One-day public sector strike hits France amid mass student, “yellow vest” protests

WSWS reporters
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Yesterday’s one-day nationwide strike was the first held by French trade unions amid the growing wave of social protests across Europe this autumn. Called against rising living costs and the €54 billion in cuts in Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu’s austerity budget, it came after six weeks of mass protests by high school and university students in France, joined by “yellow vest” protesters in October.

Protesters marched in 193 cities, and the state and the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) gave wildly divergent estimates of participation. The Interior Ministry said 575,000, with 65,000 in Paris; the CGT 1.6 million, with 350,000 in Paris. Large marches hit Marseille (14,000 for police, 150,000 for the CGT), Bordeaux (21,000-20,000), Toulouse (21,800-80,000), Lyon (30,500-55,000), Rennes (20,600-35,000), Nantes (24,000-35,000), Grenoble (10,000-28,600), Tours (16,200-22,000), and Rouen (9,700-20,000).

While the unions billed November 5 as a general strike, it remained largely confined to the public sector, notably education and the railways. The unions did not call out key industries that have seen militant strikes in recent years—such as refineries, trucking and airlines. This shows that, while social anger is mounting towards a general strike in France and across Europe, such a strike must be prepared by a conscious, independent movement in the working class, organized in committees of action. It cannot be left to the union bureaucracies.

The SNES-FSU teachers’ union reported 52 percent of staff at middle and high schools walked out. The Education Ministry put the figure at 13.5 percent in secondary schools and 19.1 percent in primary schools, while the state claimed that 10 percent of central government employees and 5 percent of local government and public hospital staff struck.

Nine of 10 TGV high-speed trains ran, as did the metro, buses and trams in Paris, where strikes were felt mainly on regional and suburban rail. On some regional lines, every second train was canceled. The strike halted the metro in Lyon, and in Bordeaux the public transport network was largely paralyzed. Nuclear power output fell by 2.4 gigawatts, and France had to import electricity for several hours.

The government prepared for the day of action as if for an uprising, mobilizing 70,000 police and gendarmes nationwide. The Paris police prefecture banned the march initially proposed by the unions but authorized a march from Republic to Nation squares, while protesters in Toulouse gathered on Saint-Cyprien Square in defiance of a police ban.

As on previous days of action, police violently attacked demonstrators, repeatedly mounting baton charges and firing tear gas at protesters in Paris and cities across France. In Rennes, police used water cannon, armored vehicles and tear gas. Yesterday morning in Aubervilliers, outside Paris, a teacher suffered a head injury when police moved against a school blockade. Yesterday evening, the Interior Ministry reported 448 arrests nationwide, bringing the total since high school protests began in September to over 12,400.

Workers and youth in Paris spoke to WSWS reporters about their growing anger and concern at economic hardship, war, police repression and the threat of far-right dictatorship, as well as disillusionment with union sellouts, such as the 2023 mass strikes against pension cuts.

Arnaud, a firefighter from the Aisne region whose wife is a care assistant, said, “We’re people who serve the nation. We get to the 10th of the month, we’ve got 20 days left, and we’re struggling. It’s not normal. It’s not normal. And that’s why I’m here today, too. I tell myself we can’t go on like this. What are we going to leave our children? … I have the impression today of being run by a mafia. The worst mafia is our government. It’s harsh

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what I'm saying, but it's the reality."

Asked about CGT officials' claims that the crisis could be resolved simply by electing La France insoumise (LFI) leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon as president, he replied, "Whoever gets elected tomorrow, it's a whole system that is fully formed. … This whole business of president, ministers, senators, deputies, the assembly—all of that has become obsolete. Something new has to be created."

Decisions, he said, should be made by ordinary working people, "because we have the impression that our government is somewhat disconnected from everyday life."

A young worker on the minimum wage, who declined to give his name, described the same situation from the perspective of his generation. He finished his studies two years ago and counts himself among the lucky ones: "Given inflation, often, every other month, you have to take on other small jobs. Working 7 days a week for a whole month so that the following month is manageable." He added, "I know a lot who have never … no longer work except through temp agencies, and even temp work, there's less of it every year."

Marc, a CGT official working at Roissy-Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris, said he placed his hopes in the youth: "In April 1968 nobody would ever have thought May 1968 [the French general strike] possible. It started with the youth, then it spread like wildfire." He acknowledged widespread disillusionment among workers with unions' partial strikes and sellouts: "If you take stock from 2006 until now, over 20 years we've done nothing but lose. We mobilised … we've done nothing but lose."

Camille, a CGT rail worker at the Gare du Nord in Paris, spoke on opposition to war: "Who is it that fights the war? It's the workers who will kill each other for other people, who themselves don't kill each other." He drew a connection between militarism and social attacks through the repression itself: "Just with the 22,000 tear gas grenades they fired since the start of the movement, those cost several million. That could have bought a number of things for the high schools."

Phil, a doctoral researcher, pointed to the class interests underlying the government's hostility to the protests: "95 percent of the media in France are owned by a handful of billionaires." He described "a system that is not only political but also economic and media-based, which works in favour of a small group of owners against the people in general." On the war, he said, "Nobody has anything against the Russian people. The Russian people are an oppressed people."

Grégory, a "yellow vest" protester and teacher at a public vocational high school, criticized police repression: "They mutilate one or several people to send a thousand home. That's the principle: they put out one person's eye to terrorise a thousand. That's how it's always worked, unfortunately. … I know that, for example, the night before demonstrations I slept badly, because I knew I was going to go, but I didn't know whether I'd come home."

He added, "Perhaps at some point the only way will be through revolution, perhaps through international revolution too."

The November 5 French nationwide strike—like similar actions called on November 11 in Spain, November 20 in Italy, and November 25 in Greece—is only one step in a growing radicalization and entry into struggle of the working class internationally. By itself, it cannot resolve the problems of capitalist austerity, police repression, far-right dictatorship and imperialist war that are provoking this movement. Rather, it must be taken as a starting point for a broader mobilization of the working class in Europe and internationally.

This mobilization must be organized independently of the union bureaucracies. While "yellow vests" are calling further protests for today and Saturday, the union leaderships are deepening their collaboration with the Lecornu government. Yesterday, Lecornu announced that he would chair a "social conference" with representatives of employers' federations and the trade unions at his official residence on Monday.

Mass anger is building against the entire capitalist system: billionaires who dictate political life, governments that pour billions into war while public services crumble, and union bureaucracies that sell out struggles. Workers and youth who are in struggle must build their own committees of action in workplaces and schools, fight to deepen the mobilization, and prepare a European general strike that can bring down governments like those of Macron-Lecornu and open a path to workers power and socialism.

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