

Strikes erupt across French economy after March 7 protest against pension cuts

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After millions of French workers and youth took to the streets Tuesday for the sixth time against President Emmanuel Macron's widely despised pension cuts, strikes are breaking out across the French economy. With refineries, energy facilities and mass transit on strike, the prospect of a total cutoff of fuel supplies that would shut down the economy is looming.

In the energy sector, workers had already decided on longer term walkouts last week. Three of the country's four liquefied natural gas terminals (two at Fos-sur-Mer and one at Saint-Nazaire) have announced weeklong strikes. Refinery workers, whose strikes were isolated by the union bureaucracy and then forcibly requisitioned by the state to make them accept below-inflation pay raises, went on strike on Monday. With strikes underway at all TotalEnergies' sites, currently no fuel deliveries are being made in France.

Workers in other parts of the energy sector also mobilized en masse. Beginning last Friday, strikes across nuclear, hydroelectric and thermal power plants cut electricity production by 5,000 megawatts, the equivalent of five nuclear reactors. Strikers turned off the electricity supply to Labor Minister Olivier Dussot's neighborhood in the city of Annonay to protest his support for the cuts.

Air traffic will remain heavily disrupted throughout the rest of the week by an air traffic controllers strike. The General Directorate of Civil Aviation (DGCA) has warned that it will cancel 20 to 30 percent of flights for the rest of the week. On Tuesday, 20 percent of flights in Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport and 30 percent in Paris Orly, Beauvais, Bordeaux, Lille, Lyon, Nantes, Marseille, Montpellier, Nice and Toulouse airports were cancelled.

Strikes are continuing in mass transit in Paris and other major cities. Railway workers at Paris-Gare du Nord station in Le Havre and Toulouse, as well as staff at Paris-Le Bourget Airport, are all on strike.

On Tuesday, striking transport workers slowed and in some cases completely shut down transport networks across France. Across the country, 76 percent of all train drivers

were on strike and 55 percent of controllers. Strikes by lorry drivers and the blockage of multiple motorways on the night of Monday to Tuesday also halted goods deliveries across the country.

Eighty percent of TGVs (high-speed interregional trains) were cancelled, impacting service from France to Germany and Spain. In the Île-de-France capital region, more than 80 percent of regional trains did not function, and there was major disruption to the Paris metro service. In Lille, the majority of buses were cancelled. In Marseille the two metro lines and one in three tram lines were closed, with 85 percent of the buses affected by the strike. Tram lines in Nice were shut down.

Significant sections of private sector manufacturing workers remained on strike yesterday after striking Tuesday. These included workers at automakers Stellantis and Renault and parts supplier Valeo, aerospace firm Airbus, engine maker Safran and naval dockyards at Saint-Nazaire.

Other critical sections of workers are also walking out. Meatpackers, who are also in the midst of contract negotiations, are also striking across the country for the entire week. Paris garbage collectors and sewer cleaners have also begun a strike since Monday. Four of Paris' 20 districts have already had waste collections impacted, and 70 staff at the incinerator at Ivry-sur-Seine just outside Paris have walked out, preventing refuse from being burned.

The onrush of workers' struggles follows the mass protests against Macron's cuts on Tuesday, which were the largest since protests began. The one-day action was called by an alliance of all major unions, including the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT), the social democratic French Democratic Labor Confederation (CDFL), and Workers Force (FO). Ultimately 3.5 million people attended the protests they had called. Over 400 high schools and 40 universities spread across all of the country's major cities were also occupied by students or forced to close.

In Paris, 700,000 marched, according to CGT figures. In

other major cities, the turnout rose dramatically from previous protest marches. Marseille saw 245,000 march, according to the unions, up from 150,000 on January 31. In Nantes 100,000 marched (compared to 65,000 on January 31); in Bordeaux 100,000 marched (compared to 75,000 on January 31) and in Toulouse 120,000 marched (compared to 80,000 on January 31).

Protesters were met, once again, with brutal police repression. According to Paris Chief of Police Laurent Nuñez, 43 people were arrested in the capital. The cops also fired volleys of tear gas at protesters in Rennes and Marseille. Violence was also meted out against students occupying schools in solidarity with the strike against Macron's reform. Three high school students occupying the Thiers High School in Marseille were arrested. Later, clashes in the old port saw multiple police officers injured and one person arrested.

Tuesday's demonstration and the wave of ongoing strikes show that the working class has the strength to undertake a revolutionary policy: to bring down Macron, stop the ruling class attacks on living standards and halt the reckless escalation of the US-NATO war on Russia in Ukraine.

Despite attempts by the Macron government and capitalist press to demonize all opposition to cuts, the strike enjoys overwhelming public support. The latest Elabe poll found 74 percent oppose Macron's cuts, 64 percent support strikes against them, and 60 percent support "blocking the country" to halt them.

The French union bureaucracies have responded to this eruption of the class struggle by yet again impotently begging Macron to withdraw his reforms to try to defuse public anger. The spokesperson for the all-trade union alliance appealed to Macron, stating, "The president's silence is a serious democratic problem" and asked to be "received urgently" by Macron.

The "democratic problem" is not Macron's refusal to talk to union bureaucracies, who in fact coordinate their policy with top officials like Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne. Rather, it is that Macron and the banks are trampling democracy underfoot: They are implementing a concerted policy of impoverishment of the working population and trying to deal with overwhelming popular opposition this creates by sending the cops to assault anyone who protests.

As long as workers remain subordinated to the national union bureaucracies, their struggles will be gradually isolated and repressed by the French state. Indeed, since the union bureaucracies never pay any strike pay, devoting their billion-euro budgets entirely to their own expenses, workers rapidly face enormous financial pressures if they strike longer than a week. Moreover, the union bureaucracies have

systematically refused to mobilize workers more broadly to defend strikers whom the state is requisitioning to force them to work.

This reflects the reactionary politics of the union bureaucracies. The CGT apparatus has not only signed statements of support for multitrillion-euro bank bailouts adopted after the 2020 financial crash at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic but also its support for US-NATO in the war with Russia, even as Macron finances a €90 billion increase in the military budget by slashing pensions. However, committed to a perspective of cutting deals with Macron, the bureaucrats seek to strangle opposition in the working class to these right-wing policies.

It is crucial for striking workers throughout France to form their own rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracies. Only with such organizations of struggle can French workers unite their struggles with those of their class brothers and sisters across Europe and internationally—who all face inflation, attacks on living standards and the escalating US-NATO war against Russia—and forge their struggles into an international revolutionary movement.

The French strikes are part of a vast wave of workers' struggles shaking Europe and the world. In recent weeks, millions of workers in the UK and Germany have gone on strike against inflation and to defend wages. Rail strikes are taking place this week in Italy, Belgium and Greece. In Spain there are mass demonstrations to defend the state hospital system. In Portugal, hundreds of thousands, especially teachers and their supporters, are going on strike.

The critical question is to make this emerging movement in the European and international working class conscious of its political tasks: stopping the US-NATO war in Ukraine, ending the massive transfer of social wealth to the propertied classes, and bringing down capitalist governments in the course of a struggle of the working class for state power and to build socialism.



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