

Workers and retirees rally against French government's austerity policies

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Yesterday was the first demonstration after the end of summer vacation called by French trade and student unions against austerity policies, three months after the end of the French rail strike. Workers, retirees and youth marched on the streets amid a deep crisis of President Emmanuel Macron's government, as criticisms of Macron grow in the police force and ministers are resigning in droves from the cabinet.

At the same time, there is deep and growing distrust among broad sections of workers in the trade unions. Despite 95 percent opposition to the rail privatization among the rail workers, the unions organized only rolling strikes, while they continued to negotiate privatization with the Macron government and ultimately wound the strikes down during the summer. The unions' inability to organize a victory despite the overwhelming support among the workers and the deep unpopularity of the government is unanswerable proof of their bankruptcy.

This experience is already having a powerful radicalizing influence in the working class. Growing numbers of workers distrust the unions and are expressing their interest in a general strike and the organization of revolutionary struggle against the Macron government.

In all, over 100 demonstrations took place across France, called by the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT), Workers Force (FO) and Solidarity unions, together with the Independent Democratic High School Students Federation, the National Union of High School Students, and the National Union of University Students. Not many more people attended than during the last national protest action, on June 28, as the unions wound down the rail strike.

In Paris, where clashes erupted between police forces and a group of roughly 100 people in the protest march,

leading to five arrests, the unions counted 50,000 protesters (21,000 according to police sources). There were between 3,000 and 5,000 marching in other cities, including Marseille, Lyon, Nantes and Le Havre.

WSWS reporters in Paris spoke to a retiree, Joyce, who lives in Brittany and came to Paris to express her opposition to Macron: "We have very low pensions, and they are not being increased. They are increasing the minimum old age salary, but low pensions that are under that threshold are not being increased. Many women had children and raised them at home, and then we found odd jobs and if then we had a workplace accident ... well then, you don't get a big pension. How are we supposed to live on that? Everything is taken away from us retirees, and for the workers it is the same thing. Even the rail workers, everything, all their social rights are being taken away."

Joyce also denounced the French government's wars in the Middle East and its plans for hundreds of billions of euros in military spending: "In Syria, what are we doing in that country, how is that any of our business? It's not our business. I don't agree with it at all."

Joyce pointed to the growing pressures on workers under Macron: "I come from a family where there are a lot of nurses. They are swamped at work, like my daughter in law. ... They reduce the number of beds in the hospital, patients have to go to another hospital, and then elsewhere for tests, then you have to go 200 kilometers to do more tests."

Joyce said Macron is only "the friend of the rich" and said the only way forward was to take the revolutionary road: "I think that in France there is far too much social inequality. Everyone should be able to live in a decent way, have enough to eat and have a roof over their heads. We don't need to give it all to the people who are friends of Macron on the stock exchange. We have

a government in any case that doesn't care about us at all, so we go and protest but it will do no good. We can protest all we want, ultimately we will have to do like in 1789, basically.”

Over 1,000 people demonstrated in Amiens, an industrial town and former French Communist Party bastion, hard-hit by deindustrialization, where hospital workers, teachers and local government workers made up the bulk of the marchers.

Philippe, a CGT rail worker, spoke to WSWS reporters in Amiens to denounce the sell-out of the rail strike and the role of CGT General Secretary Philippe Martinez: “He’s no fighter against capitalism, there should be no deals done with the capitalists and their government. Macron needs removing, he won’t give concessions. That’s the lesson of the strike. It needs a concerted movement of the whole working class, a revolution.”

In Marseille, WSWS reporters spoke to marchers among port workers, local government workers, the unemployed and teachers in vocational high schools.

Marc, a professor at Marseille’s Diderot High School, told the WSWS that he is “against Macron’s reforms that reinforce social inequality. We are struggling against the reform of vocational education, which will not allow us to train people to act as citizens and integrate them so they can take a real place in society. In fact, the government plans to cut the number of hours spent on general education, so they are just turned into raw material for exploitation, good for hiring but not for being critical.”

Marc pointed to the wave of ministers’ resignations from the government: “We see now that Macron’s politics is just old wine in new bottles. (Interior Minister Gérard) Collomb wants to take back the municipal seat he had. (Ecology Minister Nicolas) Hulot served as a left cover for the government which is not ecological at all, although that is the great issue today. The government was put in place by the powerful people who own the economy.”

Asked what conclusions he drew from the rail workers’ strike, Marc said he thought the strike was “legitimate.” He added, “Our comrades at the National Railways tried to change their methods of striking but finally they obtained none of their demands.”

Marc indicated his lack of confidence in the traditional symbolic protests organized by the trade

unions: “We are in a situation where workers and manual workers are left to fend for themselves. We have not yet managed to find more effective ways of struggling, maybe that will involve better use of social media.”

Graciela, an unemployed worker, told WSWS reporters in Marseille she “contests the policy of our dear president. The laws he is ramming through pillage our rights and attack the poorest among us, while the politicians and the lobbies are getting fatter off our backs.”

Graciela also stressed that workers should look for new means of communicating and organizing their struggles: “The press is silent about us. We must work via social media so that we can bring everyone together.” She said she hoped that the army would support the population against the ruling elites if there were a revolutionary crisis in France: “You know, there are petitions circulating for the army to join the people.”

Asked about Macron’s rail privatization and attack on rail workers’ wage levels, Graciela said Macron’s reform should be repealed and scrapped. She explained, “I want to believe that the people can go down into the streets to say stop these laws, we reject them. Everyone has to go out onto the streets.”



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