

As millions march against Macron, French unions call for “mediation”

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On Tuesday, over 2 million protesters marched throughout France and 400,000 in Paris to oppose Macron’s pension reform, according to the unions. The working class, pressing ahead in an all-out confrontation with France’s capitalist police state, is also colliding directly with the union bureaucracies.

There is nothing to negotiate with Macron, who must be brought down and thrown out of power by the working class. Three-quarters of the population oppose his pension cuts, which he rammed through without even a vote in parliament. Polls show two-thirds of the population, outraged by Macron’s attempt to rule against the people, want workers to stop him by blocking the economy in a general strike.

Yet the French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT) and General Confederation of Labor (CGT) bureaucracies, instead of escalating the struggle, are warning against growing social anger and calling for “mediation” with Macron. Having announced the next one-day protest march over a week from today, on April 6, they will enter next week into talks with Macron. This exposes figures like CFDT head Laurent Berger, who is leading the unions’ campaign to defuse the movement, as tools of the capitalist oligarchy’s rule against the people.

Yesterday, many of France’s major cities, including Lille, Nantes, St Etienne, Toulouse, Bordeaux and the capital, saw violent clashes between heavily armed riot police and protesters. By the end of the night, 201 had been arrested across France. In Charleville-Mézières, where 3,000 protesters gathered, 18 were arrested after a violent clash with police. Since Macron used Article 49.3 of the French constitution to ram through his pension cuts without a vote, over 1,000 people have been arrested in Paris and hundreds more across France.

Macron clearly intends to rely on a combination of police repression and of political demobilization of the working class to impose an unprecedented reduction in living standards on workers and youth in France.

Alongside this orgy of police violence, Macron, confident that the union bureaucracies will not lift a finger to oppose him, is also seeking to clamp down on opposition groups within France. Yesterday, Macron’s fascistic Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin spoke in the National Assembly to denounce “the extreme violence of small groups on file by the intelligence services sometimes for very many years.” In reality, it is heavily armed CRS, military police, and BRAV units who have been violently assaulting unarmed protesters for weeks now.

Darmanin also announced his intention to dissolve the Earth Uprisings climate group after clashes between hundreds of cops and 30,000 protesters opposed to an irrigation project in Sainte-Soline this weekend. The collective has ten days to make a legal response to the Interior Ministry; if it fails to do so it will be forcibly dissolved.

During this weekend’s clashes in Sainte-Soline, police used 5,015 tear gas canisters, 89 GENL type de-encirclement grenades, 40 ASSR deflagrating devices and 81 LBD rubber bullet shots. As of Tuesday night, two seriously injured protesters were still in a coma. Police authorities have reportedly banned physicians from disclosing the status of one of these individuals to the press.

Nevertheless, despite the life-threatening injuries to two protesters and serious injury of dozens more in Sainte-Soline, the same military-grade weaponry was fired at protesters in Paris on Saturday. Police fired GENL de-encirclement grenades at head height against protesters in Paris:

In Paris, two protesters were taken to hospital after being knocked unconscious by police, one struck in a police charge against protesters and another choking on tear gas.

In the evening, as police were still assaulting protesters at Place de la Nation in Paris, Berger announced that French Prime Minister Élisabeth Borne had agreed to begin new negotiations with the unions on “Monday or Tuesday” next week.

Yesterday, the CGT bureaucracy also announced that it was ending the ongoing Paris garbage workers’ strike. During this strike, the bureaucracy did nothing to defend the garbage workers whose strike pickets were assaulted by the cops. Hundreds of students and workers went to the incinerator in the Paris suburb of Ivry, but the CGT bureaucracy itself called no broader solidarity strikes to halt the police violence against the Ivry strike and thus defend CGT members.

After weeks of police violence against strikers and protesters, it is clear that the defense of the working class against the police repression is a task that cannot be left up to union bureaucracies working closely with Macron.

Alongside the union bureaucracies, pseudo-left politicians such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon also work to demobilize opposition to Macron. In last year’s presidential elections, Mélenchon received nearly 8 million votes, in the working class districts of France’s largest cities. Yet he is not calling to politically mobilize his voters, who could shut down France’s economy if they went on strike together, against Macron and the police violence raining down on workers and youth in struggle.

Instead, Mélenchon is issuing cynical calls for calm, pouring cold water over growing working class anger at Macron. He called for “pacifism in the face of government provocations” and hoped that “the demonstration ... will take place in cold blood.” That is, unarmed protesters should calmly and peacefully submit to being clubbed, tear-gassed, and hit by police grenades that tear off protesters’ fingers and hands and put out their eyes.

Workers at the Paris march who spoke to the WSWS denounced Macron and the counterrevolutionary scheming of the union bureaucracies.

Clarel, a worker who participated in the “yellow vest” protests, told the WSWS why he is protesting

against Macron. “I am demonstrating for pensions, but now it necessarily goes far beyond that. One can raise the issue of jobs, but it goes on from there. As for this government, it is a long time that it has been illegitimate and in fact unconstitutional. We are constantly manipulated, tricked; it is impossible. We have to throw this guy out; it is getting urgent. Dictatorship is a big word, but you don’t need to have gone to the National Administration School or the Institute of Political Science to know where we are at.”

Clarel also criticized Macron’s escalating military spending and his participation in the NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. “I’m not going to get into all the details, but first of all we need peace, peace, peace. In no case should we be giving military aid to either camp. The question really is: Who is benefiting from all of this?”

Finally, Clarel denounced banners held by CFDT officials calling for mediation with Macron and punishing Macron “in 2027,” that is to say, by voting him out of office over four years from now, in the next presidential election. He said, “That really shocks me. How dare they speak to us of the future like that, when the present is already totally rotten? Come on, wait a second. Berger 2027, I’ve had enough of that. We’re not in 2027, we are in 2023. We’re in it up to here. We have to talk about what to do now, not in the future.”

The struggle must be taken out of the hands of union bureaucracies that unabashedly defend Macron’s police state against the political offensive of the workers. The question of defeating the treachery of the bureaucracies and their political accomplices is squarely posed. The decisive issue is building committees in which the rank and file can coordinate their struggles independently of the union bureaucracies, in a fight to bring down the president of the rich.



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