

Hundreds of thousands protest pension cuts in France

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Yesterday, over a half-million French strikers and youth marched for a 43rd day of strikes against President Emmanuel Macron's pension cuts. They rejected Prime Minister Édouard Philippe's announcement this weekend of a "temporary" withdrawal of a planned two-year increase in the pension age from the text of the bill, which Philippe intends to rework and add back into the bill after four months of talks with the unions.

According to the unions, 550,000 people marched across France, including 150,000 in Paris and tens of thousands in cities including Marseille, Toulouse, Bordeaux and Nantes. In Toulouse, they interrupted a ceremony held by right-wing mayor Jean-Luc Moudenc, holding a banner saying "Emmanuel Moudenc, mayor of the rich" and singing "yellow vest" songs.

Among workers, there is growing opposition to Macron and support for the strike. An Odoxa poll for France-Info and the right-wing daily *Le Figaro* found that 66 percent of the population still considers the strike "justified," even though 57 percent would like it to stop, as rail and mass transit strikes lengthen commutes to work. Moreover, 67 percent told Odoxa they agreed that Philippe's announcement this weekend was "a half-measure that comes too late."

Philippe's proposed talks with the unions to identify possible spending cuts only underscore that such talks are a dead end for the workers. There is nothing to negotiate with Macron. The way forward is to organize independently of the unions, in committees of action mobilizing broader layers of workers in a struggle to bring down Macron.

Emma, a schoolteacher protesting in Paris, told the WSW: "We demand the pension cuts not be implemented. Philippe can say whatever he wants to anybody about his announcements on the pension age, we don't care—at all." She added, "What is unprecedented is that the strike belongs to the strikers. The workers have

escaped the control of the unions. So, the union leaderships can negotiate whatever they want. We will not give up anything."

Emma added that her pension could fall by up to €1,036 per month due to Macron's cuts: she is a teacher with three children and, in addition to cuts specifically to teachers' pensions, Macron's reform slashes bonuses paid to women for bearing children. She said: "Women are unjustly attacked by this reform, though media peddle the line that this is a pro-woman reform, that things will be much fairer for them if their careers were interrupted by childbirth."

Sylvie, who works in Paris mass transit, said Macron's pension cut "is bad for everyone. It is a swindle. They cannot tell us how much it will take away from the French people... But we've seen such cuts in other European countries. Cutting our pensions twenty to thirty percent or more, is that good? Who wants to earn less—and I mean much, much less? They aim to impoverish the people."

Sylvie stressed that she did not trust the unions negotiating with Macron in Philippe's four-month conference: "They are negotiating for themselves, not for the people. That is all that I can say. They are negotiating for themselves, not for Paris mass transit workers... The media are denouncing us, but it is just to impose a pension reform that is harmful to everyone, that will impoverish people."

The discrediting of the French union bureaucracy and the emergence of a militant movement in the working class reflects an explosive, international resurgence of the class struggle transforming class relations worldwide. Recent months have seen mass strikes of tens of millions of Indian workers, of US autoworkers and teachers, of Polish teachers, and mass protests in dozens of countries—from the Czech Republic in Europe to Iraq, Lebanon and Algeria in the Middle East to Bolivia, Chile and Ecuador in Latin America.

This upsurge of international class struggle unfolds amid a descent of the capitalist class into criminality and militarism, epitomized by Washington's drone murder of Iranian General Qassem Suleimani on January 3 in Baghdad. This assassination, carried out with blatant contempt for international law, exposed the danger of all-out war between the major powers in the Middle East.

As the strike against France's "president of the rich" continues, it is ever clearer that this struggle raises far broader issues that ultimately workers can resolve only via international, revolutionary action against the financial aristocracy and the capitalist system.

Jules, a Paris high school student, told the WSW: "There is a lot of concern among high school students about the danger of war in the coming years. When certain individuals start bombing the Iranian military ... then it's not even a proxy war anymore, it is America and Iran that are nearly at war, or at least in violent armed conflict. And there is a lot of concern about the future of the peace we had in Europe for the last few decades."

Jules linked the war danger to the aggressive domestic repression and austerity measures against workers at home. He said, "After attacking pensions, Macron will attack public health care and the universities... If he has given the Legion of Honor medal to the head of BlackRock, it is that he has very close links to BlackRock," the \$6 trillion global asset management firm that discussed Macron's pension cuts with him just after his election in 2017.

The WSW also interviewed Adrien, a worker at the Grandpuits refinery that is on a three-day strike. French refinery workers are discussing a possible indefinite national strike, which in 2010 rapidly led to a national fuel shortage and a direct clash with the state. Isolated by the unions, the refinery workers in 2010 were forced to return to work.

In 2010, Adrien said, "we arrived for our 5a.m. shift and discovered 17 trucks of riot police in front of our workplace. They came with the police prefect with requisition letters addressed to each of us by name, threatening us with three years of prison and €45,000 fines if we did not return to work. The UN International Labor Organization later ruled against the prefecture's position, calling it illegal: they cannot requisition a private company except to supply critical public services... It was completely illegal, and a violation of our constitutional right to strike and of democracy."

Workers are discussing what Macron might do against a nationwide refinery strike today. Adrien said, "This

government and the bosses behind it dream of just one thing: outlawing the right to strike in France. They will not hesitate to requisition us, even with illegal requisition orders. They will try to requisition us; we will struggle for our right to strike."

This experience of the class struggle underlines the need to build committees of action, organizations independent of the unions, to mobilize broader layers of workers to defend strikers. This entails a struggle against the diktat of the banks and of the police-state machine raising key political questions—above all, that of revolutionary perspective and leadership.

Éva, a student protesting in Paris against Macron and students' precarious living conditions due to low scholarships, said she "absolutely" supports bringing down Macron: "I never supported Macron and never will." However, she added, "today I see no one I could support to take his place: as always in the last years and decades, we only have politicians who want power to serve capitalism. We are ruled by finance."

The emergence of a strike consciously impelled by the workers against the union bureaucracy is rapidly transforming the political situation. While strike participation rates in rail, mass transit and education are falling—with workers temporarily returning to work part-time to earn some money, financially exhausted after weeks of striking, or striking in shifts—the radicalization of the working class continues to grow. The class gulf separating workers from the ruling class and its political agencies is ever more evident.

The *Parti de l'égalité socialiste* advances in this context the perspective of an international, revolutionary struggle by the working class to take power, expropriate the financial aristocracy, and build a socialist society as the alternative to the bankrupt capitalist system.



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