

May Day rallies in France demand rescinding of Macron's pension cuts

Our reporters
2 May 2023

Millions of workers took to the streets in France on May Day to reject the illegitimate pension law formally adopted by President Emmanuel Macron and to express their opposition to his government. He imposed his two-year increase in the pension age with open contempt for the opposition to his cuts from over three-quarters of the French people. However, the validation of the cuts by the Constitutional Council last month has not resolved but intensified the crisis.

The government has not only failed to legitimize its pension law, now promulgated by Macron. By imposing a law that is not recognized as such by the vast majority of the population, the Macron government has cast its own legitimacy into question in the eyes of masses of workers. It confirms a central point made by the *Parti de l'égalité socialiste*: The decisive task facing the working class to halt the cuts is to bring down Macron.

Millions of people marched yesterday across the country in what were, in many cities, the largest protests yet since the trade unions began calling nationwide strike protests against Macron's cuts in January. Union officials estimated near-record numbers of marchers in most of the largest cities. These included Paris (550,000), Marseille (130,000), Toulouse and Bordeaux (both 100,000), Nantes (80,000) and Lyon (45,000).

Record numbers of workers attended as well, moreover, in smaller cities, where a large percentage of the population marched against the cuts. These included Limoges and Caen (both 40,000), Brest and Grenoble (both 33,000), Bayonne (30,000), and Lorient, Nîmes and Clermont-Ferrand (25,000 each).

Tens of thousands of riot police were mobilized nationwide, including 5,000 in Paris, and the courts authorized the use of drones to spy on protesters in Paris, Bordeaux and other cities. Police violently attacked May Day rallies in cities across the country, with heavy clashes breaking out including in Marseille, Nantes, Lyon,

Rennes and Paris. The Interior Ministry reported that 108 policemen were injured, while 291 people were arrested.

In Paris, clashes erupted soon after the march began, with police charging sectors of the march and trying to separate them into several detachments, each surrounded by riot police units. They repeatedly fired tear gas at and baton-charged protesters, who threw paving stones at lines of riot police.

Two policemen were seriously burned when a Molotov cocktail exploded in a police squad.

Finally, when the march arrived at Nation Square in Paris, fires broke out after riot police sealed off the square and bombarded protesters with water cannon, tear gas and stun grenades.

WSWS journalists interviewed demonstrators in Paris. Toya, a worker from Mali, from which French troops recently withdrew after a nine-year war, said he was marching to mark the day of the international working class and oppose war.

"We are against the war in Ukraine. We are against war everywhere," Toya said, emphasizing that workers around the world need peace. "I was in Mali when the French intervention began. ... Between the French people and the Malian people, there are no problems. The problems are at the level of the politicians. But we have nothing against the French people, and the French people have nothing against the Malian people."

The WSWS spoke to Gaëtan, Quentin and Guillaume, three students studying in Paris-area universities, who had come together to the protest.

"May Day is the international workers day," Gaëtan said. "We are students, but our parents have struggled all of their lives in their jobs. If my father is forced to work until 64, it will get hard for him because he does heavy labor. We are thinking of everyone who is struggling to get by. Taking two years from us, that is a catastrophe for us." He added, "We're not in agreement with the cuts, or

especially the way they were put through.”

Quentin said Macron “doesn’t give a damn about the people; his ministers are all hopeless. We have to force them to leave. There is not a single minister who doesn’t have some major problem, who hasn’t done something wrong.”

Quentin noted that he does not support Macron’s intervention to send weapons to Ukraine, as the French government has a long record of fueling bloody conflicts this way. “France has sold a lot of weapons ... it was put on trial because of the weapons it sold that went to the war in Yemen,” he said.

He added that the struggle against Macron’s cuts is not over and even that it will intensify as Macron brings in further austerity measures rejected by the French people: “When he does his cuts to welfare spending, it’s going to get ugly, like when he does his law on immigration.”

Guillaume concluded, “We have to say no to the reform, no to this method of government. We are here to defend democracy; that is why we are here.”

The WSWs also spoke to Kevin and Céline, a delivery and logistics worker who joined the 2018-2019 “yellow vest” protests against social inequality during Macron’s first term in office.

Asked why she was coming out to protest on May Day, Céline denounced Macron’s pension cuts. “I’m not 30 years old yet, and I’ve injured my left arm, it has lost 80 percent of its function. If they tell me to work until I am 64, it will simply be impossible. They are sending people to their deaths.”

She emphasized that the movement against Macron is not dying down after the adoption of the law, as political anger is mounting, and the unelected Constitutional Council has no legitimacy to impose the cuts. “I saw the yellow vests,” Céline said, “and this is bringing people together even more. It is a measure that affects everyone. When I talk to people, absolutely everyone is in agreement: We do not want this law. ... And the Constitutional Council, it is just a rest home for political retirees.”

She emphasized her opposition to the ongoing NATO escalation of the war with Russia in Ukraine. “Workers have no interest in this,” she said. “Who will serve as cannon fodder? It won’t be Macron or Putin. It’s always the same people who do the dying.”

Céline emphasized that what is taking place is a collapse of French democracy, as the government and the banks work systematically to seal off any possibility for the population to force state policy to align itself even

vaguely with public opinion.

She said, “We try to use democratic methods, Macron rams the cuts through without a vote. We tell ourselves we have the Constitutional Council, but then it validates the cuts anyway. We protest in the streets, the police beat us up, and no one listens to us. What are we supposed to do? The most serious thing is that you can protest, try to change things at the ballot box, but there is no way to get our message through.”

In France, across Europe and beyond, workers face capitalist governments that are entirely impervious to their demands for an end to austerity and war. The union bureaucracies’ attempts to calm the situation by appealing for “mediation” with Macron have proven utterly futile, from the standpoint of the working class, and reactionary. There is nothing to negotiate with Macron, who has dispensed with the fiction that he governs based on the consent of the governed. The working class is engaged in a political struggle against the capitalist state whose revolutionary implications are evermore apparent.

The working class is compelled to take the struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucracies, who are negotiating with Macron, when two-thirds of the French people support a general strike to halt the economy. By negotiating with Macron instead of working to bring down his government, the union bureaucracies themselves are trampling on the will of the working class.

The way forward is to build independent rank-and-file organizations of struggle, fighting to mobilize the mounting political anger in the working class into a movement for a general strike to bring down Macron, repeal his illegitimate cuts and link the struggles in France to an international movement in the working class against austerity and war, and for socialism.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact