

Hundreds of thousands of protesters defy Macron government's repression in France

WSWS reporting team
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Hundreds of thousands of workers and youth demonstrated across France on Saturday, defying police repression. Throughout the previous week, the press had been dominated by hysteria portraying the protesters as gangs of rioters threatening civilisation. Many demonstrations were banned or confronted with massive police deployments. The result was a debacle for the French government. According to the Interior Ministry, 410,000 people demonstrated across France; the CGT put the figure at 800,000.

A direct confrontation is emerging between the government and the police state on one side, and workers and youth on the other. Saturday's demonstrations revealed where the violence comes from: not from the protesters, but from the government, which mobilised 70,000 police and soldiers across France.

In Paris, the demonstrations initially planned at Place de la Bastille and Place de la République were banned. People who showed up there in groups of two or more were fined without prior warning. By contrast, 250,000 people took part in the authorized march from Porte d'Italie and marched peacefully to the end. It was only when police surrounded the rally at its endpoint and tried to disperse it without any explanation that the security forces violently attacked the protesters.

The situation was similar across France. Tens of thousands also took to the streets in Marseille (100,000 according to organizers), Lille (35,000) and Toulouse (26,500). In Lyon, all demonstrations had been banned, but 10,000 people gathered in unauthorized marches across the city before being dispersed by police with tear gas. At the same time, in Orléans, a city of 116,000, 20,000 people protested against the congress of the neo-fascist National Rally (RN).

The events in France are not isolated. They are part of a wave of mass mobilizations spreading across Europe. In Italy, protests took place on Saturday against the rising cost of living, war and rearmament. In Rome alone, 1,000 people gathered for an unauthorized march and were attacked by security forces. In Belgium, 150 people were arrested during Saturday's protests. The General Labour Federation of

Belgium (FGTB) is calling a one-day general strike on November 23.

In Spain, the UGT and CCOO union federations are calling a 24-hour general strike on November 11, the first since 2012. In Serbia, where elections are being held today, 150,000 people, mostly youth, demonstrated on Friday.

In Germany, calls have gone out for nationwide "Generation Z" protests next Saturday against austerity and compulsory military service. More than 100,000 people have announced online that they will take part, and thousands more are joining every day. In Stuttgart, where more than 10,000 people have said they intend to participate, the authorities are considering banning the demonstration.

Protesters in Paris spoke to WSWs reporters. Romane said: "I came out because I'm 25 and I still don't have a job [...] I was in high school when [Macron] came to power, and now I'm at the start of my working life. I'm struggling to find a job, I have to go from one internship to the next, I have a master's degree, and I still can't find work."

She added: "I'm also protesting for students' conditions, against cuts in research funding, and against the high cost of living in general. I think people in France are just fed up across the board."

On the wave of protests sweeping Europe, she explained: "I think the mobilizations also reflect a general frustration that isn't limited to France. It's part of an international context, with the wars there have been since 2022, Russia and Ukraine, then Gaza and Israel. I think it's the rise of the far right in Europe and in the world in general."

Alexandre, who had already joined the "yellow vest" movement eight years ago, said: "With Macron, you won't negotiate anything. He's a son of a bitch. Sorry to your mom, but with him it's a no. He's a bastard. He's a banker. [...] He wasn't re-elected. With 11 percent of the vote, you can't be president." Asked about a general strike, he said: "That's all that's left to do. It's the only way to get at the state. And all states, for that matter."

Charlie and Isabelle said: "People are tired of demonstrating without being heard, and of being repressed

by the government.” They added that the problem was rooted in society: “The government flows from the current system [...] We’ve seen that this isn’t just happening in France. It’s in Europe, everywhere. Yes, it’s a global problem.”

They said they also felt “a bit let down by the unions, because they called a strike in 2018 in connection with the yellow vests. ... And the fact that they’re not doing it now isn’t very right of them. We feel a bit let down.”

Madeleine, a journalist, said: “There are so many demands that matter to me, and they’ve attached themselves to the high school students’ movement. It’s not just about demanding rights, more teachers, an overhaul of the national education system. It’s more a general fed-upness with all the rights that have been trampled since Macron came to power. The repression is such that today we have to be strong and fight in large numbers. You can easily get clubbed, have things torn out of your hands, lose an eye, just for demonstrating, and that’s supposed to be a fundamental right.”

Amélie and Chloé, who works while studying, stressed the international dimension of the mobilizations: “In Italy, in Portugal, it’s happening everywhere. I don’t know if France gave other countries the push to protest. I think a lot of them were already protesting before, but you can see that... In Europe, things are going very badly.”

Many people at the demonstration expressed fear that a dictatorship is being established in France. Chloé and Amélie explained: “When you see that most of the demonstrations here were banned, I think that really says... a lot, because demonstrating is a right in France.”

They explained that the fascists are systematically favoured by those in power: “When you see that neo-Nazi marches are authorized in central Paris, while we, look, get pushed out... to the edge of Paris, I think that says a lot. And anyway, they’ve been trying to establish the RN for years, well before Macron... There’s a man named Vincent Bolloré who has a huge stake in the French media. And him and all his friends, the ultra-rich [...]”

Grace, who carried a sign reading “Against us is tyranny,” a line from the *Marseillaise*, also denounced Macron’s repressive policies: “It’s a government that’s going all out to repress its people’s demands with extremely violent methods. Lots of high school students are being maimed. People died in Paris last week, with very, very little information and no coverage from the major TV channels. So we have to highlight the violence being inflicted on people in France, which is really deeply worrying and alarming, even for the major international human rights organizations.”

Grace also drew a connection between the social cuts and

the military rearmament undertaken by the Macron government: “I’m totally against war and against militarization. I find it really shocking that billions of euros are handed to the army, while students are only asking for an extra 10 billion euros for education. When you see the enormous sums going to the army, you have to question the government’s priorities.”

WSWS reporters discussed with many protesters how to take the struggle forward, stressing that simply putting pressure on Macron was not enough. Grace said: “I admit it’s hard to keep believing in this government, especially since none of the mobilizations under his presidency have really gotten anything out of a government that is truly determined not to listen to its citizens’ demands.”

WSWS reporters explained that it was necessary to mobilize the entire working class, not only in France but internationally. “Yes, I agree. But it would still take a lot of coordination and organization. I hope it happens,” Grace replied.

In France, the political confrontation between the government and the population is openly intensifying. New demonstrations have been called for next Saturday, along with a national strike on November 5. But the decisive question is that of political perspective. The government is not simply reluctant to make concessions. It is fundamentally incapable of doing so.

The working class must intervene as an independent social force to bring down the Macron government and open the way for the struggle for socialism. The Parti de l’égalité socialiste (Socialist Equality Party) calls on workers and youth to form action committees in their workplaces and schools to organize this struggle independently of the trade union federations.



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