

Over 1.5 million people march in 12th protest against Macron's pension cuts in France

Our reporters
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Over 1.5 million people marched yesterday, according to trade union figures, in a twelfth national day of protest strikes against French President Emmanuel Macron's pension cuts, in the lead-up to today's ruling by the Constitutional Council. If, as is widely expected, the Council only makes minor changes, or approves the cuts outright, they would have cleared all obstacles to being promulgated as law.

The protests again revealed the explosive conflict between the working class and the capitalist state, as Macron, the "president of the rich," rams through a pension cut opposed by three-quarters of the French people. Violent clashes erupted between protesters and riot police, who were filmed on social media repeatedly assaulting peaceful protesters. It is apparent that Macron's goal with this is to discourage strikes and protests against the cuts, allowing them to pass despite overwhelming popular opposition.

If the protests were somewhat smaller than previous protests, this is not because the cuts are any more popular, but because the union bureaucracies have spent weeks warning of "violence" and promoting a bankrupt "mediation" with Macron. They thrust aside two-thirds of the French people who supported a general strike to block the economy and bring down the Macron government. They tried to demobilize the protests, even as workers and youth overwhelmingly rejected talks with Macron, who clearly had no intention of negotiating anything.

There still remains explosive anger across France and wide layers of workers who are mobilized against the law. The working class has to bring down Macron by a general strike, and this can only be done, as the *Parti de l'égalité socialiste* (PES) has explained, by building a movement of the rank and file independent of the bureaucracy.

Yesterday, police units again launched several raids in the early morning against workers who went on strike and blockaded their workplaces, including a garbage

incinerator at Aubervilliers near Paris and the Feyzin refinery in Lyon.

Tens of thousands marched in larger cities across France, including in Toulouse (70,000), Bordeaux (50,000) and Lyon (22,000). Trade union officials estimated that there were 150,000 people at the protest in Marseille, where marchers chanted slogans denouncing Macron. In Paris there were 400,000, facing a deployment of several thousand heavily-armed riot police who guarded the Constitutional Council with a large deployment to prevent protesters from sacking the building.

Police repeatedly charged demonstrators in Lyon, where they beat a journalist until his head was covered in blood.

In Paris, striking rail workers entered the headquarters of LVMH, the luxury firm of billionaire Bernard Arnault, who recently became the world's wealthiest man again. They chanted slogans demanding the withdrawal of Macron's cuts. At the end of the march in Paris, clashes broke out between riot police and protesters on Bastille Square, where riot police repeatedly fired stun grenades and large volleys of tear gas at the crowd.

WSWS journalists interviewed protesters on the march in Paris. Brandon, who works as a mason and supported the "yellow vest" protests against Macron in 2018, said he is determined that opposition to the cuts should continue.

"Today we are here because we are getting our pensions a bit later, two years, and we don't know what that will mean for our children and grandchildren. Will people have to work until they are 100? It's impossible, we are too tired," he said.

Brandon said he did not see any point to trade union talks with Macron: "They have tried negotiating hundreds of times. Macron is just stubborn."

"He rules over France, but a president should satisfy the demands of the people, not just enrage them," Brandon

continued. He added that Macron bears responsibility for the enormous wave of police brutality unleashed on protests against his pension cuts: “The police forces are officials of the state. Macron runs all of that. So if we need to force things, we will force things, if we have to cry out, we will do that, if we have to hit things, we will, because they are hitting us.”

Tess, a student, told the WSWS she was protesting against pension cuts because “we youth have our whole lives ahead of us, and we don’t want to die at work. ... It’s our future, it’s my future and that of the youths of France.”

Tess sharply criticized Macron’s diversion of tens of billions of euros per year from pensions to the military budget amid NATO’s war with Russia in Ukraine. She said that the war “is useless compared to what is happening in this country. ... People are already working very hard, and they will then be told to go to war? No, it’s really useless.”

She added, “Macron wants to do everything, he wants all the money, he wants to have his cake and eat it, too. Well, that’s not possible.”

The WSWS also interviewed Christophe Farinet, an official of the General Confederation of Labor’s (CGT) garbage and sewage workers’ federation.

He reported the police assault on the Aubervilliers incinerator: “Today, we had 17 comrades who were taken away and three were jailed, a driver was beaten. Macron does not respect humanity. He has contempt, he is arrogant, he thinks he can run everything from on high without taking French democracy into account, but this will come back to haunt him. The French people in history have known how to rise up against all forms of dictatorship, and Macron is a force for dictatorship.”

In his trade union, Farinet added, “Workers are very, very angry and motivated to struggle. They feel these cuts are extremely unjust and then there is inflation, everything they are living through. Macron governs against the people, he is an agent of capitalism.”

Farinet pointed to the belief that, after the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, the highly-exploited workers in his industry expected to be treated better: “We lived through a pandemic in 2020. We saw ... that there were jobs that were essential in this country, people who did them could not go on lockdown. I am not thinking only of sewer or garbage workers, there were also cashiers, security guards. Our political leaders promised they would see society differently after this. But in fact, what we see is that three years later, workers are having to work two

years more before retiring, though the difficulty of their jobs is well known.”

He noted, “This reform is deadly, because currently we have workers classified as in ‘active’ professions, who have the right to retired at 57. Then there are the sewer workers and their foremen, who have the right to retire at 52. They are classified as in ‘unhealthy’ work, they have 12 to 17 years less life expectancy than the average in France. Adding two years back on to them, it’s simply criminal.”

Asked about the union bureaucracy’s attempts to negotiate with Macron, he called for trade union unity against Macron: “Nothing will come out of this mediation. For the time being, trade union unity is holding. But there is no reason to sit down at a table with Macron. He has done everything he could to strangle the workers. ... There can be no dialog with Macron.”

Faced with explosive anger among broad layers of workers, many of whom work in ever more horrific conditions, the trade unions have indeed continued to call strikes. But workers face a critical problem that cannot be solved by “unity” among the different union confederations: All of the union bureaucracies are betraying the rank and file by demanding “mediation” with Macron, warning of “violence” by protesters, and thus working to demobilize the overwhelming opposition that exists to France’s “president of the rich.”

Critical political lessons have to be learned from this long and bitter struggle. For the working class, the only viable response to Macron’s police-state repression and accelerating turn to austerity and authoritarian militarism is to take control of their struggles into their own hands—building rank-and-file committees to coordinate the preparation of a general strike to bring down Macron, and take power over economic life out of the hands of the financial aristocracy he represents.



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