Workers, youth denounce war at protest in southern France against pension cuts

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Yesterday, workers and youth turned out in greater numbers for the second nationwide union protest against President Emmanuel Macron's pension cuts after the initial January 19 protest. The protests in southern France made clear that opposition is not limited to pension cuts but extends as well to the Macron government and the NATO war on Russia in Ukraine.

In Marseille, the unions announced 205,000 protesters, or 50,000 more than before. In Nice, 25,000 people marched, 80,000 in Toulouse, 28,000 in Nïmes, and 40,000 in Grenoble. In Lyon, where the operations of schools, mass transit and the Feyzin oil refinery were largely shut down, 45,000 people marched. France3 television counted 25,000 protesters in Montpellier and 14,000 in Perpignan, a city ruled by the neo-fascist National Rally. The unions announced 65,000 protesters in Nantes.

In Nice, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters met Vincent, a student who demanded that Macron withdraw the pension cut: "Like everyone else, I am asking for the pure and simple withdrawal of an unjust reform. This cut allows them to impose the bulk of the cuts on the 50–60 age bracket, instead of spreading it over everyone. They can find 400 billion euros for the army, so certainly we can find 20 billion euros for pensions."

On Macron's announcement of a €400 billion military budget while he also slashes pensions, Vincent said, "It is bad timing. They are announcing an increase in the army budget that is insane, and then they demand the French people hand over billions to the state that they earned through their labor. Then we are afraid of an escalation and spread of the fighting, whereas the real questions we need to solve are ecological, not military."

A health worker told the WSWS the strikes over wages still had not fully compensated for the impact of inflation. "My salary has not increased 15 percent the way that food items have. I wanted to get a meringue at the bakery; it used to be 2 euros and now its €2.30, it's risen 15 percent, but my salary hasn't. We went on strike, but they only gave us a 1 percent raise. That is pathetic. When are the prices for food and energy going to come back down to normal levels?"

Mathieu, a self-employed worker, said he was protesting Macron's cuts as well as the NATO war in Ukraine against Russia. He said, "It's always the same ones who end up being had, it's really a sinister trick. Many people are suffering in Ukraine and in other countries that are at war. A Third World War is a real possibility."

Mathieu explained why he thought it is important to protest: "This cut affects French and world society, because people are looking at us. It is important to be here. Macron is working for the rich, for big business. The politicians don't care about the people, they whip up false problems in order to make believe that we need to tighten our belts, while they are just stuffing their own pockets. We are all being crushed by capitalism."

In Marseille, the WSWS met Chantal, who works at the Finance Ministry. She said, "I am here for my retirement, I signed a contract saying I would pay in 37.5 years for a pension and now I will have to pay in 43 years. … This reform is offensive to the working class. They are stealing our lives, our health. It's also an act of violence against women, I realized that because our careers are broken up due to having children, that we will have to work even longer. And we will have to do more with less money."

Chantal pointed to the huge tax handouts to the rich that Macron is making. "Macron, when he took power,

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he modified the taxes on corporate dividends paid out of shareholders. … If you compare the former tax rate of 21 percent that used to be applied to dividends and the 12.8 percent rate now in place, you see that 5 of 6 billion euros more have gone down the hatch into the pockets of the corporations."

On the role of the unions, Chantal said, "There have been a number of times where one didn't really feel like seeing them negotiate, because they agree to something and approve something that causes problems for me. … One could also dream of a political organization that unites the left."

Jane, a student in a science prep school, said she was protesting "against pension cuts and the Macron government. … I have heard that we could try to take this on a rhythm of one protest each day, increasing the mobilization of youth in assemblies to vote on strikes. Because we are giving hundreds of billions to the army, not for social need."

Jane said she trusted protesters in the streets more than the union bureaucracies: "The unions are divided right now, I have more confidence in a mobilization of the people independent of the unions. One has to wage a power struggle against the unions, they make too many concessions. At first, the 'yellow vests' were radical, the movement was taken over, denounced, they lost their shine but it is something that must be understood and that served a purpose."

About Macron's sending tanks to Ukraine, Jane said, "Clearly, sending tanks is stupid, that means that we are drawn into the conflict. It gives another dimension to the war. I am not a genius on military strategy, but I find the military escalation that is underway really shocking. And Russia is dependent on China, which itself depends on the United States."

Jean, a retiree, told the WSWS, "I do not want my children and grandchildren, and the population overall, to be victims of this law that will be voted. The street and the people must speak as loud as possible. … Workers and students must take their struggles into their own hands, say 'no' to the pension cut and many other things besides, including to profit in an unfair system in which a minority tells everyone what to do."

On Macron's increase of the defense budget, Jean said, "I oppose militarism, political parties and the people should decide on military budgets. Preparations for war are dangerous for us. But it is not just a matter of the military budget, there is also the austerity diktat from Brussels. There's an entire series of things that we must fight overall."

"When we send tanks to Ukraine and increase the military budget, personally I do not find myself in agreement with that," he continued. "Sending tanks to Ukraine is getting one's fingers caught in a vicious struggle that will press Russia to say, OK, we will defend ourselves because we are surrounded on all sides. It is very serious, then they will try to ramp up the adoption of measures of all sorts; states of emergency, pension cuts like today."

Jean said he agreed with an international struggle by the workers, independent of the union bureaucracies. "Bringing together workers on an international level, it is important … You start to realize that the forces of capital always are one step ahead of the game. But today we are here to defend ourselves."

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