

May Day 2018: Millions march on International Workers Day

Our reporters
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Millions of people around the world participated in protest marches and strikes yesterday to mark the holiday that celebrates the history, struggles and demands of the international working class. The tone and mood of the protests reflected the growing radicalization of the masses internationally, amid broad popular anger over social inequality and imperialist war.

On every continent, marching protesters yesterday faced the threat of police repression, as capitalist governments of all colorations step up their militarist and authoritarian agenda. Nor could the protests escape another key challenge facing workers internationally: the political influence of corporatist trade unions and their allies, including bourgeois governments, that called the May Day demonstrations. In many countries, including in some where workers mounted boycotts of the day's events, the protests were organised by forces whose hostility to the working class is impossible to deny.

Mass protests against austerity and war took place across Europe, in France, Spain, Greece, and Russia. In France, only weeks before the 50th anniversary of the May–June 1968 general strike, hundreds of thousands of people marched in hundreds of protests across the country, amid growing strikes against President Emmanuel Macron's social cuts and his government's bombings of Syria. Tens of thousands of people marched in Paris and Marseille, while thousands marched in Toulouse, Rennes, Lyon, Bordeaux, Nantes, Lille, Strasbourg, and Nancy.

In Paris, clashes erupted between the massive police presence and unidentified masked protesters, who hurled Molotov cocktails, torching a McDonald's restaurant and a Renault car concession. Some 200 people were arrested, and forces from across the political establishment denounced the protest, calling for more police action in France.

In Spain, tens of thousands of people marched against austerity in Madrid and in Barcelona, where marchers also protested the unelected government imposed on Catalonia by the central government in Madrid, after the crisis over the Catalan independence referendum last October. In all, the unions called protests in 70 Spanish cities.

In Greece, shipping and mass transit ground to a halt as workers struck and thousands joined multiple rallies in Athens

and Thessaloniki, amid rising anger against the EU austerity policies of the Syriza ("Coalition of the Radical Left") government. Significantly, Syriza has close ties to Greece's trade union federations, which called the protests against it. Nonetheless, masses of people demonstrated in a show of defiance towards both the EU and the treachery of Syriza, which came to power three years ago promising to end austerity, but has continued to impose it.

Protests took place in other countries across Europe, with 12,000 people marching in Vienna to protest the Austrian government's social cuts, and 340,000 people marching across Germany, according to the German Trade Union Federation.

Growing popular anger at NATO threats against Russia was expressed in marches across 735 cities, organized by trade unions and parties that offer political support to President Vladimir Putin. At least 130,000 people marched in the main rally in Moscow, while 60,000 marched in Krasnodar, 50,000 in St Petersburg, and 20,000 in Vladivostok. Smaller protests against Moscow's blocking of the encrypted messaging app Telegram, or in favor of US-backed opposition politician Alexei Navalny, gathered a few thousand people.

Across Canada and the US, various protests, strikes, pickets, occupations and demonstrations took place—including a rent strike in Hamilton, Ontario and continuing teacher strikes in Arizona. In New York, students at the New School occupied their cafeteria to express solidarity with workers fighting for a new contract, while port workers participated in an ILWU-organised strike across West Coast ports. In Puerto Rico, police clashed with demonstrators.

In the Middle East, hundreds of thousands of people marched in Turkey, defying growing repression from President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government. Approximately 100,000 marched in the main protest in Istanbul, with a smaller protest at Anadolu Square in the capital, Ankara, and in cities across Turkey, as Erdogan mobilized a heavy police presence against them. In Istanbul, dozens were arrested trying to reach Taksim Square, where the Turkish army slaughtered protesters precisely 41 years ago, in the bloody May Day massacre of 1977.

In countries across Africa, marches and state-sponsored rallies marked May Day. In South Africa, multi-millionaire

President Cyril Ramaphosa, who led the miners' union as it supported the Marikana massacre of dozens of its own striking members in 2012, received a warm welcome at the rally organized by the Congress of South African Trade Unions.

In Asia, there were protests across India in Delhi, Calcutta, Amritsar and Bangalore, while in Sri Lanka, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government banned all protests and meetings, specifically aimed at preventing the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka from holding its scheduled annual May Day events. Numbers of party members and supporters responded by picketing the Colombo Fort railway station to denounce the government's anti-democratic and anti-working class attacks. In Pakistan, workers and labour activists held a candlelight rally in Karachi to demand better working conditions.

In South Korea, in the midst of a huge military buildup on the Korean Peninsula, some 20,000 protesters rallied at a Korean Confederation of Trade Unions demonstration in the capital Seoul, demanding a higher minimum wage and decent wages and job security for all workers. In Indonesia, some 10,000 workers from various unions participated in a rally outside the presidential palace in Jakarta, demanding higher wages and an end to outsourcing.

A rally of around 2,000 garment workers in Phnom Penh, Cambodia was also called to focus on work-related grievances, but was stopped by riot police.

In the Philippines, workers from several labour groups demonstrated outside the presidential palace of President Rodrigo Duterte, burning effigies of Duterte in protest at his refusal to fulfill a campaign promise to end short-term employment. As well, the workers demanded jobs, higher wages and an end to government repression.

In Paris, WSWS reporters spoke to youth and workers who attended the main rally at Bastille Square. They spoke out against war and in support of the struggles of the working class, including the French rail workers' strike, which has targeted Macron's plans to privatize the railways.

Scott, a young student, said he was marching out of political opposition to Macron: "I think he wants to set up a sort of tyranny, that is why we have to stop him now." Scott denounced the military strikes on Syria by Paris, alongside Washington and London: "I think France plays a major role in this, it sends weapons to these countries and then it bombs these countries and I do not think it is fair. ... I find this so ridiculous, you had to expect it, but that does not mean that it is good."

Expressing his support and solidarity for the striking rail workers, Scott declared: "I think their struggle is praiseworthy. I have seen many of them, I have attended many of their events and I think there is a real press campaign against them. Their movement should grow. I think it is a good thing."

Scott also expressed the doubts of growing layers of workers and youth about the stranglehold of the unions over the class struggle. While the French rail unions have continued to

negotiate directly with the government, even as it insists it will not modify its reform at all, Scott said he did not think a trade union strategy could stop the cuts: "No, honestly, I don't think so. That has never been shown. No trade union has ever gotten a law fully withdrawn in the recent years. I think that has to be done by other means."

The WSWS also spoke to Glen, a Gabonese student studying in Paris, who bitterly attacked the neo-colonial policies of the imperialist powers in the oil-rich former French African colony. "Gabon is a small country with a great deal of wealth. We should live better. A Gabonese worker does not get even close to the French minimum wage; he is paid less than 100 euros a month. ... The IMF bailouts give money to [President] Ali Bongo to hold parties, but that does not help the workers."

Glen added, "Today Macron is the president of the rich, but not the president of the French people. He attacked Syria, claiming that President Bashar al-Assad is killing his own people. But Macron let Ali Bongo kill his own people in front of French troops (stationed in Gabon). Then he is the first to lecture everyone about democracy. So we will give up nothing, we will go to the end to make sure that labor rights are respected in Gabon."

Glen also appealed for unity among workers and against the victimization of immigrants: "All the workers facing repression, the retirees, we should give up nothing. We have to rise up for justice and to demand our wages. We deserve that as Gabonese. We ask our French brothers to hear us, because we are brothers of the French people. We do not come to France for fun, we come to study and to go back to Gabon and work. More than 1,000 Gabonese have been forced to seek asylum in France. ... But we all have to be able to go back to our respective countries. We are the youth; we are tomorrow. We must rise up to throw out those who are guarding the political order."



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