

French students speak out after 5 arrested at protest to defend garbage workers striking against Macron's pension cut

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Protests continued in France on Friday, a day after French President Emmanuel Macron announced plans to force through his despised pension reform. Some 400 people were arrested during a police crackdown on demonstrations Thursday night. These protests have intersected with an expanding number of strikes and pickets across France's critical industries, including refineries, ports and energy plants.

On Friday morning, students from Paris 1, Paris 3 and Paris Cité university protested at the Tolbiac campus in support of garbage workers, after Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin announced that he would begin requisitioning garbage workers throughout the capital.

Garbage workers began a strike on March 7 against Macron's pension reforms, disrupting garbage collection in the capital for a week and a half. Waste disposal workers have also been on strike in Le Havre since March 7. Seventy students also traveled to the incinerator at Ivry-Sur-Seine to support striking workers.

On Thursday morning, a picket of garbage workers at a depot in Ivry-Sur-Seine was attacked by police and dispersed using tear gas so that French military personnel could gain access to garbage trucks.

The picket was only dispersed after police assaulted students and workers with batons and tear gas. After clearing the picket, police arrested five students, who were still being held as of Friday evening. Hundreds of people gathered outside the Commisariat of the 1st Arrondissement to demand the release of the five arrested protesters.

Near the Tolbiac campus, the WSWS spoke to Jonas and Lisa, students who took part in the effort to defend the striking garbage workers and were victims of the

violent police repression of the demonstration.

Jonas, who attends Paris City University at Grands Moulins, explained the events of the morning. "I was in class when several people came around the lecture halls to mobilize us. Several amphitheatres rose up spontaneously, and we then went to raise other amphitheatres. We intended to go and help the workers being requisitioned. It had a snowball effect, and we all started to march towards Tolbiac [university] to join other students gathering there."

"As we approached the university, the cops kettled us and began to use [tear] gas, which got many of us. We then stayed there for a while, and after a few minutes we got gassed again. We resisted and we tried to pass, but we were pushed back. After around half an hour or 45 minutes, they pushed us back down the street. The group scattered, and they arrested five of us."

Jonas denounced the anti-democratic passage of the pension reform and the use of the police to suppress protests, "We would like that in a 'democracy,' it is the people who decide what happens. And that maybe for once the police could avoid cracking down on people expressing themselves democratically, that would be nice too."

Lisa explained the rising social anger among workers and young people. "All the workers are against [the pension reform]. We understand what the government wants is not at all in the interests of the working class. We all really want to go demonstrate, to organize for a big strike and to build for the strike."

When asked how workers could defeat the Macron government, Jonas responded, "The 49.3 [article used to push through the pension cuts] only threw fuel on the fire. The people were already revolting against the

government. We must build a political movement, that is the only way to make the government bend or change. Not just against the government as well but against the bosses and the big companies. They are the ones who are really behind this reform.”

He continued: “We have to show the workers everywhere that we have a real strength, and the youth too. The youth must mobilize to support the workers, because this reform is disgusting for us also. Adding two years to the workers’ [retirement age], that will mean that the job market will be even more clogged for us.”

“I want to add as well, in this mobilization everyone together should be on the offensive and demand more. We must demand lower inflation, younger retirement and the return of all the social gains that Macron took from us in the last five years, and even more.”

As tens of thousands of workers and young people began spontaneous protests against Macron’s use of Article 49.3 yesterday evening, the joint-union, a coalition of the major French unions, called for a ninth isolated one-day mobilization on Thursday next week.

Jonas spoke about the role the union bureaucracies play in demoralizing and isolating the struggle: “I think that eight [previous] big days of demonstrations is a start, but eight big days in a row is more scary. By proposing referendums, by proposing distant dates somewhere, the unions break the movement little by little because mobilizing on deferred dates is exhausting for all.”

“It’s the workers that should decide their schedule, and if they’re not happy with leapfrog strikes and decide to go every day, then we go on strike every day. Right now we only follow the union calendar because it is the only one that exists.”

Lisa added, “I think what they are afraid of what happens when the movement goes a little beyond the trade union organizations, and the workers begin by organizing themselves at the base. And now, in fact, we are seeing workers are beginning to organize outside the unions.”

As the police were assaulting striking workers and university students, high school students at Lycée Henri IV in central Paris blockaded their school to protest against the reform and Macron’s use of Article 49.3 to force it through the National Assembly. Students at dozens of lycées across France engaged in similar

actions. The WSWS spoke to Étienne and Julien, two Henri IV students taking part in the blockade.

Étienne explained, “Our blockade is to protest against the use of 49.3 to pass this law by force. It is only possible to have the reform removed if we continue to mobilize in the street and to block everything as much as possible.”

Étienne explained why he opposed the reform: “It is completely unfair and in most large work situations, it will be difficult. I’m not talking about executives or people who work in important positions in the companies, but workers, construction workers, bus drivers, garbage collectors. We must stop saying that there is no money for them. We keep funding things for businesses, which is only helpful for the shareholders, who enjoy a higher quality of life day-to-day.”

“We have all seen that the demonstrations and the parliament, it did not work. If it continues like this, much more violent things will happen. If the classic demonstrations don’t work, if the debates in Parliament don’t work, if the talks between the unions and the government don’t work, then things will get more radical.”

Étienne also spoke in support of workers engaged in strikes across France against the passage of the reform. “It’s exactly what is needed. It needs to continue as much as possible. The strikes need to become as large as possible. More people can join and prevent the reform.”

Julien added he thought it was “necessary to block everything, it is necessary for everyone to decide to join the effort to block the country. We can only remove Macron if the strikes and the demonstrations continue.”



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