

French public sector workers strike against Macron government attacks

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Hundreds of thousands of French workers demonstrated on Thursday as part of a nationwide public sector strike to oppose the Emmanuel Macron government's draft law on the "modernization" of the public sector.

After six months of "yellow vest" protests, all of the unions felt obliged to call for participation in the day of action, fearing they would otherwise lose control of the anti-government protest movement.

Macron has pledged to eliminate 120,000 out of 5.5 million civil service jobs by 2022. The positions eliminated will be replaced by lower-paying contract jobs from the private sector for one-off assignments. Workers will be forced to move between jobs and locations, and work longer hours. Once the reform has been approved by the National Assembly, it will take effect on January 1, 2020.

Over 150 protest demonstrations took place on Thursday. Teachers, customs officers, orderlies, nurses and air traffic controllers were mobilized. Some 110,000 people demonstrated, according to the French government, while the CGT union federation claimed 250,000 participants. There were 3,000 protesters in Marseille (a union source reported), and between 3,300 to 5,300 in Lyon, and thousands in Rennes, Montpellier, Bordeaux, Angers, Lille, Strasbourg and Perpignan. In Paris, 30,000 people demonstrated, according to the unions.

The workers who turned out did so despite their strong mistrust of the trade union apparatus, which limited the size of the turnout. Secretary of State Olivier Dussopt estimated the number of strikers in the civil service at 3.3 per cent, in the hospitals at 4 per cent and in the state civil service at 11.4 per cent, with a strong participation by teachers, who are also mobilized against the education "reform." The education ministry reported 17.6 percent and 11.7 percent striking in primary and secondary schools, respectively.

In Paris, the WSWs spoke with Anita, a retired civil servant who came "to defend the public service, to preserve all the gains that have been won through hard work and for the right to stand together to express our disapproval of the policies that are currently being pursued. There is money, so we have to share it. If there is globalization, we must share globally on a human level, for the happiness of the people in general."

Anita explained that the fight against social inequality must go through to the ending of capitalist exploitation: "We should all be equal, we are all human beings, women, men, whatever the color, whatever the country. However, decision-makers still want more money, more capital. If they can't exploit the Western working class, they will look for children in India, everywhere to produce at low cost and fill their pockets."

The WSWs also interviewed George, who works at the Bobigny Regional Court. "We have tools that work poorly," he said, "that are not adapted and that make our work more difficult when we are already overloaded."

He pointed out that "the index point [that determines civil service wages] has been frozen for nine years ... Everything increases except our pay."

George had no illusions about Macron's attacks: "He doesn't care anyway. Macron is financed by the rich, so he doesn't care about the 'yellow vests'. He makes and carries out a policy for the rich, for those who financed his campaign. He owes them."

George indicated he didn't believe in the current initiative of the unions: "It's a real problem. I think that 'social dialogue' is bullshit. Workers' unions are being caught up in it and some will go so far as to accept money. They are caught in a trap where social dialogue leads us to believe that we might have common interests with employers, when we see the decline in the rights of employees and the poorest. We must stop pulling the wool over our eyes and return to shorter, more ferocious

forms of struggle. The ‘yellow vests’ may be a solution.”

The WSWs spoke to Lucile, a high school teacher, who said that “it is a demonstration that concerns all civil servants, not only teachers, and it is against the breakdown of public service that has been organized since the election of our very dear president. Now it is really becoming something that is really serious. At school there is an ongoing reform that is very serious, especially for high school students. Also in the hospital and in all public services, so they will be aligned with conditions in the private sector.”

Asked about teachers’ strikes in the US in 2018 and 2019, Lucile replied that she “followed the strikes” and saluted their struggle: “Teachers in the United States do not have the same protection as we who are well-protected. I have not followed the teachers’ strikes in Europe, but it is important to make our voice heard now for the European elections.”

“We have the same needs whether in Europe or throughout the world,” she concluded. “That’s it, we can’t give up because that’s what they expect us to do.”

The French government’s attacks on the public service, as well as on pensions, confirm that Macron has no intention of listening to workers’ demands. After six months of “yellow vest” protests, Macron intends to force through and intensify the policies in favor of the rich that have made him the most unpopular president of the Fifth Republic. His attitude to the workers has been demonstrated in his deployment of soldiers in Operation Sentinel, with permission to fire on “yellow vest” protesters.

It is essential that workers take their struggles out of the hands of the trade union apparatuses, which negotiate and accept the government’s austerity policies and which have been hostile to the “yellow vests” struggles. The latter have shown in many ways the way forward, by organizing themselves independently of the trade unions. They have faced brutal repression and denunciations in the media.

The unions, which isolated and strangled the railway workers’ strike last year, have no intention of organizing a struggle. Financed to the tune of billions of euros by corporations and the state as part of the “social dialogue,” they are hostile to opposition to Macron’s policy, which threatens their material interests. They announced that the objective of Thursday’s rally was merely “to inform, raise awareness and increase the opposition to this bill.”

Faced with Macron’s obvious intransigence, Jean-Marc Canon of the CGT claimed that “the possibilities of social

dialogue with the government have been exhausted.”

In fact, the union apparatuses organized this week’s strike only out of fear of being overwhelmed by the workers. Union officials are nervously watching the rise of workers’ struggles in France and across Europe.

Nurses and nurses’ aides at the Chalon sur Saône hospital have been on strike since Wednesday. The *Info.Chalon* website explained that the strike was launched independently of the unions. An emergency room doctor described the conditions: “In one year, we have only five days without any patients in the emergency corridors, with sometimes up to 18 patients sleeping in the corridors.”

The unification of the ongoing struggles requires a conscious break with the trade unions and the creation of action committees to coordinate a political struggle against Macron, the European Union and the international financial aristocracy.

Twenty-eight years after the Stalinist dissolution of the USSR, falsely described as the “End of History” and the class struggle by the ideologists of the ruling class, the struggle of the “yellow vests” as well as the public sector workers is part of a resurgence of the class struggle around the world.

Teachers have been mobilized in the US, the UK, Kenya and Poland. Movements of “yellow vests” have also emerged in Portugal, Germany and beyond. Mass movements of workers and youth are aimed at overthrowing military dictatorships in Algeria and Sudan. Faced with the intransigence of the financial aristocracy and the politicians it places in power, only the revolutionary path is open to workers.



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