No to Macron's pension cuts! Workers will not pay for war!

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After 3 million workers in France marched Tuesday against President Emmanuel Macron's pension cuts, strikes are spreading across Europe.

Anger is erupting against austerity and soaring prices for energy and food that are impoverishing workers worldwide.

The same day as the French protests, Belgian medical workers marched in Brussels against the hospital crisis triggered by COVID-19. Yesterday, tech workers went on strike as the first in a wave of industrial action over wages across Finland. And across the English Channel in Britain, half a million workers in Britain went on strike against inflation and draconian anti-strike "minimum service" laws.

The French strikes raise questions sharply posed to workers internationally. It is impossible to turn back the escalating assault on the social rights of the working class without building a movement against the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and the mounting danger that it will escalate into a global, nuclear conflict.

Macron is under no illusion that raising the minimum retirement age to 64 to cut overall pension spending by over 5 percent—or around €13 billion per year—is popular or democratic. Polls show 70 percent of French people oppose it, and 79 percent say a social explosion is "possible" in the coming months. Yet Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne has declared the cuts are "non-negotiable" and is mobilizing tens of thousands of riot police to assault workers and youth protesting the cuts.

To justify his authoritarian policies, Macron is recklessly sending tanks to Ukraine to fight Russia and raising French military spending by nearly €100 billion, to €413 billion over 2024–2030. He then cynically claims cutting pensions is "indispensable" to "save the system" from state bankruptcy. He has blamed this on Russian President Vladimir Putin: "There are no more peace dividends as a result of Russia's aggression against Ukraine."

Macron is championing the demands of the ruling classes in every imperialist country. In its Tuesday editorial, "Why France Needs Pension Reform," the *Wall Street Journal* echoed the arguments of the imperialist bourgeoisies at the outbreak of the two world wars of the last century: Waging great-power war requires drastically cutting workers' living standards.

It wrote, "Spending to meet the threats won't be possible without reforms that make pensions and entitlements more sustainable. This is a debate that needs to take place across Europe and in the US. The end of the Cold War created the illusion that welfare states could coast along with ever-more generous benefits. But they can't if democracies want to defend themselves against authoritarian threats."

These arguments are a pack of lies. The slashing of pensions is rooted not in Putin's reactionary decision last year to invade Ukraine, but in the material interests of a tiny, entrenched financial oligarchy that plunders society.

Last month's Oxfam report on global inequality showed that the top 1 percent of society siphoned off 63 percent of all wealth created, or more than $26 trillion, in 2020–2021. France, whose CAC-40 stock index yet again hit record profits of €172 billion last year, currently is home to the world's richest man, Bernard Arnault. Boosted by multi-trillion-euro European Union (EU) bank bailouts, Arnault's stock market wealth rose from €85.7 billion in 2020 to €213 billion in 2023.

The €13 billion Macron wants to cut from total yearly pension spending is less than one-third of the yearly increase in Arnault's personal wealth (€42 billion) since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

The social onslaught on the workers is rooted not in Russian military planning, but in deep shifts in world politics since the 1991 Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union. Abroad, the NATO powers, led by Washington,

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embarked on a neocolonial rampage that cost millions of lives, with wars in Iraq, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Mali, Syria and beyond. At home, the EU sought to slash basic social rights the ruling class had been forced to concede in Western Europe after the Soviet defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II.

In France, negotiations between the state and union bureaucracies over "reforms" to cut pensions or critical social services became almost yearly events, ever since Prime Minister Alain Juppé's pension cuts provoked a mass wildcat rail strike in November–December 1995.

Macron is not slashing pensions because it is the only way to finance a response to a sudden threat from Russia, which traditionally has close diplomatic ties to France. Rather, he is risking world war in order to continue the social onslaught at home.

In 2019, Macron gave an extensive interview to the *Economist*, criticizing NATO threats against Russian forces in the Middle East. He said NATO was "brain-dead" and called for it to "reconsider our position towards Russia." He added: "When the United States is very harsh with Russia, it is a form of governmental, political and historical hysteria." He said France sought to "build relations to prevent the world from going up in a conflagration."

While Macron fell into line with NATO in Ukraine last year, initially he refused to send tanks to Ukraine, saying it could provoke World War III. "We do not want a world war. We help Ukraine resist on its territory, never to attack Russia," he tweeted last October. In December, he said a "red line" at which he would stop was any move making France a "co-belligerent."

At the new year, however, as Macron settled a debate over pensions policy in favor of imposing a massively unpopular cut, he also decided for war on Russia. On January 4, he pledged to send AMX-10 tanks to Ukraine. To justify slashing pensions and boosting the police and military, it was decided to make France a co-belligerent and risk the global war Macron had warned against.

Eighty-five years since Leon Trotsky founded the Fourth International—warning in the *Transitional Program* in 1938, on the eve of World War II, that capitalism faced its death agony—capitalism again faces a mortal crisis.

Rallying workers in America, Europe, Ukraine, Russia and beyond to an international struggle to stop the war is an urgent task, indissolubly linked to the struggle against social austerity.

One key difference separates the situation today from the world wars of the 20th century. In World War I, it took nearly three years for the working class to launch the first offensive against the war: the 1917 revolution in Russia that brought to power Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks. Today, however, as it seeks to drag the world into World War III, the bourgeoisie faces explosive opposition and mass strikes internationally.

To stop the war and the social attacks, the struggle must be taken out of the hands of national trade union federations like France's Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) bureaucracy. These bureaucracies divide the working class along national lines, negotiate cuts with capitalist governments and block opposition to war. Last year, the CGT bureaucracy and its political ally, the Pabloite New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), issued statements endorsing NATO arguments for war with Russia.

The way forward is building rank-and-file committees in workplaces and schools, independent of the union bureaucracies. Linked in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, they can unite the growing struggles of workers and youth into a powerful, international movement, fighting to stop the war and bring down reactionary governments like that of Macron.

The Marxist-internationalist perspective to sustain such a movement can only come from the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the world Trotskyist movement. It has been 70 years since the Pabloite political ancestors of the French NPA split with the ICFI, arguing that Stalinist bureaucracies would provide revolutionary leadership to the workers. CGT and NPA support for NATO in the current war objectively constitutes a devastating refutation of this position.

The political alternative that must be built is the ICFI and its French section, the Parti de l'égalité socialiste, fighting for the perspective of world socialist revolution.

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