Mass strikes intensify ahead of national protest against French pension cuts

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16 December 2019

After Prime Minister Edouard Philippe's arrogant declaration that he would ram through pension cuts despite overwhelming popular opposition and mass strikes launched on December 5, strikes are intensifying before tomorrow's mass protest marches.

Today truckers will take strike action across France against the cuts, as most of France's eight oil refineries are already on strike or blockaded. With the strike already paralyzing the French National Railways (SNCF) and Parisian mass transit (RATP), the threat of a nationwide petrol shortage now hangs over the government. Truckers unions warned the press that their members would organize "rallies, blockades or other actions … in every region of France."

Anger continues to mount at Emmanuel Macron, the president of the rich, after last week's reports that he met officials of BlackRock, the world's largest international investment fund overseeing $6 trillion in financial assets. The French presidency's hidden links to private unelected financial officials reveals the class interests underlying Macron's attempts to smash the current pension system and replace it with a system of retirement "by points" and encourage the population to develop private retirement accounts.

An irreconcilable conflict has emerged between the working class and the Macron government, for which the only progressive solution is to bring down Macron. This demand, popular among "yellow vests" and growing layers of workers, requires workers to organize independently of the unions, in committees of actions that would mobilize ever broader layers of the working class in struggle, in France and internationally. It is clear, however, that the trade unions are trying to negotiate a deal with Macron that could only be a rotten compromise.

A video of ex-French Prime Minister François Fillon already revealed the reasons why the ruling class wants to pass to a system of pensions "by points." In this video, Fillon admits that a system that grants workers retirement "points" of indeterminate monetary value "allows for one thing that no politician is admitting. It allows for reducing each year the size, the value of the points and thus to diminish the level of pensions."

In short, the government is entirely conscious of what most French people know: the Macron government's policy is to reduce millions of retired workers to poverty in order to boost the profits of a parasitic financial aristocracy.

Jean-Paul Delevoye, the high commissioner who oversaw the preparation of Macron's pension cuts, is totally discredited by recent revelations that he did not declare that he holds a volunteer position at France's Institute for Training Insurance Professionals. He was thus hiding his links to the very same financial circles that would benefit from the state's slashing tens of billions of euros from the pensions paid to the French population.

Delevoye was paid €74,526 yearly as high commissioner for pension reform. But he combined this position with a leading position at the IGS institute for higher teaching (where he received €78,408 instead of the €40,000 he declared on his government forms) and the affiliated Parallax think-tank (where he was paid €73,338). This combining of employment at a public position with a ministerial position is a violation of the French constitution, whose Article 23 bans ministers from holding "any public employment or professional activity."

At Saturday's "yellow vest" protest, attended also by RATP Paris mass transit workers, strikers stressed their disgust at Macron's policy. Patrick did not hide his contempt for "Delevoye who is 72, and is raking in

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€20,000 each month. Then he goes to tell people, 'You should work longer for a smaller pension.'"

Patrick added, "I want to throw Macron out, it's that simple. … The pension cuts are yet another example of what Macron and those who installed him in power have decided to do with France. It is the European Union, the Finance Ministry technocrats, and all the big businesses that run the media."

Patrick also warned against the role of the unions, who are negotiating with Macron, a half-century after betraying the revolutionary potential of May-June 1968: "I want to recall something from history. In 1968 there was a student revolt and afterwards a general strike. Then the unions started negotiating … The role of the unions is to make this system survive."

Franck, a RATP driver and "yellow vest" protester, said: "We are at war and on strike against a pension cut that threatens the entire French population. We are not there to defend just our own interests, otherwise we would not be here to support the 'yellow vests'. … That shows we're not here to defend what's on our plate, but that of everyone, all our children, the French people. The goal of this reform is just to spray cash on private pension funds, the usual friends of those in power, and destroy a system that has been present for decades in our country."

Raising the eruption of mass protests in countries around the world, like Algeria and Iraq, Franck added that he saw his fight as an integral part of an international struggle: "Today we are opposing more than just one cut, but an entire system, and we know it is a global system. We know France can open a way, that we are mobilizing in France because we believe France can show things to people and help them fight. But obviously it's a global fight."

Franck also stressed the strikers' determination to continue to struggle despite the holidays and lost income from striking: "We'll have Christmas dinner on the picket lines if we have to, because that is what is everyone's best interests. What is at stake is the society we live in. … We are used to sacrificing our holidays, we are often away from our loved ones in our trains. So if we have to sacrifice this holiday to obtain better pensions and a better society for our children, and not this government's vision, we will sacrifice one more holiday."

He told WSWS journalists that he agreed with the need for workers to have power: "The treasury is empty, but who emptied the treasury? It can only be those who have been in power for all these years, it is the laws that they passed that emptied the treasury. So indeed it is time for us to take the reins in our hands."

This radicalization has exposed the class gulf separating the workers from the union bureaucracy, which is desperately trying to negotiate with Macron, and the need for workers to organize independently of the unions. The unions are ever more openly hostile to the political struggle the workers have launched against Macron and the banks, in particular the French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT) which just joined the strike after boycotting it for nearly two weeks.

Laurent Berger, the head of the pro-Macron CFDT, told the *Journal du dimanche* that the "matter is simple: for the CFDT to take another position on the draft law, all the government has to do is to agree to withdraw" the effective increase in the retirement age from 62 to 64. He promised to attend talks with the government this week, then demanded that strikers not organize "any blockades of the transport system this Christmas." He added that "the CFDT is calling for protests on Tuesday, December 17" but not "to continue on the 18th, 19th and so on."

Philippe Martinez of the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) offered the same line, with at most a slightly different tone. On BFM-TV, he begged the government to withdraw the cuts: "If the government withdraws its plans, everything will go great on Christmas." He also warned Macron against what he called the "frustrations" of the strikers.

Faced with bankrupt unions that for decades have negotiated regressive "reforms" with successive governments, the way forward for workers is to take the struggle out of the hands of the unions, build their own action committees independent of the unions, and fight to bring down Macron.

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