

Millions of workers in France march against pension cuts, Macron and war

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Tuesday saw a second nationwide protest in France against President Emmanuel Macron's plan to slash pensions by raising the minimum retirement age to 64 and increasing the pay-in period to 43 years. Rail and transit workers, energy and refinery workers and public servants went on strike against the cuts. Protesters also denounced the Macron government's broader policies, including France's expanding role in the US/NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

The protests were broader than those held on January 19, when 2 million people marched. According to the trade unions that called the nationwide action, 205,000 people marched in Marseille, 80,000 in Toulouse, 28,000 in Nantes, 25,000 in Nice and 18,000 in Toulon. In Rennes, where 23,000 people marched, police assaulted protesters with water cannon. The General Confederation of Labor (CGT) announced that 500,000 people marched in Paris, 100,000 more than on January 19.

Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne, who before the protest announced that her raising of the retirement age was "non-negotiable," mobilized 11,000 cops across France, including 4,000 in Paris.

This nationwide strike is part of a broader, international upsurge of strikes across Europe. Yesterday, as Turkish refinery workers mounted a work-to-rule action and Spanish air traffic controllers went on strike, 12,000 workers marched in protests in Brussels. Belgian rail and transit workers, teachers and health care workers were protesting against declining real wages and inflation, and demanding better working conditions.

On February 1, strikes are expected in Britain and Finland. The Finnish unions have proposed 5 percent raises in several industries, although inflation is far higher, at over 10 percent, and strikes are set to begin today and continue throughout the month.

In Britain, a half-million strikers are expected as school teachers, rail workers, public servants, university

lecturers, bus drivers and security guards all go on strike. The British prime minister's office at 10 Downing Street has publicly announced that Wednesday will be "very difficult."

Across Europe and beyond, the working class is mobilizing as an international force against not national, but global problems: inflation, social austerity, health crises and war. The growth of opposition to war and military spending in France, after Macron announced a staggering €400 billion military budget, was particularly evident on Tuesday.

These strikes raise crucial issues of political perspective: How can workers overcome the obstacles posed by pro-government national union bureaucracies, unify the working class across national borders, and oppose the policies that emerge from union negotiations with Macron? It is crucial to unify the working class against NATO's reckless escalation of its war on Russia in Ukraine, which the French CGT union bureaucracy has officially endorsed.

Valérie, who works at a school for handicapped children, told the WSWs in Paris that she feared the sending of tanks to Ukraine by Macron and other NATO powers would provoke a global conflict. "It's true that the risk is real," she said. "I'm afraid of all of that. But here we are, I get up in the morning and I tell myself I'm struggling for me, I'm struggling for my son and for my children, we are always struggling."

The WSWs spoke to Maxime, who works at a bookstore and said he came to protest "Macron's pension cuts and to fight against possibly having to work two years more for pensions that will in any case be very small." He added, "And also, working at a bookstore is not a very high-paying job. When you are a bookstore employee, you get by without having very much. The only thing that we really know so far is that we're being told no retirement before 64. In fact, most of us know it

would be more like 67, 68 or even 70.”

Maxime denounced the vast sums Macron is spending on war and the police, and the soaring personal fortune of Bernard Arnault (€213 billion), the world’s richest man. “There is so much money for the army, for the police and for the security forces,” he said. “But on the other hand, when you start talking about raising workers’ wages, helping people, there is nothing—even though now, the world’s richest man is French. During Macron’s two terms, there have been enormous, constantly-renewed handouts to the corporations, while workers are supposed to foot the bill.”

Maxime said he hoped the protest would provoke a social explosion. “I think the movement against pension cuts is bringing together many frustrations about everything that has happened since Macron was elected,” he said, “and even before that, in fact. We are hoping it will turn out to be a catalyst for other movements, too, like the ‘yellow vests’ were in their time, which led to other protests, like against the security law and all of that.”

The WSWS also met high school students who were protesting against the rise in the retirement age. One of them said, “They want to make pensions come very late for everyone, even though some jobs are much tougher or more complicated than others. And so it’s obvious that some will die before getting to retire, and we do not want to die before retirement. We want to enjoy life and retire early enough that we can continue on with the rest of our lives.”

Jihan, a high school student, stressed the importance of uniting students with the working class: “I think it’s very good that high school students feel involved. It is better to wake up and fight this injustice. Just after graduating from high school, we will go to work or have to get a job to finance our studies, so students are very close to the workers.”

WSWS reporters also covered the protest in the city of Amiens in northern France, which was again larger than on January 19, with 18,000 protesters and many youth. They spoke to Augustine, a high school student, who said: “We protested in front of our school to get people to come to Amiens. We are there to support our elders. Macron’s army budget is a political choice made to support wars in the interest of the system.”

Rémi, a history student at Jules Verne University, denounced “conditions facing workers in this period of inflation,” and continued, saying, “The situation keeps getting worse and worse. We must stop useless spending

like the military budget. During the pandemic they have relentlessly enriched the bosses. Now, people have trouble getting enough to eat.”

Three political science students at the same university said Macron’s cuts were “illegitimate,” with Louise commenting: “Macron makes the lives of youth precarious. We want to enjoy our youth without having to worry about what will happen to us in 50 years. But we have no future under this system. The military budgets are really frightening. This is not the time for such measures, when we are struggling for our lives.”

Mathieu told the WSWS: “We are the workers of tomorrow, but we are being spat upon. Our years in school do not count to the pay-in period for retirement. We see the health conditions our parents are in, as they retire at 60. It will be the same for us! We are fighting against that, but the government pays no heed to the opinion of people in the streets.”

The decisive question is the unification of workers internationally against NATO’s imperialist war and the social austerity policies dictated by the financial oligarchy. Macron’s class war policies aim above all to free up hundreds of billions of euros that are necessary to finance NATO’s wars of plunder. The struggle of the working class against war and austerity must be forged as a conscious, international anti-war movement in the working class and among the youth.

This entails first of all taking the struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucracies that negotiate with Macron and other NATO governments, and building rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracies and their political allies. Only such organizations, linked to a socialist perspective to take power in the workplaces, stop the war and bring down reactionary governments like Macron’s, can defeat the class war now being waged against the workers.



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