

French unions negotiate with Macron as mass protests explode across Europe

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Yesterday, France’s union confederations met with Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu to discuss the one-day nationwide strike called for November 5. The result was a debacle for all those who argue that workers and youth can leave the leadership of strikes to these bureaucracies. They are doing everything they can to delay broader strikes, and workers must organize independently, in rank-and-file committees of action, to take control of the class struggle out of their hands.

The meeting came after weeks of high school protests that have been violently repressed, the mass October 17 protest in France, and protests for housing or against war spreading from Spain and Portugal to Belgium, Italy, Albania and Greece. By now it is clear that President Emmanuel Macron will not make concessions, but rely entirely on repression. Over 10,000 people have been arrested. Macron is imposing curfews in France’s major cities and is calling out the army, tactical military police squads, and armored vehicles to repress this weekend’s October 24 “yellow vest” protest.

Before meeting with the union confederations, Lecornu made clear they would discuss not wage or social demands, but police repression on November 5. His letter of invitation stated that the topic of discussion would be the “ways and means to guarantee the indispensable freedom to protest [that] some seek to corrupt” by using violence. Nevertheless, the union heads still decided to attend.

Before the meeting, Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) secretary Sophie Binet went on RTL radio to claim that she would focus the meeting on obtaining social concessions. “There is legitimate and enormous anger, and what I am going to tell the prime minister in a little while is how one responds to such a situation,” she said. “One does not respond to a social mobilization with repression, one responds politically.”

This is a charade, taking the working class for fools. After nearly 10 years of Macron’s presidency, it is well known that its only political response to protests is repression. The senior minister who attended the meeting with the union leaders, besides Lecornu, was Interior Minister Laurent Nuñez. Nuñez no doubt asked how union leaderships and security details would help police keep protest marches on October 24 and November 5 under control.

Nonetheless, after the meeting, Binet and other confederation

heads play-acted as if they were surprised and disappointed that the government had made no concessions. None of them called for further strike action, however. Limiting themselves to a sole, one-day protest on November 5, over a month after the beginning of the mass high school protests, they are continuing to isolate protesting student youth and “yellow vests.”

French Confederation of Christian Workers (CFTC) president Cyril Chabanier said the meeting was “disappointing ... Social anger was not heard as we wished.” He admitted that “There were no concrete announcements,” then speculated that Macron might in future consider an “early increase in the minimum wage.”

French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT) secretary Marylise Léon said it is “imperative that there be social answers” by November 5 on “the question of wages, of public servants’ pay.” She claimed that “the government is not really on the right tempo.”

Binet pretended she was so surprised and angry that the government had not made concessions that the CGT had suddenly decided to call strikes, though not before November 5. “The prime minister, the government gave no measure, no taking into account of our demands,” she said. “It is time to move to the next stage. Strikes must come to the fore. This is why the CGT, with the all-trade-union alliance, is calling for the broadest possible mobilization on November 5.”

While not explicitly calling for a general strike, Binet suggested in vague language that the CGT might consider one after the November 5 one-day strike. “Workers must hold general assemblies everywhere, in all workplaces, with all their colleagues, in every administration, to generalize the November 5 strike and after,” she said. “When workers stop working, the country comes to halt, the economy is blocked, and our demands will be heard.”

This is a fairy tale Binet tells workers and youth to hide the necessity of independent struggle and cut workers and youth in France from struggles of their class brothers and sisters internationally. Firstly, the CGT bureaucracy itself does not support a general strike and has not called for one. In 2023, when millions of workers were striking and youth were protesting against Macron’s pension cuts, and polls showed mass support for a general strike, the CGT opposed it and

instead wore down and ultimately shut down the protests, selling out the struggle.

The working class can bring France and Europe to a halt, block the economy, and demonstrate its immense, revolutionary social power. But this requires independent, international organization of the rank and file. Binet's idea that one-day protests can convince Macron of the error of his ways and to resolve the crisis in France via a national policy of social compromise is an illusion. A wave of strikes preparing a genuine general strike will massively intensify class conflict.

Writing in *Whither France* amid the escalating class struggle before the 1936 French general strike in the final years before World War II, Trotsky explained:

The general strike is not possible except at a time when the class struggle rises above particular and craft demands, and extends over all occupational and district divisions, and wipes away the lines between the parties, between legality and illegality, and mobilizes the majority of the proletariat in an active opposition to the bourgeoisie and the state. Nothing can be on a higher plane than the general strike, except the armed insurrection. The entire history of the working-class movement proves that every general strike, whatever may be the slogans under which it occurs, has an internal tendency to transform itself into an open revolutionary clash, into a direct struggle for power.

Class struggle is no less bitter today than in the 1930s. The refusal of every prime minister under Macron over the last decade to grant social concessions is not a product simply of personal stubbornness that workers can overcome with larger protests. It is objectively rooted in the international crisis of capitalism, especially the escalating global war and European financial crisis.

France, like countries across Europe, is escalating NATO's war with Russia and plunging tens of billions of euros into increased military spending and militarization of industry, in a bid to secure as large a share as possible of the spoils from a new global war. Even as it competes with other countries for military power, France, like other European countries, devotes ever more income to servicing its massive, unviable €3.5 trillion debt.

This sets the ruling establishment on a collision course with workers and youth deeply opposed to austerity, war, police-state repression and neo-fascism. The task objectively posed to workers is to build organizations of struggle and articulate a political perspective capable of unifying struggles against austerity, war and repression now unfolding across Europe into a united movement of the working class.

Greece saw a nationwide day of action yesterday on

education as students and workers demonstrated in solidarity with youth in France. After protesters set up tents in Syntagma square in Athens in line with mass housing protests in Spain, 10,000 people marched in Athens, with smaller protests in dozens of Greek cities, including Thessaloniki, Patras, Ioannina, Larisa and Crete.

Yesterday, in Italy, following a nationwide day of action that saw at least 100,000 people march, there was a public transit strike in Genoa and over a dozen protest marches, with 1,000 students marching in Trento and 2,000 in San Severo. A further nationwide day of action is planned for October 30, which will also see international European port workers strike against militarization.

In the regional Galician city of La Coruña in Spain, 5,000 people demonstrated on María Pita Square against a meeting of the far-right Vox party. Protesters shouted slogans like "Spanish nationalists out of our streets," "Fascists out of Galicia," and "We are the antifascists." Spanish police assaulted the protest after the Vox meeting ended, firing rubber bullets and tear gas grenades, and arresting two. Student groups are planning further protests against this repression in the lead-up to a one-day nationwide strike on November 11.

The political charade of the French unions' meeting with Macron is a warning: workers cannot wait upon the timetables of these bureaucracies to struggle. As the Parti de l'égalité socialiste has explained, the alternative is

the building of committees of action in schools, universities, workplaces and neighborhoods, elected and controlled by those engaged in struggle and independent of the union bureaucracies and capitalist parties. These committees must take control of the struggle out of the hands of the bureaucracies. They must unite workers and youth in France with those now entering struggle across Europe and worldwide, to prepare a general strike against austerity, repression and war.

This requires a revolutionary political perspective: the fight for workers' power and the United Socialist States of Europe, against fascism, war and capitalism.



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