

Macron's attack on pensions sets stage for showdown with French working class

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11 January 2023

On January 10, French Prime Minister Élisabeth Borne announced plans for sweeping cuts to state pensions in France. The bill, which would raise the official retirement age by two years, resurrects the pension cut President Emmanuel Macron tried and ultimately failed to ram through in 2019-2020.

Macron's attack on French workers is part of a global offensive against the working class, whose aim is to impose the cost of the capitalist crisis onto workers all over the world. Macron's plan has been hailed by celebratory editorials in big business newspapers in the UK and US.

The cut is overwhelmingly unpopular, with 68 percent of the French people opposed, and Macron was forced to shelve the pension cut in 2019-2020. It provoked a six-week rail strike, which Macron and the parliament waited out, adopting the reform after the strike ended. However, Macron then felt compelled to abandon it in the spring of 2020—even after it was voted for in parliament—as mass strikes in Italy, France and across Europe against state inaction on COVID-19 forced Macron to heed doctors' calls for a strict lockdown.

The revival of this plan by Macron, a former investment banker known as the “president of the rich,” makes clear the financial aristocracy's plans for the new year. It acts with utter class contempt for the social rights of workers. As France and other NATO states recklessly pour billions of euros into sending tanks and artillery to Ukraine for war on Russia, risking an all-out Third World War, they intend to finance war by slashing living standards.

Borne announced several key attacks on the pension system initially set up in 1945-1946, amid the fall of the Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime at the end of the Second World War:

- Raising the minimum pay-in period to retire with a full pension one year, to 43.
- Raising the minimum age at which one can retire with

a full pension two years, to 64.

- Canceling “special regime” pension plans offering better conditions to certain groups of public sector workers.

- Helping “retired” workers to return to work to supplement inadequate pensions.

Raising the pay-in period and the minimum pension age allows the state to slash pension spending. Broad layers of blue-collar workers are too worn out to work until 64. Workers who obtained higher education, or who spent time unemployed, cannot pay into the state pension scheme for 43 years without working well beyond age 64. The French state can thus apply devastating penalties, cutting up to 5 percent of a worker's pension for each year missing from the pay-in period, or each year spent retired before age 64.

Economy Minister Bruno Le Maire announced that the reform would cut €17.7 billion from overall spending on pensions in 2030—roughly €1,000 per retiree per year. This is more than 5 percent of the overall French pension spending in 2020, of €332 billion.

Borne's call to help retirees work to supplement their pension only underscores that the financial aristocracy intends to scrap the social right to a livable public pension altogether. Already in 2019, 400,000 retirees in France had to work to supplement their state pensions; the pensions these retirees received averaged only €772 per month.

The pension cut of Macron and Borne is so wildly unpopular that it is unclear whether they have enough votes to pass it through the National Assembly, where Macron's Renaissance party has only 170 of the 577 seats. There have been many reports of a deal between Macron and the right-wing The Republicans (LR) party to support the cuts. However, there are still concerns that, after Macron took back his cut in 2020, certain LR parliamentarians might at the last minute decline to

support him now.

Borne has therefore adopted the cynical and anti-democratic trick of putting the cut in the budget law financing shortfalls in Social Security spending. She can then use an arcane provision in France's constitution allowing the president to force through the Social Security budget with only the support of the French Senate—a body not elected via universal suffrage, and in which LR holds a majority.

The ruling classes in France and internationally are fully aware that by proceeding this way, the Macron government risks provoking explosive strikes and social opposition. Last week, an IFOP poll commissioned by the SUD Radio station found that 79 percent of French people believe a social explosion is “possible” in the coming months. Moreover, 52 percent want such an explosion to take place.

Above all, as Macron tries to slash pensions, strikes are erupting across Europe and internationally against austerity, inflation and policies of mass infection with COVID-19 and war. Britain in particular has seen a wave of strikes or strike votes by transport, port, education, health and civil service workers. Strikes by rail workers are ongoing in Germany and Portugal, and by metalworkers in Turkey. Across the United States, strikes by health staff are mounting and calls for strike action are mounting in rail, auto, and other key industries.

The only way to stop Macron's cuts is to link opposition among French workers and youth to this growing global opposition to inflation and war, organizing workers in rank-and-file committees independent of the union bureaucracies in a movement against capitalism and for socialism.

The French union bureaucracies, in contrast, have responded to Borne's announcement of pension cuts by holding a joint meeting to announce a one-day national protest strike on January 19. They have received the support of the Unsubmissive France (LFI) party of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who tweeted that Borne's pension cuts are “a grave social regression.”

Philippe Martinez, the head of the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union, claimed that trade union unity created the possibility of building a powerful national movement through the existing bureaucracies. “The fact that all the trade union organizations are in agreement ... will allow for trade union alliances in enterprises, professions, and establishments,” he said. He added that the CGT is “determined that this bill will not pass.”

The French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT), historically linked to the big-business Socialist Party (PS), said it had warned Macron in their discussion of the cuts that it would have had no choice but to oppose the measure. CFDT President Cyril Chabanier said: “We had warned that if there was an increase in the pension age, we would go into the streets. So, we will.”

This perspective for nationally-based protests controlled by the union bureaucracies is nothing but a trap for youth and workers opposed to Macron's cuts. The CGT bureaucracy has already stated its support for multi-trillion-euro bank bailouts to the super-rich at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as for the war in Ukraine. Committed to right-wing policies internationally, the union bureaucracies will prove hostile to any initiative mobilizing workers in France independently of their corrupt “social dialog” with the Macron administration.

Indeed, in 2018, Martinez responded to initial explosion of “yellow vest” protests for social equality by denouncing the “yellow vests” as a far-right mob, and isolating them by calling off solidarity strikes organized by truckers. The outcome of the CGT bureaucracy's treachery was seen in 2019-2020: the CGT isolated and called off a powerful, six-week rail strike against Macron's pension cuts, initially allowing Macron to write them into law.

The dictatorship of such reactionary national bureaucracies over the class struggle must be broken. Opposition to austerity and war among workers and youth is explosive and is mounting rapidly. However, it is only by building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, in a movement opposed to the union bureaucracies and their pseudo-left political allies, that this opposition can be mobilized as an independent and conscious force to stop the social retrogression and drive to war now proceeding across Europe.



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