

Why are German unions silent about the revolt against Macron's pension cuts?

Peter Schwarz
19 April 2023

For three months, week after week, millions of French people have been rebelling against President Emmanuel Macron's pension cuts, which are opposed by the vast majority of the population. It is the largest class movement in France since May/June 1968, when a general strike paralyzed the country for weeks. The protests are continuing even after Macron has pushed the law through without a parliamentary vote and the Constitutional Council—a hand-picked panel of former politicians—has approved it.

The German unions are panicked by this powerful movement of French workers. There is no other way to explain their deafening silence. Although Germany and France border each other and together account for about half the economic output of the Eurozone, the German unions are avoiding the topic like the devil avoids holy water.

The May Day appeal by the German Confederation of Trade Unions (DGB), under the motto “unbroken solidarity,” does not utter a single syllable about the events in the neighbouring country. This is despite the fact that the DGB's central May Day rally, at which Social Democratic Party (SPD) Chancellor Olaf Scholz will speak, is taking place in Cologne, less than 200 kilometres from the French border.

No reference to the events in France can be found in the publications and websites of the trade unions without an exhaustive search, and whatever reference one finds lacks any declaration of solidarity.

There is no report on the uprising in France in either the January/February or March/April issues of *metall*—the magazine of the IG Metall, Germany's biggest union—which has a print run of two million copies and is sent to all members. The only international topic covered is the Ukraine war, in which the union—despite a few phrases about a “peace policy”—makes clear its support for the war course pursued by NATO and the German government, including arms deliveries to Ukraine and economic sanctions against Russia.

If you go to the official website of what is, according to its own advertising, “the largest trade union in the world,”

under the heading “International” you will mainly find articles about the Ukraine war and the persecution of trade unionists in Belarus. On March 11, IG Metall, together with the employers' association Gesamtmetall, called for a minute's silence in the factories to “jointly commemorate the victims of the war of aggression launched by Russia's President Vladimir Putin.”

The situation is no different on the international and European websites of IndustriALL, a federation of nearly 200 unions in the metal, chemical, mining and textile industries, with about 50 million members, headed by IG Metall boss Jörg Hofmann. Although all French trade union federations are members of IndustriALL, the mass protests in France are taking a back seat here as well.

The last entry dates from January 19, the beginning of the protests in France. In less than 20 lines, IndustriALL appeals to all governments to “support their workers and create fair and decent working conditions,” and calls on “President Emmanuel Macron to withdraw the [pension] reform immediately.”

That's it!

The service union Verdi, which only recently sold out the collective bargaining dispute at Deutsche Post and is now preparing the same for 2.5 million federal and local government workers, is also cloaking itself in silence.

Unlike *metall*, the March edition of Verdi's membership newspaper *publik* does carry a journalistic report on the pension protests, which presents the facts somewhat objectively. For example, it dispels the fairy tale spread by the media that after the reform, all French people will be able to retire at 64 instead of 62.

It states: “However, the right to a full pension at 64 does not exist automatically in France. To qualify, employees must have paid into the system for 43 years. A full pension without deductions, regardless of the length of time paid in, is also only available in France at 67.”

But Verdi officials do not want to show solidarity with the protests—not even in non-binding terms. They are far too afraid that the willingness of the French workers to fight

might infect their own members, who are fed up with the wage cuts to which Verdi officials regularly agree with their friends in government and administration.

The German unions' fear is all the greater because more than a decade ago they accepted similar pension cuts to those Macron is now imposing by dictatorial means, without offering any resistance.

In 2006, the first grand coalition of the SPD and Christian Democrats (CDU) under Angela Merkel decided, on the initiative of Vice Chancellor and Labour Minister Franz Müntefering, to gradually raise the retirement age from 65 to 67 by 2031. This SPD politician and member of IG Metall for 40 years worked closely with the unions to impose this measure. Although the unions formally rejected the increase because they feared a rebellion by their members, they did everything they could to sabotage any resistance to it.

If the German unions are now keeping quiet about the uprising in France, there is more at stake than the retirement age and wage percentages. As the WSWs has pointed out, a revolutionary crisis is developing in Europe.

“A mass strike movement has erupted in Europe, drawing in millions of workers from every corner of the continent,” we wrote in a joint statement by the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) and its French, British and Turkish sister organizations.

What is unfolding is not a series of national trade union struggles that can be resolved by isolated negotiations with one or other capitalist government. Rather, it is an international political struggle, as workers raise similar demands in every country and are met with police crackdowns and legal threats from governments that are discredited and widely despised.

The brutality with which Macron has whipped through the pension cuts and flouted elementary democratic rules confirms this assessment. After decades of cuts in workers' incomes and social provisions, and the enrichment of the oligarchs to the tune of billions, social antagonisms have reached a level of sharpness that can no longer be blunted. The systematic escalation of the war with Russia in Ukraine, the billions spent on war and armaments, and the battered financial markets are further exacerbating the crisis.

This is driving ever broader layers of workers and youth into social and political struggles, while all parties defending capitalism—from the supposedly “left,” to the social-democratic and conservative, to the ultra-right—are swinging further to the right.

The unions are part of this united front against the working class. They are corporatist apparatuses, deeply integrated into the companies and the state, supporting pro-war policies, restraining and suppressing the class struggle, and being well paid for it. This is true not only in Germany, but also in France, where the unions are doing everything they can to keep the movement under control and prevent the fall of President Macron.

The dispute over pension cuts in France, which coincides with major strike movements in Britain, Greece, Portugal and numerous other countries, is the beginning of an international wave of class struggles.

France has a tradition of over 200 years of signalling revolutionary struggles throughout Europe. Even the young Marx wrote that “the day of the German resurrection” (meaning revolution) would be heralded “by the crowing of the cock of Gaul.” As early as 1789, the French Revolution sent shock waves throughout Europe. It was followed by the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 and the Paris Commune of 1871 and, in the twentieth century, by the general strikes of 1936 and 1968.

The working class and youth can only win these struggles, defend their social gains and defeat the danger of war and dictatorship by breaking with all the pro-capitalist parties and trade unions, overcoming national barriers, uniting across Europe and the world, and taking up the struggle for a socialist program and the building of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). The wealth of the super-rich, the banks and corporations must be expropriated, and production organized according to the needs of society instead of the profit interests of the rich.

The ICFI has taken the initiative to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). As the ICFI's May Day appeal states, it is establishing “a worldwide network to assist in the development of a global strategy and the tactical coordination of the class struggle against corporate power and capitalist rule. Its aim is not to apply pressure upon and reform the reactionary bureaucracies, but to transfer all decision-making and power to the rank and file.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)