

Major protests against French President Macron's austerity measures

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On Thursday, more than one hundred thousand people took to the streets throughout France to protest President Emmanuel Macron's plan to slash jobs and freeze wages in the public sector, and to privatize the French National Railways (SNCF) and destroy rail-workers' social rights.

The strikes and protests were called by seven unions in the public sector. According to the unions, more than 150 protests were organized nationwide, and around 500,000 people marched across France, including 65,000 in Paris, 55,000 in Marseille, 20,000 in Toulouse, 35,000 in La Rochelle, 15,000 in Bordeaux and Rouen, and 10,000 in Nantes. Between 1,000 and 10,000 people marched in other towns.

Students and high school students mobilized to mark the fiftieth anniversary of student revolt on March 22 that launched the events of May/June general strike in 1968.

In Paris, protesters carried banners expressing anger at the government and its plan to destroy social rights, reading "Macron resign!", "No to the destruction of public services!" and "We do not negotiate a social retreat. We fight it by the general strike!"

The sectors hit by strikes included railway, school, air transport, hospitals, libraries and other public services. Hundreds of flights and train services were cancelled and scores of schools closed.

The train service in the Paris region and in the provinces were hit. Air traffic was disrupted, with 30 percent of short haul flights cancelled at Paris airports. Yesterday, Air France staff staged a walkout as they protested working conditions and demanded a six percent pay rise across the board.

The protests indicate the social opposition that is developing against to Macron government amid growing radicalization in the working class internationally.

With Macron's approval ratings plunging, there is a growing public anger at his plans to impose a social counter-revolution. Having imposed labour decrees allowing bosses and unions to negotiate contracts, facilitating mass sackings and the imposition of salaries less than the minimum wage, Macron now aims to smash the public service workers.

In February, the government announced a sweeping attack on the public sector, which employs around 5 million people, including the elimination of 120,000 jobs, freezing wages,

hiring more contract workers and slashing budgets across the board.

The government is moving to privatize the French National Railways (SNCF), together with destroying rail workers' social rights—including a standard salary schedule, a retirement age of 52 for train drivers and 57 for other workers, and guaranteed lifetime employment established after World War II.

The trade unions and their pseudo-left allies including the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) and Jean Luc's Mélenchon's France Insoumise felt compelled to call for a symbolic action to defuse social anger. They are doing so while negotiating with Macron, encouraging illusions in the government, while doing everything possible to prevent an independent movement of the working class.

Laurent Berger, of the French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT), told France's RTL radio, "Either the government listens or civil service workers will be extremely mobilized".

Expressing his hostility to a broader social movement in the working class, Berger said, "The convergence of struggles is not the CFDT's cup of tea for a simple reason, it is that the convergence of the struggles never has concrete results."

On its part, Yves Veyrier, a spokesman for Force Ouvrier (FO), said, "We would prefer not to strike and would prefer to have a debate with the government, but we have asked Presidents Nicolas Sarkozy, François Hollande and now Emmanuel Macron and we are still waiting for it."

Workers must take these comments as a warning. The trade unions are preparing to suppress them, while seeking a deal with the government to impose its measures.

Macron is counting on the unions to suppress social opposition in order to ram through further cuts in the public sector and railway. He made clear that he won't retreat from his reform plan.

Despite growing militancy in the working class, workers are confronted with nationally oriented trade unions that seek to negotiate austerity with Macron. To oppose Macron's attacks, workers cannot rely on a few symbolic trade union protests organized at the national level. The key question is to take the struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucracy and its political allies and organizing independently to wage a political

struggle against the anti-democratic and militarist policies of Macron and the EU.

The Socialist Equality Party spoke to striking and protesting workers about what brought them onto the streets.

Jacques, who is a maintenance worker on the railway, said, “I’m demonstrating against the reform of the official status of train worker and against privatization as well. I myself have a status which is hardly exceptional. I earn \$1,854 per month. It’s better than some people that earn the minimum wage, but it is a far cry from having a privileged life because I earn such a wage!”

“Today with the privatization what is likely to happen, if they open us up to competition, is a social onslaught. Our wages will fall to the official minimum wage (SMIC) or below because this will be the case with our competitors. Already many at the SNCF are paid much closer to the SMIC than myself. Little by little, when we bid for projects we will lose because we will be too expensive. After that there will be redundancies and we will find ourselves unemployed.

“I don’t understand what the rich want with all the money they have. My father worked in industrial agriculture—in meat. Often he used to tell me, ‘Those people will eat steak at every meal.’ Today there are many people who can’t afford to eat meat. If we redistributed all that money, we would restart the economy—it’s obvious really.

“Macron, the European Union and the rich don’t even realize what’s going on in the world we live in – they live in another world. They don’t realize the difficulties we face every day. I, myself, am renovating a house while living in it. I’m surrounded by bits of cinderblock walls. I’ve been living here for seven years and I’m progressing bit by bit. They have gold and fineries, they just don’t realize. In seven years I’ve only just finished insulating the house. Now, we’re not so cold as before.

“For me Macron is a liberal extremist. I’ve often heard of left and right-wing extremists, but liberal extremists are the same... We have to get together all of us. I support workers in other countries with all my heart. If it’s days like today, we could all come together and we would be that much more powerful.

“The problems we have in France are the same problems all over the world, from liberalism and globalisation. The problem is international. Even if we had good politicians leading France, finance is stronger. We would be blocked internationally from doing good things. That’s why we need an international movement because a single country in today’s world system cannot succeed in following a progressive social policy. It must be the whole world together. It’s hard to deal with this but that’s the truth.

“There’s something I want to add. I’ve seen it for quite some time, but it has been getting worse. It’s the way in which the media manipulates rail-workers. Every time the media show train workers, they show those with the most privileges to denigrate all rail-workers. But there are many who earn little

more than the SMIC—they are paid between \$1,482 and \$1,606 per month and the media don’t speak about that. They only show drivers and others, who work on the trains, because they get bonuses. But this is justified because they work long hours and have to sleep over in other parts of the country. I spent two years in a depot repairing trains. It was night work. Today I’ve changed my job because I got health problems from that work. Now, I work in logistics, still on the maintenance of trains.”

Thibaut, a train driver, explained, “Today we’re demonstrating to defend our rights and conditions. We find it unjust that they are threatening to take them away.

“All the rights that we have won for our status and conditions of work. If tomorrow our health fund disappears and all the rights for which previous generations fought, well it’s up to us to make sure that we don’t lose these rights.

“Our right of work security does not mean ‘a job for life’. In any company, an employee who does something wrong can be fired. Our only advantage is that we have the opportunity to change jobs within our company.

“This can mean that the type of professional activity we carry out changes because our company has so many different types of work. Myself, I am a train driver. Tomorrow, if I have health problems, I might not be able to continue. I would be moved to a different activity, whereas in other companies if I no longer pass the medical I can be fired. That is the only difference. When I hear people say we have a job for life, it’s ridiculous.

“People say we’re paid too much. That’s another debate. I would like to show my paycheck to people so they can see my base pay. Yes, there are train workers who are well paid, but it’s because of the bonuses. However, if you are ill all the bonuses stop. I think there are many people in private industry that get a bigger base pay than me.

“Yes, you can a relatively high standard of living in certain jobs at the SNCF. It’s mainly the drivers and others that work on the trains. But if I’m ill for say six months I lose all of it. Everyone who works at a station or another location does not get bonuses and has a salary that is no more than the private sector.

“I support all the other workers who are on strike internationally. Every worker must defend his rights and fight to keep them. Even to fight for better working conditions. I’m for it!

“I don’t support giving the military, all these weapons and all the funding. There’s better things that money can be used for than buying armaments.”



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