

Protest marches called this week as French public sector strike continues

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The French public sector strike is set to continue today as hundreds of thousands of French public sector workers protest President Emmanuel Macron's pension cuts and austerity policies. New strike actions and protest rallies are called for tomorrow.

The public sector strike in France is part of a global upsurge of the class struggle, which has seen substantial sections of the working class in Chile, Bolivia, Ecuador, Lebanon and Iraq, and the strikes by US and Mexican autoworkers and British rail workers.

"Monday will be extremely complicated for all our passengers, the network will still be extremely disrupted," announced French National Railways (SNCF) spokeswoman Agnès Ogier. She indicated that only 15 to 20 percent of trains would run, including both long-distance high speed trains (TGV) and regional express trains (TER). International Eurostar, Thalys and Lyria trains to Britain, Belgium and Switzerland are also heavily affected by strikes.

The Independent Authority for Parisian Transport (RATP) said metro and Regional Express (RER) lines will also be heavily disrupted. Only a few metro lines will run partial service around rush hour, while only a small fraction of RER and tramway and half of buses will be operating.

Tens of thousands of the nearly 1 million staff in the French public education system are expected to strike as well, down from half to two-thirds of staff on Thursday and Friday. Strikes are also continuing in airports, and the General Directorate of Civil Aviation (DGAC) has again asked airlines to reduce the number of flights.

Broader sections of the public sector workforce that struck last week—including hospitals, energy, and ports—as well as refinery workers are expected to again strike and march tomorrow.

While anger continues to mount at the pension cuts and the police repression of Thursday's protests, workers must be warned: the unions are preparing a sell-out. It is critical for workers to take the strike out of the hands of the unions, draw broader layers of workers and youth into the strike action, and take up a struggle to bring down the Macron government. This is the only way to halt the Macron government's onslaught against the workers.

Predictably, Macron government officials are making clear that they are determined to ram through their reform and will at most make only token changes, and trade union officials are signaling that they are looking for a compromise with Macron.

After many workers stayed on strike Friday, the day after the December 5 national day of action, several unions again felt compelled to call new protests. The Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT), Workers Force (FO), Solidarity and the United Union Federation (FSU) all issued calls on Friday night for strikes and protest marches tomorrow and pledged to "make the movement last in the longer term." The CGT, FO, Solidarity and FSU also said they would meet to discuss how to proceed tomorrow night.

CGT General Secretary Philippe Martinez called on the government to withdraw its planned cuts, which he said "will increase poverty in this country." However, Martinez appealed to Prime Minister Édouard Philippe for collaboration, advising Philippe to "intervene to say 'we have heard the country's anger, we are starting over, we are withdrawing the plan,' and rework it."

While calling protests, these unions are also working closely with the Macron government, publicly and in back channels. At the same time as they announced the strike and protest marches tomorrow, the unions announced that they would meet with Solidarity

Minister Agnès Buzyn today to discuss their plans. “The anger of the French people has been heard,” Buzyn declared in response.

This is a cynical trick, as the government is making very clear that its response to the growing social anger is to work closely with the unions to pass its pension cuts with, at most, minor changes.

In their current form, Macron’s cuts not only eliminate special pension funds in the public sector, but raise the retirement age from 62 to 64, and introduce a pension “by points” system. This device allows the state to slash the value of pensions over time, as the “points” workers would receive for paying into the pension system have no fixed monetary value. The state has full latitude each year to decide how much pension money each “point” would give workers retiring that year.

Philippe gave an interview published yesterday in the *Journal du dimanche* (JDD), announcing that he would give a speech on Wednesday at the Economic, Social and Environmental Council (CESE) announcing last minute fine-tuning of the cuts. The CESE is a body where state officials speak to both employers groups and the trade unions to discuss social cuts and other legislation.

Philippe said he would announce more details on the implementation of Macron’s pension reform at the CESE. However, he stressed that there would be no turning back from the general direction of the Macron government’s cuts. “If we do not make a progressive reform now, someone else will come along and do a brutal one later,” Philippe told the JDD.

Martinez appeared on France Inter radio yesterday afternoon to make clear that he would work closely with Philippe after he speaks Wednesday. “We are not saying it’s either they withdraw their policy or else, we say withdraw it and improve the system, which is the best in the world,” he said.

Echoing Macron’s arguments for the pension cuts, Martinez said: “We say that we have one of the best pension systems in the world, we just have to improve it and adapt it to certain realities.” He suggested that Macron work with the CGT to devise the content of the cuts. “When you have such discontent, it is best to reflect and say ‘the reform is not the right one,’ so we start over and work based on other hypotheses—like the CGT’s propositions, for instance?”

Martinez also indicated that he could be open to ending the strike movement after Philippe’s speech on Wednesday to the unions at the CESE. “We’ll see on Wednesday night what we decide to do on Thursday,” Martinez said.

These statements vindicate both the growing distrust of the union bureaucracies among the workers, and the calls of the Parti de l’égalité socialiste (PES) for workers to take the struggle out of the hands of the unions by building their own, independent committees of action. Growing sections of workers sense that independent action is the only way to prevent yet another sell-out by the unions of their struggle.

Speaking to the WSWS at the Paris rally Thursday, Seb, a firefighter who had come to Paris for the protest march, stressed his contempt for Macron: “I think the policy he implements is not his own, he is just a puppet of the oligarchy. ... We cannot just each defend our own cause each one of us alone on our side. It does no good. It has been six months that we always get the same answers to our demands.”

Tony, a striking airport worker, told the WSWS: “I’m here because we’ve had enough. It’s been 30 years that workers have been attacked from all sides on pensions, wages, everything. Now we want to end all that. ... We have to get the money back, we built the wealth, it is ours and there is no reason for it to accumulate just at one pole of society. All we want is what is due to us: decent wages and jobs for everyone.”

Tony added that between workers and unions, “It is true that there is legitimate distrust. It’s more than once that they have betrayed the movement. To get beyond that, we will have to organize ourselves, be active, and in fact decide ourselves on our movement and how we will strike and what we want to do.”

The author recommends:

The way forward for the mass strike in France
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