

French unions work to end strike as government maintains pension cuts

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The mass strike against French President Emmanuel Macron's pension cuts is at a crossroads. After declaring on Tuesday his "complete determination" to push through pension cuts despite overwhelming opposition from workers, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe released a new press statement following meetings with unions and business groups Thursday. The unions are now calling for an end to strike action or using negotiations scheduled for January as a pretext to weaken workers' resolve and betray the strike.

Philippe told the media that he had "proposed new advances" to the unions. He claimed that he did not want "lower pensions" or "higher labour costs" through increased pension contributions, but that "this does not mean that the only budgetary measure would be" a raising of the effective retirement age from 62 to 64. He had proposed "to the trade unions to discuss this" next January.

Philippe's statements are cynical and self-contradictory lies. Firstly, they commit his government to nothing—any more than does his promise to "reduce," at some later date, the age at which a worker who has not contributed enough to his or her pension (due to long periods of unemployment or studies) can retire, which is currently set at 67. Under the government plan, a worker who retires before the new "pivot age" of 64 would still suffer a large cut to his pension.

Secondly, if the enforcement of a "pivot" age of 64 is not "the only budgetary measure," it is because of other cuts contained in the reform. Benefits for different sections of public sector workers, including teachers, civil servants, and railway workers, would be eliminated. In addition, the reform would change pensions from being monetary entitlements to a "point"-based system, meaning that the government and trade unions will be able to endlessly revise down the value of points in the future. Francois Fillon, the former right-wing prime

minister, declared that this would take place during a speech he gave in 2016.

The class character of the reform is made clear by Philippe's declaration last week that a world of unemployment and precariousness "is the world we live in." His government, which is giving hundreds of billions of gifts to the rich and investing massively in the military, has nothing to offer the working class but the looting of their social entitlements for the enrichment of the financial elite.

Yet upon hearing these same empty pronouncements, the unions have rushed to declare that they are ready to negotiate and shut down the strike. Laurent Berger of the government-aligned CFDT (French Democratic Labor Confederation) union declared that "there is a willingness for dialogue" and "openings," though on "the question of the pivot age" there is "disagreement". Berger said he was open to negotiations: "We will go, we will work, but there is a hard point which is this question of finding the balance in the short term, so that is where we stand."

The UNSA (National Union of Autonomous Unions) federation, which covers some railway workers and does not oppose Macron's "reforms," took the same line as the CFDT. UNSA issued a statement that it "calls for a truce for the school holidays," to allow the return to normal of Paris' metro system, which rail workers have shut down since December 5 in a show of their resolve to fight against Macron.

There is a clear division of labor between the different trade unions. On the one hand, the openly pro-Macron unions are hailing the reactionary reform and openly calling for the strangling of the strike. On the other, the General Confederation of Labor (CGT), Workers Force (FO) and Solidarity unions adopt the pose of an opposition, make some criticisms of the reform. However, they give no perspective to the strikers, who are in struggle and under pressure after not being paid for over

two weeks—except to offer another “day of action” in more than two weeks’ time.

CGT Secretary Philippe Martinez said, “The CGT obviously does not share this project, so on behalf of the union alliance (CGT, FO, CFE-CGC, Solidaire, FSU) I can announce that the next joint union day of action will take place on January 9.”

The intention is clearly to impose a Christmas truce in the strike, despite the opposition of strikers and the youth, so that any day of action on January 9 would be a one-off last gasp before the government rams the reform through parliament in February.

Yves Veyrier of FO impotently complained about the Prime Minister’s rapid timetable for the negotiations with the unions. “There is little time left for discussion,” he said. “We have to press the stop button, put this bad idea aside and only then will we be able to negotiate.”

The role of these “oppositional” unions is particularly cynical. They claim they want the pension reform to be withdrawn, but they negotiated it for two years with the government. In fact, they have negotiated with Macron on all its reforms: the labor law, the slashing of unemployment benefits, the privatization of the national rail network, etc. They did not seek to mobilize the workers, but isolated and betrayed them whenever workers fought back—as, for example, when the unions shut down the strike against the breaking of the railway workers’ statute and the privatization of the rail network in 2018.

The union apparatus is not opposed to the government’s austerity policy. If this corrupt bureaucracy has organized a few days of action, it is because it is terrified that it will be overwhelmed by independent strike action taken by the workers against them. The unions were terrified by the wildcat strikes launched by rail workers at the Châtillon rail repair yards and the Paris metro strike in September and October.

Workers and young people do not want negotiations between the unions and Macron that would end the fight against the president’s pension cuts and his illegitimate government—which received the votes of a minority of the population.

Workers’ strikes and occupations in the course of the struggle have demonstrated the revolutionary potential of the working class. The fight against the pension reforms must be taken out of the hands of the trade unions, which are financed by the state and employers. Workers need their own organizations of struggle—action committees whose function would be to unify workers’ struggles with

those of their counterparts internationally, including in Lebanon, Chile, Colombia, the United States and across Europe.

The unions’ negotiations with Macron make clear their opposition to any struggle against the Macron government. When the “yellow vest” protests erupted against Macron and developed outside of the control of the union apparatus, the unions slandered them as far-right.

A sharp warning is particularly necessary about the role of the CGT. The experience of even the most recent struggles by workers makes clear that the CGT’s decision not to openly align themselves with the pro-Macron position of the CFDT union does not mean the CGT will seek to continue the strike. In fact, they want to shut it down at all costs.

In 2010, then CGT secretary Bernard Thibault called for “symbolic actions” after the CFDT signed pension cuts imposed by President Nicolas Sarkozy, who sent police units to force refinery workers back to work to stop the fuel shortage produced by energy workers’ strike against the cuts. The CGT did nothing to mobilize the entire working class to defend the energy workers against this repression. After Thibault announced his minor “symbolic actions,” the CGT ended the strikes.

As the “yellow vests” protests have shown, a break must be made with the trade unions for the struggle to move forward. The workers need their own organizations, action committees organized independently of the trade unions, to prevent the latter from strangling the struggle. Stopping Macron’s reform requires a political struggle by the working class to bring down Macron’s government and expropriate the corporate and financial elite.



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