

French unions meet with Macron administration to organize attack on pensions

Will Morrow
7 September 2019

The Macron administration in France concluded two days of talks with the major trade union federations and the country's employer association on Friday, as part of preparations to announce sweeping cuts to pension entitlements. The government is expected to announce the new pension reform law at some time in the autumn.

The meeting, chaired by Prime Minister Edouard Philippe, was universally presented in the media as a negotiation of adversaries: with the unions, particularly Workers Force (FO) and the General Federation of Labor (CGT), supposedly rejecting any measures demanded by employers that would negatively impact their members. The reality is that all the unions agree with the government's pro-business proposal, and the gathering focused rather on how they will suppress the anger and opposition in the working class to this historic attack.

The restructuring of the national pension system is the centerpiece of President Emmanuel Macron's austerity program. In July, following 18 months of consultations, the government published a report produced by Jean Paul Delevoye, a long-time career Republicans politician appointed by Macron to the new post of "high commissioner for the reform of pensions." On Tuesday, Delevoye was promoted to a permanent seat at the government's ministerial table, while keeping the same title.

While the full details have not been released, the proposed pension system will include certain major elements. It will abolish in one stroke 42 different pension entitlements that currently apply within specific industries and create a single universal scheme in their place. Pension rights that had been won by different sections of public sector workers in major struggles in the 20th century, including railway

workers, teachers, nurses and other healthcare workers, will no longer apply. This change, which is grotesquely being presented as improving the equality in retirement, had been particularly demanded by business.

Secondly, pensions will no longer be an annuity, in a guaranteed amount of money. Instead, workers will accumulate points over the course of their working lives. Upon their retirement, these points will be converted via some as-yet undisclosed mechanism into a monetary amount. This will allow either the Macron or any future administration to continually reduce the monetary value of points and compel workers to work for longer by making retirement impossible.

Delevoye's report also included a recommendation to raise the effective retirement age for a full pension from 62 to 64 years. This would be achieved via a so-called "pivot" age whose purpose is to disguise the increase—workers who retire between 62 and 64 years will forfeit part of their pension, and those who retire after 64 will gain a bonus.

In an interview with *France 2* on August 26, Macron claimed he was not opposed to maintaining the retirement age at 62, but may opt to achieve the same result via different means, by increasing the total number of years that workers must pay into their pension to retire on a full benefit.

The French Democratic Labour Confederation (CFDT) union is openly supporting the Macron administration's policy. CFDT head Laurent Berger said after the first day of talks on Thursday that the union supports a "qualitative reform" of the pension system. He called for the government to increase the required years of service instead of the effective retirement age, which would more nakedly expose the union's own efforts to promote the law and threaten to provoke broader opposition. "If this pivot age

concentrates the idea that it's age and 'working longer' that is the task of this reform, we will be stuck," he said.

Aware of the widespread anger in the working class against the reform, the CGT and FO are fraudulently posturing as opponents of the law, in order to be able to sabotage any struggle against it. They have called a series of isolated strikes and one-day protests to isolate every section of workers from one another and prevent a unified struggle.

This month alone, the unions have called a one-day strike among Parisian bus and rail workers on September 13, a strike by public sector professional employees on September 16, a national "day of action" organized by FO on September 23, another "day of action" by the CGT on September 24, and a national strike of railway workers on September 24.

Workers have seen it all countless times. After the political theater and declarations of opposition, the unions have negotiated and imposed major attacks with the Macron administration and his predecessors in the Socialist Party and Republicans over decades. Since Macron came to power, they have signed on to the destruction of the labor code, facilitating mass layoffs, and sold out the 2017 strike by railway workers to pave the way for the privatization of the national railways.

When "yellow vest" protests erupted in November last year in opposition to social inequality, a major factor driving protests was the existing poverty-level pension rates for retirees. The unions denounced the protests, with CGT head Philippe Martinez lyingly claiming that they were right-wing and fascistic. The role of the unions expresses their objective function as bribed allies of the corporations and the government—from whom they receive ninety percent of their revenue—tasked with suppressing workers.

In an interview with *Liberation* on September 4, Martinez criticized the Macron administration for having sidelined the union and not incorporated it sufficiently closely into the organization of its attacks on workers since coming to power. "We are criticized for not wanting to talk, but we aren't normally invited!," he said. "In one-on-ones, with Macron, I saw him last in June 2017. We're not the largest union, but we are still present in the country, especially when there are social movements."

The unions' role exposes at the same time the various

pseudo-left organizations that continually promote them, including the New Anti-Capitalist Party and Workers Struggle. These parties insist that workers must subordinate their struggles to these corrupted apparatuses only because they are factions of the union apparatuses themselves and seek greater privileged positions within them, and because they are hostile to the development of any independent movement of the working class.

In an editorial published yesterday, entitled "Pension reforms: the long-term decision," *Le Monde* hailed the Macron administration's decision to hold consultations with the unions to organize the pension cuts. The editors declared with satisfaction, "We have sufficiently reproached the head of state with ignoring, and even dismissing, the social actors, to not congratulate ourselves for this turn."

It concluded with the warning over the danger of a social explosion in the working class. "The consultation cannot get lost in the haze," they warned. "The destruction of 42 existing pension systems will cause pain and inevitably raise tensions..." Macron's "effort is far from being won."

The Macron administration is now intensifying its austerity program as part of a broad acceleration of austerity across the European Union. The ruling class intends for the working class to pay for the failure of the capitalist system through an unending assault on their social entitlements.

In Italy, coalition government of the Democratic Party and Five-Star Movement was sworn in on Thursday, tasked with intensifying social cuts demanded by the EU. It is expected to slash tens of billions of euros in its budget to be handed down next month. In Germany, the *Sddeutsche Zeitung* and other pro-business commentators are demanding that the Grand Coalition introduce an "Agenda 2040," to continue the Hartz IV austerity measures initiated by the Social Democratic-Greens government in the 2000s.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)