“Human Wave” rallies protest austerity in France

Our reporters
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On Saturday, 250,000 people joined “Human Wave” protests organized by a group of parties and trade unions led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s Unsubmissive France (LFI) movement.

The protests reflected the growing radicalization of workers and youth in opposition to the militarist and austerity policies of President Emmanuel Macron in France and more broadly across Europe. Even as thousands of people marched in France, mass protests were erupting in Berlin against a march organized by the neo-fascist Alternative for Germany (AfD), and the Irish population was voting in a referendum to legalize abortion.

Saturday’s demonstrations in France came only days after 95 percent of rail workers voting in a company referendum rejected Macron’s planned privatization of the French National Railway (SNCF). The vote took place amid strikes not only at SNCF but also at Air France and in the public sector.

A chasm separates the growing opposition of the French working class from the policies of Mélenchon and his allies in the trade union bureaucracy, the Socialist Party and pseudo-left organizations such as the New Anti-capitalist Party who led Saturday’s protests. Mélenchon is doing everything in his power to boost the authority of the unions, which have worked systematically to isolate the SNCF strikers and are holding talks with the government in an effort to end the walkout on Macron’s terms.

The unions have called off strikes at Air France until a new CEO is named, limited public-sector strikes to symbolic one-day actions, and separated the rail strike from those in the rest of the public sector.

The LFI is insisting that the workers look to the unions and the parties allied with them to forge a united movement to pressure Macron. This means, in practice, subordinating the opposition of the working class to organizations and parties that are hostile to any struggle to bring down the Macron government, which has made clear it will not retreat from its program of privatization and the gutting of statutes protecting the jobs and conditions of rail workers.

The Parti de l’égalité socialiste (Socialist Equality Party—PES) is calling for the formation of rank-and-file committees of action to take the conduct of the struggles against the Macron government out of the hands of the trade unions and fight to broaden the movement throughout France and Europe as a whole.

Saturday’s protests occurred in nearly 200 cities, according to figures provided by LFI, with 80,000 people marching in Paris. *World Socialist Web Site* reporters interviewed protesters at the Paris march who stated their opposition to Macron’s agenda of war, social austerity and attacks on democratic rights.

Mélodia said she was “moved by the notion of unity” of the different struggles against Macron, and that she had come to demonstrate against attacks on immigrants and the right to asylum. She said, “The asylum-immigration law defended by (Interior Minister) Gérard Collomb is sordid and has been criticized as being contrary to human rights. It proposes, among other things, to increase from three to 90 days the time asylum seekers can be kept in detention centers, including women and children.”

She pointed to the role of the wars launched by the major NATO powers, including France, in provoking the refugee crisis. “In general,” she said, “I find that France does not have a reasonable or responsible policy, because the interventionist policy, especially in the Middle East, has caused enormous chaos that hurts the population. We know today that among the major reasons, which were hidden, for the wars in Libya and in Syria was access to oil resources.”

She stressed her opposition to Macron’s social attacks on the SNCF and the hospitals, as well as the rise of police state measures. “I am hostile to the generalized state of emergency,” she said. “It creates a sort of hysteria and a repressive policy that favors a spiral of violence. We saw at the protests at Notre Dame des Landes scenes of civil war in France, where the police forces were using tanks… This will only strengthen the position of the National Front.”

Mélodia added that despite the reactionary policies of the ruling elite, “I remain essentially optimistic about

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humanity's capacity to understand the social, human and ecological stakes in this situation and react in a planned and conscious way."

WSWS reporters also spoke to a couple directly affected by the planned 4,000 job cuts at the public unemployment agency, Pôle emploi. They said working conditions there were getting "very, very bad," noting, "We have on average 303 job seekers per advisor." They added, "The job offers that we get show us that the minimum wage has become the average, though the minimum wage is supposed to be for people without qualifications or experience. But now we often have to propose to job seekers positions at 80 to 120 percent of the minimum wage, with no job security."

They expressed their anger at the growing class disparities in medical care in France: "The situation in the hospitals is really serious… Moreover, having to get treatment if your situation is precarious leads to serious differences in treatment outcomes. That is always how it turns out."

"There is a layer of people whose living standards do not really allow them access to dental care anymore. That is so terrible. The world should have solved these problems long ago thanks to science and technology."

Mathieu, another demonstrator, stressed the need to unify the struggles against Macron, saying, "I think everything will depend on our ability to struggle all together. If we don't all fight together, if our struggles get separated, we will not manage to build something strong."

On the "reform" Macron wants to dictate to the SNCF, Mathieu said that Macron "probably thinks that all these movements will mean nothing, he can pass his law anyway. But what he is underestimating is the anger that he will create among people who are demonstrating… What he is doing today is not going in a good direction for what it means about his future relationship to the French people."

Mathieu also hailed the strikes by teachers in several US states. "I think that striking is one of the best ways to show our discontent," he said. "And it is also a way of going into struggle against the employers, that is, a struggle through which new social rights can be established. I strongly encourage the teachers there to mobilize and protest for their rights, even if they are in a country where striking is not necessarily easy. I think it is a good way for us to improve the situation and ultimately to win our demands."

Protesters' remarks reflected the social gulf separating broad masses of workers entering into struggle against Macron from the trade unions and political groups that called the rally. The unions, former Socialist Party (PS) presidential candidate Benoît Hamon, the New Anti-capitalist Party and other Mélenchon allies all back the trade unions' negotiations with Macron and oppose a strategy of unifying the strike struggles into a movement to bring down his government.

Several protesters told WSWS reporters about their disappointment in the trade unions, which are not bringing together the strike struggles into a unified movement. They stressed their lack of confidence in the unions' capacity and willingness to fight Macron, or even to modify government policy.

Marie-Noëlle, who works in social services, stressed her anger with the French political establishment and her disillusionment with the unions. "There are many citizens who would be willing to donate their experience and their time, but no one listens to them," she said. "Politicians and finance dominate. The cut to the tax on large fortunes (ISF)—it means giving even more money to the rich… It is too bad that politicians do not listen to the street. It is the only way today for us to make ourselves heard."

She stressed her lack of confidence in the talks on social policy between Macron and the unions. "The unions are really useless," she said. "I don't know much about them. Unfortunately, I was never unionized and so I don't know how it works from the inside, but I know what I know. They no longer have the sort of power they once had."

Aurélie and Maxime discussed with WSWS reporters the perspective of building independent rank-and-file committees to take the struggle out of the hands of the unions and unify them in a political movement against Macron. They agreed, saying that today, "The disunity of the different struggles is pretty flagrant. When you look at the unions or the left political parties, a lot of these left parties have totally abandoned us."

They added, "If you look at the strikes we will be having in France, it is pretty impressive. And yet, so far what these sorts of protests have accomplished is, let's say, sort of a mixed bag."

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