

French union leaders plan to abandon struggle against Macron's pension cuts

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Despite the opposition of an overwhelming majority of French people to Emmanuel Macron's pension cuts, the all-trade union alliance is preparing to give up the fight. While two-thirds of the population say they want to block the economy and harden the struggle, the union bureaucracies insist that workers must prepare to abandon it.

This vindicates the *Parti de l'égalité socialiste* (PES). From the beginning it has insisted that this struggle was between the workers and the whole capitalist state, in which the workers would be forced to organize independently of the trade union apparatuses in order to bring down Macron. The union leaders' declarations confirm this. To continue to struggle against Macron, the working class will have to form rank-and-file action committees, independent of the union apparatuses.

The union bureaucracies issued a joint statement for Thursday's protest. It explained why the union bureaucracies continue, for now, to criticize the pension reform, while they launch a "mediation" with Macron aimed at ending the struggle against his government. The intersyndicale said:

Each of our organizations, on each of the issues, will be able to formulate proposals at the appropriate time to improve the lives of our fellow citizens. But the time has not come! The postponement of the legal retirement age to 64 will have very concrete consequences on the lives of our fellow citizens, on their health and on their projects. This is why we will not go back to the consultation table as if nothing had happened and once again call for the withdrawal of the text, pure and simple.

This cynical hodgepodge aims to hide the union leaders' alignment with Macron, who plans to slash workers' living standards. The fact that Macron imposed this reform without a vote in the Assembly underlines that he is governing against the people in the interests of the banks.

Indeed, the all-union alliance does not say why "the time has not yet come" to make "proposals to improve the lives of our fellow citizens." One might naively expect that any time is a good time to try to improve the lives of the masses. Moreover, a proposal that would improve their lives, according to the opinion of the majority of the French, would be to mobilize the workers to block the economy with a general strike, stop the reform, and bring down Macron. But the inter-union alliance has no intention of hearing this proposal.

Indeed, it intends to wait for the protests to run out of steam and, when the "time comes," to put forward its "proposals" within the framework of the cuts dictated by Macron. These cuts will devastate the lives of French people, with many premature deaths of older workers in arduous jobs. The union alliance therefore prefers to hide its support for the cuts.

But as it goes to its "negotiating table" with Macron, the union alliance is sending a signal to the ruling elite: that its call "once again" to withdraw the cuts could be the last. Afterwards, it will develop its "proposals" within the framework of the cuts, which it will accept.

This is what CFDT head Laurent Berger indicated. "Perhaps there will be no way out, and this law will be enacted and it will apply," he said on BFM-TV. He added that if Macron succeeded in forcing through the law, the CFDT apparatus would stop calling strikes.

"If you ask if there will still be a demonstration a week in six months, the answer is no," Berger declared.

On the refinery strike, Berger said: "There are disruptions, I am truly sorry about it, but the objective is

not to blockade the economy.”

The statements of Berger and the inter-union group trample on the will of the workers and the people. Two-thirds of the French call for blocking the economy, the obvious purpose of a strike of all the country’s refineries; moreover, three-quarters of the French people are hostile to the cuts. But Berger says he does not want to block the economy, and that he will not consider implementing the cuts.

While the workers seek to intensify the struggle against the cuts, the union apparatuses call for “mediation” with Macron and want to stop the mobilization against him.

This vindicates the analyses of the PES, which has stressed the need for workers to organize independently of the union bureaucracies into action committees to bring down Macron. On March 9, it issued a statement titled “Stop the pension cuts and the war, Bring down the Macron government!” This statement rejected “attempts to subordinate workers’ initiatives to national union bureaucracies” and called for “the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the apparatuses.”

This starkly contrasts with the class line of petty-bourgeois pseudo-left parties like the *Morenoite Révolution permanente* group, or the *lambertiste* Independent Democratic Workers Party (POID). They argue for the union bureaucrats to put more pressure on Macron, either by transforming themselves into a “revolutionar” fraction of the bureaucracy or by imploring the bureaucracy to become revolutionary. Both these utopian perspectives have failed.

The PES bases its analysis, on the other hand, on the International Committee of the Fourth International’s (ICFI) analysis of the unions. In the era of globalized capitalism after the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, their bankruptcy is ever more obvious. In France, where they lost the mass base they had up until the 1970s and 1980s, they have capitulated to the partial or total imposition of numerous cuts to pensions or other social programs since the 1990s.

In *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished 20th Century*, David North, the chairman of the WSWs International Editorial Board, pointed to the root causes of the union bureaucracy’s tendency to betray the interests of the rank and file. North wrote:

There is, to be sure, a definite link between trade unionism and the class struggle; but only in the sense that the organization of workers within trade

unions derives its impulse from the existence of a definite conflict between the material interests of employers and workers. It by no means follows from this objective fact that trade unions, as a specific, socially-determined organizational form, identify themselves with, or seek to prosecute, the class struggle (to which, in a historical sense, they owe their existence). Rather, history provides overwhelming evidence that they are far more devoted to its suppression. ...

Standing on the basis of capitalist production relations, the trade unions are, by their very nature, compelled to adopt a hostile attitude toward the class struggle. Directing their efforts toward securing agreements with employers that fix the value of labor-power and determine the general conditions in which surplus value will be pumped out of the workers, the trade unions are obligated to guarantee that their members supply their labor-power in accordance with the terms of the negotiated contracts. As Gramsci noted, “The union represents legality, and must aim to make its members respect that legality.”

But the “legality” the French union bosses aim to impose on the workers is the illegitimate and artificial legality of a president ruling against the people. Despite the vast media propaganda held around the demoralizing statements of the union leaders, among rank-and-file workers and youth, there remains an enormous readiness for struggle. If the union leaders are preparing to abandon the fight, this is because it would require a political struggle to bring down Macron that would threaten their own position in the state machine.

The PES will react however by intensifying its struggle to build rank-and-file committees among the workers and to develop a Marxist revolutionary consciousness in the working class, allowing it to mobilize in struggle to bring down Macron as well as his union lackeys.



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