted by 42.9 percent, resulting in hotel closures and hundreds of job losses.

Unemployment stands at around 20 percent. According to the unions' estimate, in 2016 some 80,000 French Polynesians, almost a third of the

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population, were living in poverty.

The trade unions, however, offer no way forward for workers and are actively preparing a betrayal. They have already accepted spending cuts in principle. They merely differ with the government on which areas should be targeted first, warning that the population will not accept a pension cut.

On February 14, the website *Tahiti Infos* quoted Lucie Tiffenat, general secretary of the Otahi union and spokeswoman of the union alliance, saying “five billion [Polynesian francs] could be saved” through various cuts to the health system.

Radio 1 reported that Tiffenat said the unions wanted a “more comprehensive reform of social security in general, not just the retirement bill.” She attacked doctors for being too highly paid.

Underscoring their pro-capitalist orientation, the unions claimed that the business federations Medef and CPME, despite opposing the strike, also had concerns about the pension “reform.” This is because it would reduce their say in future decision-making and put all pension-related decisions in the hands of the ministers.

Similarly, French Polynesia’s main opposition party Tahoeraa Huiraatira criticised the government’s decision to raise the pension age, but called for “a discussion” about a “comprehensive reform” of both pensions and health care.

Tahoeraa Huiraatira is a right-wing party whose leader, former President Gaston Flosse, supported Marine Le Pen, leader of the fascist National Front, in last year’s French presidential election.

French Polynesia has long-standing strategic significance for France. The French military used its islands as the site for 193 nuclear weapons tests between 1966 and 1996, leading to soaring rates of cancer.

The general strike has undoubtedly provoked concern in Paris as well as in Australia and New Zealand, which regard the South Pacific as their backyard. All three imperialist powers have joined US military preparations and threats against China and are hostile to China’s growing economic influence in the Pacific, including French Polynesia.

The entire Pacific region is a cauldron of social tensions. Fiji airport workers recently gained widespread support during a month-long lockout. Last year Papua New Guinea was engulfed in widespread protests against police brutality, austerity, poverty and inequality.

Significantly, France’s corporate media and trade unions have remained silent on the French Polynesian strike, as have the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) and other pseudo-left groups that orbit the political establishment.

The last thing the French ruling elite and its political servants want is for a mass anti-austerity strike in one of its colonies to set an example. New Caledonia, French Guyana, Martinique and Guadeloupe are all beset by economic crises and have experienced significant strikes recently.

Fifty years after the revolutionary upheavals of 1968, the French working class is also suffering from record levels of inequality produced by a decade of austerity measures. Protests have risen against the Macron government, which is intensifying the assault on living standards, including plans to cut pensions and unemployment benefits, while at the same time diverting billions of euros to prepare the country for war.

Workers in French Polynesia cannot fight to defend their pensions, health care and other social rights within the straitjacket of the unions, which accept the entire framework of austerity and the capitalist nation-state system.

What is needed are workers’ committees, democratically controlled by the workers themselves and independent of the political establishment. These must be guided by a socialist and internationalist program, to unite workers throughout the Pacific, in France and other countries, in a struggle for a planned world economy and a workers government, based on meeting human needs, not protecting the fortunes of a wealthy elite.

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