

1.2 Million French Workers Strike Again

Proposed reductions in pension benefits ignite unions and youth to challenge government in Paris

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For several months, unions and students in France have engaged in periodic general strikes and mass demonstrations in protest against a pension reform plan advanced by President Emmanuel Macron.

The new scheme being debated in the National Assembly and Senate would not only raise the retirement age from 62 to 64 these new regulations require 43 consecutive years of employment to receive full benefits.

On March 7 and 8, over one million people stayed away from work and school impacting the public services, transport and energy supplies. Workers prevented trucks carrying oil shipments from leaving their production facilities. Oil shipments on March 7 were halted when they were exiting the refineries of TotalEnergies, Esso-ExxonMobil and Petroineos groups.

In addition, truck drivers sporadically clogged major highway arteries and interchanges in successful efforts to slow down traffic. Approximately 20% of flights could not take off at Paris's Charles de Gaulle Airport while 33% were cancelled at Orly Airport. Transport rail lines to Germany and Spain came to a halt, and those to and from the United Kingdom and Belgium were reduced by one-third, according to the SNCF rail authority. Others were left without adequate electricity and heating services due to striking employees.

The General Confederation of Trade Unions (CGT) had called for the country to be paralyzed until the demands of the workers were met. Rising energy prices have contributed to the level of inflation aggravating an already decline in real wages.

French President Emmanuel Macron has refused to listen to the broad criticism of his pension reform policies. The president rebuffed two offers during the week of March 6-10 for urgent discussions with the trade union movement and students.

After winning reelection during 2022, Macron has rapidly moved to engineer the cuts in the

retirement system. The official response from his office to the more than one million workers and youth who have staged rolling strike actions is that the issue is now under consideration in the Senate after already being discussed in the lower house of the National Assembly.

The government's position is that the reforms are necessary in order to prevent the pension funds from becoming insolvent. Macron and his allies supporting the bill, which includes the neo-fascist National Front led by Marine Le Pen, are claiming that if the changes are not implemented it would jeopardize younger generations from ever receiving retirement benefits.

[A report published](#) on March 10 by the leading French newspaper Le Monde noted that:

“Macron told the unions he understood ‘the anguish of the many French people worried they may never get a pension.’ But he said the government had already made concessions, such as raising the retirement age from 62 to 64 years, instead of the 65 initially planned. Unions across the board have demanded that the government drop its plan to hike the retirement age altogether. An official in Macron's office told Agence France-Presse that the government ‘will be open to anything so long as there is a willingness for dialogue and compromise.’ Unions have vowed to keep up the pressure on the government, with another day of mass protests planned for Saturday (March 11), and some have even said they would keep up rolling indefinite strikes. On Tuesday (March 7), more than a million people marched across France and strikes disrupted transport and schools.”

The work stoppages and mass demonstrations were largely peaceful on March 7-8. However, there were clashes between strikers and the police in several locations throughout France.

These policies are part and parcel of the neo-liberal framework under which many capitalist states operate in the present century. Macron was supported by some workers because they perceived the National Front as a far greater threat to their interests.

However, in the existing capitalist governments, the influence of finance capital remains paramount. Defined pensions and the enhancement of social spending measures are largely discounted as long-term policies. The ruling class in these states advance the notions that larger payments to retirees, those unable to work and the poor are wasteful and unsustainable. Nonetheless, resources are routinely gathered for spending on war and subsidies for the large corporations.

The Broader Significance of the French Struggle for Pensions

Although these strikes and mass demonstrations have continued since the beginning of the year, they are taking place during a period of rising uncertainty within the western industrialized capitalist states. Since the shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and the subsequent economic decline, the world financial system is clearly responded to the cumulative effects of rising interest rates ostensibly to reduce inflation, the closing of small and medium-sized businesses, substantial layoffs within the tech service sector and the economic impact of the United States proxy war against the Russian Federation in Ukraine.

Energy prices have risen sharply while the salaries of workers have witnessed precipitous declines over the last year. The administrations in London, Washington, Brussels and Berlin

are largely preoccupied with the NATO arming of the U.S. and European Union-backed regime in Ukraine.

Workers in the U.S., Britain and other capitalist states are facing the same attacks against their living standards. The French trade unions and student organizations are setting an example for their counterparts internationally. It will be the overall political balance of forces that will determine the outcome of the campaign to end the Macron pension reform program.

Interestingly enough, one financial publication in the U.S. did at least partially understand the plight of retired workers both domestically and around the world. In an opinion article in Forbes magazine, Teresa Ghilarducci, a former professor at Notre Dam University who now teaches at the New School for Social Research, shared some of her findings on the developing crisis of retirement in the U.S.

In the piece published on March 9, [Ghilarducci emphasizes](#):

“While the French take to the streets, Americans worry about outliving their money and tell stories of kind strangers raising money on GoFundMe Accounts so they can retire. Until American voters and workers show the kind of unity and outrage the French workers show when their government aims to cut pensions, American politicians will continue to push for Social Security retirement ages to be raised to age 70 or older. Until American workers unite to improve pensions, it will be normal that millions of Americans approaching retirement age do so with no savings. If we do nothing, the U.S. will be in the awkward and embarrassing position of being a world power with sky-high senior poverty rates and small periods of retirement.”

One key element missing from Ghilarducci’s assessment is the role of the Pentagon budget in draining the U.S. national economy in light of millions facing evictions, food deficits due to inflationary pressures and the deterioration of the medical, educational and environmental infrastructure throughout the country in urban, suburban and rural areas. By initiating a proxy war against Moscow and raising tensions with the People’s Republic of China to heightened levels, can only ensure that military spending will increase.

The White House and Pentagon are once again attempting to convince people in the U.S. to accept yet another “permanent war”, this time in Eastern Europe. Despite the failures in Vietnam, Southern Africa, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Haiti, Libya, Palestine, Colombia, Cuba, Venezuela, etc., the administration of President Joe Biden has prioritized conventional warfare against Russia as the first priority leading into the 2024 national elections.

Nonetheless, in Western Europe opposition to the arming of Ukraine is being manifested in rallies and protest demonstrations involving thousands of people. These demonstrations have not been replicated as of now in the U.S. although a recent poll taken by the Associated Press indicated that support for sending weapons to Ukraine among the electorate was down to 48%. Everyone must keep in mind that these responses by voters are occurring while all news being transmitted across major corporate and government-controlled networks is heavily biased against Russia which is consistently portrayed as the aggressor in the war. See [this](#).

The only response to the escalating crisis in the U.S. is the raising of interest rates by the Federal Reserve Bank and the ignoring by government officials of the thousands of layoffs

taking place in important sectors of the economy. During the week of March 6, two large banks which are intertwined with the tech sector collapsed. In addition, the four largest banks based in the U.S. lost \$52 billion in value on March 7-8 while Fed Chairman Jerome Powell addressed the Senate and House of Representatives. Stocks markets plummeted during this same week with almost no acknowledgement from the White House. See [this](#).

What these events illustrate from France to the U.S. is that workers and youth throughout the capitalist states must recognize that the existing system cannot deliver the necessities of life in the 21st century. There should be a renewal of socialist thought and programmatic direction which views the current problems as an opportunity to advance militant solutions aimed at ending all forms of exploitation and oppression.

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