

French union bureaucracies pause strikes as social explosion against Macron looms

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Across Europe, as hundreds of thousands are being massacred in the Russia-NATO war in Ukraine, workers struggles are still mounting. Everywhere, governments that waste billions of euros on war and militarism reject demands of workers mobilized to defend their wages and social rights.

Seven of Germany's main airports went out, as millions of German workers have gone on strike in recent weeks called by unions against rising inflation. In the UK, millions of workers have taken strike action in recent weeks, as the union bureaucracies refuse any unified mobilization against the Conservative government. And hundreds of thousands of Spanish caregivers and Portuguese teachers demonstrated and went on strike.

In France, whose government is recklessly escalating the war by sending tanks to Ukraine, more than 2 million workers again mobilized last week against the pension reform. Workers are furious at Macron, whose reform is rejected by seven out of ten French people. Sixty percent want the strikers to blockade the economy, that is, for there to be the eruption of a general strike.

In this objectively revolutionary situation, workers must take their own struggles out of the hands of the union bureaucracies. These struggles are rapidly evolving towards a decisive confrontation not only with Macron, but with all European governments and with the capitalist system worldwide. It is necessary to build in the workplaces, in France and abroad, rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracies, to organize and coordinate these struggles.

This implies an organizational and political break with the union bureaucracies, which support the NATO war against Russia and which coordinate their actions with Macron's government.

Faced with the eruption of social anger, the national all-trade union alliance has announced that it could consider the possibility, widely desired by the French population, of blocking the country. It even chose a day, March 7. But it has called off further strikes until then.

At the same time, it is negotiating behind the scenes with Macron and demobilizing workers, particularly in railways and refineries, who want to go on an indefinite strike, and working to isolate them from their class brothers and sisters in struggle across Europe.

The union bureaucracies' joint statement hails a "social movement unprecedented in its magnitude" against Macron's pension cuts. "Since January 19, the population has continued to demonstrate its very strong determination to refuse the government's pension reform through strikes, protests, but also the online petition which has reached one million signatures," they write.

The bureaucrats propose to politely ask parliamentarians, most of whom are supporters of Macron or other right-wing parties, to change their minds about the cuts. They promise to write "each parliamentarian of the Republican arc" and "contact deputies and senators in their constituencies." And it is only in the event—which is in fact easily predictable—that the ruling elite continues to insist on its cuts, that they will consider the possibility of blockading France.

But the union bureaucracies only want to do this for one day, on a feminist basis: "Finally, if despite everything the government and the parliamentarians remain deaf to popular protests, the national trade union alliance would call on workers and youth to harden the movement by bringing France to a standstill on March 7. The alliance will take advantage of March 8, the

international day of struggle for women's rights, to highlight the major social injustice of this reform for women.”

Given that most French people support blockading the economy and powerful sections of workers want to go on an indefinite strike, the union bureaucrats are putting themselves with this statement not at the head of events, but timidly tail-ending them.

Ignoring the necessary fight to link between workers' struggles in France and internationally, they hinder the workers' offensive against Macron. They canceled the renewable railway strike announced for February 11-12, claiming it would have turned public opinion against the strikers, when the majority of French people actually want the country to be blocked. They isolated refinery workers who were calling for a strike to empty gas stations across France.

As they have done for decades, they are accompanying the movement in order to continue weighing on workers and subordinating them to the bureaucrats' "social dialogue" with the capitalist state.

Labor Minister Olivier Dussopt reacted to the unions' statement by declaring that the government is closely coordinating its policy with the union bureaucracies, via behind-the-scenes talks between ministers and union leaders.

“The main thing is to keep in touch,” Dussopt added, stressing that there are “public” contacts and other “more informal” contacts between Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne and union officials. “The Prime Minister is free to make whatever calls she wishes, in whatever order she wishes.”

CGT boss Philippe Martinez reacted to Dussopt's announcement by confirming that the CGT, like the CFDT and FO, had taken calls from Borne. Martinez called it a “courtesy call ... (Borne) must have said to herself, ‘Perhaps I should call them to avoid giving the impression that we are leaving the unions aside.’”

Martinez said he “reminded” Borne that “the government and the president have not taken the measure of what is happening in the country”. However, he then downplayed the importance of his own statement to Borne, admitting that she knows very well that she is pursuing a policy rejected by an overwhelming majority of French people: “I think she is aware of the broad opposition in the population to this reform.”

In fact, ministers and union bureaucrats all know that governments in France and across Europe are on the brink of collapse. Nevertheless, they continue their headlong rush into war and against the working class. While the Macron government intends to use the war as a pretext for police repression and social austerity, the union bureaucrats have their own reasons for supporting this reactionary policy.

Given the collapse of the unions' base in the working class over the last half-century, union budgets are largely made up of employer and state subsidies. The resulting 4 billion euro yearly budget does not go to paying strike pay to workers who are in struggle, which is never paid in France, but only to funding the expenses of the bureaucrats. Waging long-lasting strikes requires constituting new strike funds, which goes against both the financial interests of the bureaucracy and the politics underlying their negotiation with Macron.

In particular, the historically Stalinist bureaucracy of the CGT has published several appeals to support Macron's and NATO's policy of escalation in Ukraine.

The international upsurge of the class struggle will leave workers no choice but to overflow the union bureaucracies and form their own independent organizations of struggle. The Parti de l'égalité socialiste (PES), French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), calls for the formation of grassroots committees in workplaces in France and internationally. They would join the committees already formed elsewhere in the world, which are fighting to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

This alone can mobilize the full force of the international working class in the struggles that lie ahead, and stop the dangerous military escalation now underway Europe. The PES insists on the need to build a political movement to explain to the workers the need to transfer power to the organizations of the working class, to overthrow capitalism and build a socialist society.



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