Defending pensions against Macron requires an international political strategy

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This statement was published in French and distributed to striking Paris rail and bus workers.

This month, many sections of workers will take strike action against the drastic cuts to pensions and the police state policies of French President Emmanuel Macron. Mass transit, hospital workers, the public service, electricity workers and rail workers are all preparing strikes amid widespread anger among workers and youth.

In the working class, there is a determination to prevent the slashing of pensions, which would impact millions of workers. A recent poll found that 62 percent of the French population wants a mass movement against Macron, the "president of the rich."

The unions have not called this month's protests to mobilize the immense power of the working class, but rather to let off steam and sabotage any struggle. Once again, they have separated workers according to industry and even according to the trade union to which they belong. The greatest fear of the union apparatus is the development of a unified counteroffensive of the entire working class for its social and democratic rights.

Almost a year after the first "yellow vest" protests, which erupted outside the unions and shook Macron's government to its foundations, critical questions are posed to workers and youth. The "yellow vest" movement saw an unprecedented outpouring of popular anger at the unions, their financing by employers and the state, and their bankruptcy and impotence. Workers are on a diametrically opposite trajectory to the unions, which are negotiating cuts to pensions, unemployment insurance and other critical social programs with Macron.

Macron has shown over months of bloody repression of the "yellow vests," with the largest wave of arrests in metropolitan France since the Nazi Occupation, that he will not back down. Against the workers, he has behind him the international financial markets and the entire ruling class in Europe.

The way forward to defend pensions and oppose the well-advanced drive towards police state rule is to turn to the international working class. After decades following the Stalinist regime's restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union in 1991, during which the class struggle was suppressed around the world or straitjacketed by nationalist bureaucracies, it is reemerging with explosive force.

A broad, global resurgence of class struggle, driven by mounting opposition to social inequality and militarism, is underway. The last year saw a wave of teachers' strikes in the United States, the first mass strikes in that country since the 1980s, and the first national teachers strike in Poland since capitalist restoration. Alongside the "yellow vests," mass protests have erupted demanding the fall of the Algerian and Sudanese military regimes and in Hong Kong against social inequality and for democratic rights, defying the Chinese Stalinist regime.

The collective industrial power of billions of workers around the world must be mobilized against the small propertied elite that benefits from austerity, police state militarism and war. However, this requires a decisive organizational and political break with the nationally-based union bureaucracies, which negotiate the terms of austerity with the capitalist class in every country.

Workers and youth need their own committees of action, directly controlled by them and independent of the unions, and organized on an international scale. These new rank-and-file organizations in workplaces, schools and working class communities are the only way to coordinate workers' struggles and overcome their sabotage by the unions, which isolate workers along national lines and further divide them industry by industry.

Building and sustaining such organizations of struggle requires a turn to a Marxist political perspective. The only viable perspective for workers organized in committees of

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action is the taking of power by the working class internationally and the expropriation of the financial aristocracy on a socialist program.

This entails a decisive break with petty-bourgeois parties like Unsubmissive France and the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA), oriented to the unions and their talks with Macron. These organizations descend from Stalinism and various renegades from Trotskyism. They promote illusions that the old national union bureaucracies, which initially denounced the "yellow vest" movement as fascist, can be forced to mount a genuine struggle.

NPA official Olivier Besancenot noted at his party's summer school that since 2003, four struggles against pension cuts have been lost in France. Speaking of union protests, he said, "[W]e know it will not work." The best he could do, however, was to call for "all political class struggle union teams" to unify with workers, youth and "yellow vest" protesters in a movement "more or less at the same level as the densest weeks, in terms of the class struggle, that we saw last year."

But last year's protests were not sufficient to halt attacks on working people. As workers and youth enter into struggle against Macron, it is essential to fully measure the political challenges they face.

A decade after the 2008 Wall Street crash nearly brought down the world financial system, the capitalist system is moving back towards fascism and war. While Washington speculates about attacking Iran and Trump "jokes" about canceling the US presidential elections, Britain's parliament is shut down, as the ruling class bitterly debates Brexit. German right-wing extremist professors backed by the entire political establishment legitimize Hitler as "not cruel" to justify remilitarizing German foreign policy, while Macron last year hailed fascist dictator Philippe Pétain as a "great soldier."

Calls for an "apolitical" struggle under such conditions are light-minded and bankrupt. Workers face a political struggle.

The "yellow vests" showed courage and determination, but also the limits of what a spontaneous "apolitical" struggle without perspective could achieve. While they elicited enormous sympathy among workers in France and around the world, they could not lead a broader, international movement. Nearly a year after the outbreak of their struggle, a bitterly unpopular Macron remains in power and on the offensive against workers' living standards.

The historic alternative to the bourgeoisie's drive to fascism, war and the immiseration of the working class is the Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). Macron's drive to dismantle all the social programs built amid the collapse of fascist rule in Europe after World War II, when the Stalinist parties blocked the seizure of power by the working class, vindicates the ICFI's struggle for world socialist revolution.

The entire framework of the "debate" accepted by the trade unions and all the official parties—that there is no money for pensions, health care, education and the other social rights of the working class—is a lie. The money exists—but it is monopolized in the hands of a tiny corporate elite.

The answer is the socialist reorganization of society: the expropriation of the ill-gotten fortunes of the corporate and financial elite and the transformation of the major banks and corporations into public utilities, democratically controlled by the working class to meet social need, not private profit.

The French section of the ICFI, the Parti de l'égalité socialiste (PES), was founded in 2016, nearly a half century after the ICFI's former section, the Organisation communiste internationaliste of Pierre Lambert, broke with the ICFI and Trotskyism in 1971 to pursue a "Union of the Left" alliance with the bourgeois Socialist Party (PS). The PES counterposes to the nationally-based, anti-Trotskyist perspective of building opportunist parties seeking entry into bourgeois governments the struggle to build a Marxist vanguard in the working class in France fighting for a program of international socialist revolution.

We urge workers, young people and genuinely socialist-minded intellectuals who want to take up the fight against capitalism and for socialism to join the PES and to build it as the revolutionary leadership of the working class.

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