

After the passage of Macron's pension cuts: What way forward for workers in France?

Parti de l'égalité socialiste (France)
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Three months ago, on January 19, millions of workers in France walked out in the first in a series of mass protest strikes against Emmanuel Macron's pension cuts. Workers' anger erupted as the banker-president demanded they work two more years, raising the minimum retirement age to 64 and the length of time workers must pay into the pension scheme to 43 years. Three-quarters of the French people oppose the cuts, and it was widely acknowledged that it marked the greatest political crisis in France since the May 1968 general strike.

But this weekend, Macron promulgated his massively unpopular cuts with a rubber-stamp from France's unelected Constitutional Council, after ramming them through the National Assembly last month without a vote. It was yet another searing lesson in the class character of the state, which is a dictatorship of the capitalist oligarchy over the workers.

The formal adoption of Macron's cuts does not mark the end of the workers' struggle against them or against Macron. Imposed by trampling upon the will of the people, without a vote by any elected body, they are unjust laws that lack even a veneer of democratic legitimacy. Mass protest strikes are set to continue in coming weeks. However, it is apparent that the passage of the cuts marks a new stage in the struggle.

It confronts masses of workers with a stark reality: they are engaged not in a trade union struggle to persuade the president to shift policies, but in a political struggle against the capitalist state. Macron leads a police state serving an entrenched capitalist oligarchy that rules against the people. Determined to divert hundreds of billions of euros into the pockets of the financial elite and into Macron's "European war economy," it responds to strikes and protests not by shifting its policies, but with bloody police violence and mass arrests.

The way forward, as the *Parti de l'égalité socialiste* (PES) has explained, is to prepare a general strike to bring down Macron and abolish the vast powers of the French presidency. While this proposal has the support of two-thirds of the French people, who want a mass strike to block the economy and defeat Macron, realizing it will require a tremendous exertion of the industrial and political power of the working class. This struggle cannot be left to the union bureaucracies: it requires building new, rank-and-file organizations in a political struggle posing the question of state power.

This emerges from even an initial balance sheet of the struggle against Macron as it has unfolded since the end of January, and particularly since the first decisive experience: Macron's imposition of the cuts without a vote in parliament on March 15.

Mass protests erupted at Concord Square in Paris and in cities across France that evening. For several evenings, heavily-armed riot police clashed with masses of workers and youth protesting in virtually every major French city, who broke into or set fire to police stations, local offices of Macron's Renaissance party and municipal buildings.

TV pundits' comments on March 15 faithfully reflected the panic seizing the ruling elite as a whole. "We are in a major political crisis. Things must be calmed down," said Sandrine Rousseau, a Green member of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's New Popular Union. Social-democratic commentator Natacha Polony warned that "This is the beginning of something that is skidding out of control," as right-wing editorialist Bernard Duhamel desperately asked: "The risk is that the trade unions will not hold. Will the union leaderships be able to hold?"

Duhamel asked whether the working class would overrun the union bureaucracy because the ruling elite fears revolution. The eruption of class struggle has driven a sharp wedge between the broad masses of workers and the reactionary layers of the affluent middle class that dominate the union bureaucracy and its pseudo-left political allies.

Polls showed 62 percent support in the population for "hardening" protest actions against Macron. Support for harder action grew the further one looked down the income ladder. But just as Macron trampled the will of the people, the union bureaucracy trampled the will of the working class.

The bureaucracies intervened to criticize "violence" by protesters, isolate striking garbage and refinery workers whose pickets were attacked by cops, postpone further mass protest strikes and block a struggle to bring down Macron by instead calling for "mediation" with him.

"I am concerned by this situation," said French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT) head Laurent Berger in a widely-viewed TV interview advocating "mediation" with Macron. Warning of "a dangerous political climate," he called to not "fall into the insanity that could take over this country, with

violence and also very deep social anger. ... We have to turn the temperature down, not stoke things up.”

Macron’s ability to survive the protests and finally promulgate his cuts is not due to a failure of the working class to struggle, but to the treachery of the union bosses and their political allies. This also raises the significance of the Trotskyist alternative represented by the PES.

The PES advanced a perspective for a workers’ revolt against the bureaucracy, building rank-and-file committees of action to prepare a general strike to bring down Macron. Before the March 15 crisis, it advanced demands to bring down Macron, end bank bailouts and war with Russia and build rank-and-file committees in the working class. After Macron rammed his cuts through the Assembly, the PES further developed this perspective, writing:

The Macron presidency, the nerve center of financial and police-state conspiracies against the people, must be brought down. This can only be done, however, by mobilizing masses of rank-and-file workers and youth in a campaign for the removal of Macron, the abolition of the draconian powers of the French presidency and the preparation of a general strike against Macron. ...

In every workplace and school, resolutions must be passed demanding the bringing down of Macron. This requires convening general assemblies of workers and youth in their workplaces and schools to debate and adopt these resolutions, as well as the formation of workplace committees to share and publicize these resolutions and thus unite the working class against Macron. This independent mobilization of the working class, making workers aware of their militancy and collective strength, would create conditions for a general strike to bring down Macron.

This remains the perspective to build a mass movement against Macron. Indeed, campaigning among workers and youth, the PES has revealed in its interviews the vast popular opposition to the bankrupt perspective of union “mediation” with Macron.

A class gulf separates the PES from the milieu of middle class political descendants of renegades from Trotskyism like Mélenchon, the Pabloite New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) and Workers Struggle (LO). When promoted by the capitalist media in presidential elections, they have all received millions of votes. In 2022, Mélenchon had nearly 8 million votes in working class districts of France’s major cities. Yet not one has publicly appealed to their electorate to mobilize in mass strikes and protests to bring down Macron.

Macron’s ability to ram through his cuts despite mass

popular opposition is a historic exposure of these bankrupt parties. It also exposes pseudo-left groups on their periphery, like the Morenoite *Révolution permanente* (RP) group, whose appeals to the union bureaucracy to build a general strike predictably failed. RP leader Juan Chingo outlined their perspective in a statement declaring that “The situation is not revolutionary,” and that RP would help “the mass movement have experiences with bourgeois representative democracy.”

But the situation is objectively revolutionary. Macron’s imposing his cuts has not lessened but sharpened the conflict between the working class and his government and its bureaucratic accomplices. Moreover, this struggle is unfolding amid a wave of strikes by millions of workers in Germany, Britain, Portugal, Belgium and beyond. The emergence of rank-and-file committees in the working class will raise the issue not only of bringing down Macron, but the building of an international movement and a struggle to transfer power to workers’ organs of struggle and build socialism.

The events in France have confirmed in the sharpest way possible the decisive role played by political perspective in the struggle to mobilize mass working class opposition to austerity and war. On this basis, the PES points to the online global May Day rally that will be held by the International Committee of the Fourth International, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality and the *World Socialist Web Site*. It urges all those in struggle against austerity and militarism in France and internationally to register today and discuss the way forward in the class struggle.



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