Second nationwide strike hits France amid continuing youth protests

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On Tuesday, 17 November, hundreds of thousands of workers struck and marched at the call of all the public sector union federations, demanding wage increases against the freeze of civil servants' pay. The Interior Ministry counted 146,000 marchers nationwide; the CGT claimed over 500,000.

The strike, amid ongoing high school and university student protests and following a first cross-industry strike on 5 November, is part of a European eruption of class struggle. After a strike by 4 million workers in Spain on 11 November, national strikes are planned in Italy, Belgium and Greece in the coming days. Youth protests continue, with the struggle against military service in Germany and a European day of action set for 20 November.

Yesterday's strike in France went beyond the public sector. The CGT Ports and Docks Federation called a strike at ports including Le Havre, Rouen, Saint-Nazaire and Marseille-Fos. The CGT-Cheminots, SUD-Rail and CFDT-Cheminots rail unions called a strike, and according to the CGT nearly one rail worker in three stopped work. Regional train traffic was disrupted in several regions.

Official figures, however, show a sharp drop in participation from 5 November, when the ministry counted 575,000 marchers and the CGT about 1.6 million. Yesterday, the strike rate in the state civil service fell from nearly 10 percent to 2.6 percent. This reflects not declining social anger or opposition to repression of youth, but the role of the union bureaucracies holding back the mobilization, and above all that of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's La France insoumise (LFI).

The crisis requires the independent organization of workers and youth in action committees in workplaces and schools, to prepare a real European general strike. The full social power of the working class must be mobilized against the capitalist oligarchy and its policies of austerity, police dictatorship and imperialist war. It cannot rely on hopes of blocking the neo-fascist National Rally (RN) from power by electing Mélenchon in the 2027 presidential election.

Mélenchon is a capitalist politician who does not call for mobilizing the working class to bring down Macron and stop war and capitalist dictatorship. Instead, he asks workers to elect him on empty promises of a progressive policy he would negotiate with the capitalist oligarchy. Yesterday, at a press conference at the Paris march, he announced he would attend a private dinner that evening with business leaders, including billionaire Bernard Arnault and TotalEnergies CEO Patrick Pouyanné.

Mélenchon said he would see "how people like them, who are radicalized politically to death, […] and people like me, who have a program and will keep to it" could reach "compromises." He added: "I'm glad to see them, because some of them are very good. […] What are we going to do? We are condemned to live together, so we'll do it."

A policy of adaptation to French imperialism can only betray the hopes and demands of workers and youth in struggle, as expressed by Paris marchers to the WSWS.

Inayate, a CGT delegate at Roissy-Charles de Gaulle Airport, told the WSWS: "We must address young people's problems. Parcoursup [the university admissions platform] must be abolished. And today, we can't live on our wages anymore. It's time to raise the minimum wage, not by 1.6 percent, but by at least 10 percent. … At an airport, we have no weekends, no holidays, we work odd hours. We're exposed to microparticles from aircraft brakes, kerosene, factors … that cause illnesses, cancers. All that means workers today can't take it anymore."

He demanded in particular the right to retire earlier: "Baggage handlers crouch in the holds loading bags every day to satisfy the customer. By 55, that's it, your back is wrecked. So this pension system must be revised, the age

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must come down. You can't do this job until 67."

When the WSWS stressed the need to organize a real general strike on a European scale, Inayate replied: "Today, Europe must be a power. We shouldn't go through wars, it's nonsense. We must give strength to the population. And we must stop waging pointless wars that just kill people who never asked for anything. What we want is purchasing power for everyone. Everyone must be able to live in dignity. What will wars create? Only misery in the world."

Ninon, a high school student in the Paris region, said she liked the social measures in Mélenchon's program, "but unfortunately I also think his program is a dream program. … They want to put lots of money into lots of things, except France is already in debt." She added: "We follow all the general strikes, all the union calls, we blockade, blockade, blockade. We haven't gone back to class for two months because we blockade every morning at 6 a.m."

Assa, a student in Paris, said she agreed with the WSWS call to prepare a real European general strike: "Not being listened to is starting to wear out the movements. But then, there will be a big wave of anger, personally, I think so anyway. And I think the economy will stop running at some point."

Olivier, a corporate coach, said he would vote LFI to block the neo-fascist RN. "I'm not pro-LFI or pro-Mélenchon. I'm going to vote LFI," he said, adding that "the balance of forces starts now and will continue after the election." Even if Mélenchon is elected, he said, "we'll be up against all the powerful capitalist players who will want to tear down everything we're trying to build through a progressive program."

When the WSWS stressed the need for an independent mobilization of the working class to prepare a European general strike, he replied: "Of course, we must block the economy. That's the ultimate balance of forces, because, contrary to what the capitalists tell us, that wealth is produced by companies, it's actually produced by workers."

Daniel, a retiree of Armenian origin, told the WSWS he was marching against the normalization of the far right: "My father was a Communist resistance fighter. His job was to blow up bridges on France's roads. I'm here to honor his memory." He added: "Macron will leave an indelible, shameful stain on our country's history. … If, unfortunately, the RN wins, there will be Macron's people in the government. It really reminds me of a sad period in French history: the collaboration."

He explained: "When I turn on the news channels, I mostly see National Rally members offering their precious advice under the docile, benevolent gaze of journalists. This helps normalize the National Rally, which originated in the National Front, founded by neo-Nazis and former Nazis."

Isabelle, mobilized at the Sophie-Germain high school in Paris, said: "We're mobilized for the high school cause, especially in support of the suburbs, over dilapidated buildings full of rats and leaks. … More broadly, we're mobilized for social change, a more egalitarian society … and of course against the rise of the far right."

She noted the difference between suburban high schools and hers in central Paris, but also the repression they share: "In the suburban schools, it's police custody, rubber bullets fired at children, hands torn off, they have to hide in their teachers' cars. At Sophie-Germain … we still had a student taken into custody who was held over 48 hours."

She stressed her solidarity with the struggle against military service in Germany: "What I fear, obviously, is a world war. Rising tensions remind me, if I may cite my history classes, of World War I and the rise of the far right before World War II with Hitler. We're also campaigning against the militarization of youth."

While she said she hoped for an LFI victory in the presidential election, she added: "I have much more extreme ideas than Mélenchon. Mélenchon isn't the far left …. LFI isn't necessarily at all the party that corresponds to a society, as I told you, that is fairer, more egalitarian, more equitable. Really, it's the lesser evil."

When the WSWS stressed the need for youth to fight to spark a broader, European strike movement, she replied: "We also hope for a convergence of struggles, for workers to join us, health care workers, teachers."

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