

Fires in the Streets of France Illustrates Anger over Pension Reforms

Demonstrations turned violent for several days before sanitation workers returned to their jobs

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Discontent with President Emmanuel Macron is mounting in the aftermath of his executive enactment of a controversial pension reform bill that would make substantial changes to the retirement system for millions of workers.

On March 22, Macron sat down for an interview with a French television station where he attempted to justify his actions which by-passed a vote within the National Assembly.

Macron maintained that it was necessary to raise the retirement age from 62 to 64 while requiring 43 years of service to qualify for full pension benefits. He continued the same argument that without these reforms the retirement system would become insolvent in a matter of a few years.

Such statements by the president further enflamed the public prompting even larger and more militant demonstrations between March 23-26. Hundreds of people were reportedly arrested and complaints of police brutality against demonstrators have gained international attention.

Various human rights organizations have accused the police of utilizing preemptive arrests of activists as well as excessive physical force against demonstrators.

The newly crowned King Charles III of the United Kingdom had been invited to make a state visit to France beginning on March 26. However, the general strike and subsequent rebellions in several cities including the capital of Paris made it impossible for the monarch to enter the country.

It was announced by the French government that Charles III would postpone his visit until

the summer months. The inability to host a head-of-state was a further blow to the stature of Macron among other imperialist states. Several political parties commented that this diplomatic embarrassment highlighted the political weakness of Macron. Recent opinion polls show the president as having less than a 30 percent approval rating among the electorate. 70 percent of respondents indicated that the government was responsible for the strikes and violent unrest and that the situation could worsen in the coming days and weeks. (See [this](#))

Police clash with protesters during a demonstration in Lyon, central France, on March 23, 2023. ©
Laurent Cipriani, AP

In an effort to appear unphased by the unrest in France, Macron attended a European Union (EU) Summit in Brussels, Belgium on March 24 where he reiterated his position on the pension reforms. Before the legislation is fully implemented, it must be reviewed by the Constitutional Council, the highest legal authority in France.

On March 25, unions estimated that 3.5 million workers and youth took to the streets demanding the withdrawal of the legislation by Macron. As police attempted to control the crowds in Paris and other cities, clashes erupted resulting in broken windows and arson attacks.

A firefighter and a local resident try to extinguish a fire during unrest in Paris on March 23, 2023. © Anna Kurth, AFP

In an [article published by France24](#) discussing the previous week, it said of the developing situation that:

“First an epic tussle with the unions, then a bitter standoff in parliament, and now a full-blown crisis in the streets. France’s festering pension dispute took a turn for the worse this week, with protests against Macron’s deeply unpopular plans hardening and escalating amid scenes of chaos in Paris and other cities. The unrest – which began last Thursday after Macron used special executive powers to ram his pension reform through parliament – has seen security forces fight running battles with protesters late into the night even as firefighters race to extinguish hundreds of blazes.”

In addition to the escalating tensions between the government and the unions, yet another conflict erupted over environmental and economic concerns stemming from the construction of a reservoir in the western rural district of Sainte-Soline. Opponents to the plan say that it is designed to benefit large-scale agricultural corporations while disempowering smaller farmers.

A scheduled demonstration in Sainte-Soline on March 25 attracted thousands of activists. In response to the large protests which are prohibited in the area, police initiated violent attacks against those opposing the reservoir.

[A Guardian news report](#) emphasized:

“Several people have been injured after clashes between French police and protesters opposed to a large water reservoir for farm irrigation, despite a ban on gatherings in the area. Police fired teargas to repel some protesters who threw fireworks and other projectiles as they crossed fields to approach the construction area in the western rural

district of Sainte-Soline. At least three police vehicles were set alight, television footage showed. Two protesters were seriously hurt, including one who is in a critical condition after suffering a head injury, as well as 16 police officers, the local prefecture said. One officer was evacuated by helicopter. Thousands of protesters had converged on the site of the planned reservoir, where a similar protest last October also turned violent.”

10th Day of Mass Action Held

Macron’s use of article 49.3 of the French constitution to force his pension reform through parliament has incensed his opponents. © Benjamin Dodman, FRANCE 24

Another day of strikes and protests occurred on March 28 as the unions estimated participation at over 2 million. People continued their demonstrations against the Macron pension reforms and what they perceived as the dictatorial posture of the government. Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne offered on the same day to hold talks during the first full week of April with the eight major unions behind the mass demonstrations and strikes. Pledging to maintain their strike actions, there was an announcement of an 11th day of protest on April 6.

[Reuters News Agency](#) described the day as follows:

“Black-clad groups set fire to garbage cans and threw projectiles at police in Paris, who charged at them and threw teargas in confrontations on the fringes of a march against President Emmanuel Macron and his deeply unpopular pension bill. Clashes also erupted on Tuesday (March 28) at similar rallies in other cities including Rennes, Bordeaux and Toulouse, with a bank branch and cars set ablaze in Nantes. However, while public frustration has evolved into broader anti-Macron sentiment, there was less violence than last week, and rallies were otherwise largely peaceful.”

One major announcement came on March 29 when the sanitation union suspended their

work stoppage. Thousands of tons of garbage remained piled up in the streets of Paris prompting an infestation of rats.

[An Associated Press report](#) on the sanitation workers said:

“In a decision that sent waves of relief among many Paris residents, the powerful CGT union representing sanitation workers announced that the three-week-long strike would be ‘suspended’ as of Wednesday (March 29). Crews will join others who were legally requisitioned over the last week to help with the daunting clean-up process. A statement by the CGT claimed that requisitions of trucks, incinerators and personnel, ordered by the Paris police prefect, had bled the movement, leading to its suspension. But added that ‘the combat isn’t over.’ ‘It’s good that the trash is collected. It’s very unsanitary, and some residents already have trouble with rats and mice. It can be dangerous if it’s left too long,’ said artist Gil Franco, 73.”

Struggles Involving Workers Not Confined to France

The outcome of these industrial actions will ultimately depend upon the consistency and strength of the unions and their allies among the youth. These attacks on pensions are part and parcel of the austerity measures being enacted by capitalist governments in Europe and North America.

In Germany on March 27, transport unions staged a one-day strike which shutdown most rail lines, buses and airplanes. A payment dispute involving two unions and their employers has resulted in the most widespread industrial action in the country in recent years.

The EVG union reported to the media that in excess of 30,000 railway workers participated in the strike. Transport of cargo on the rail networks and at the German ports were also impacted as dock workers joined those on strike.

Meanwhile in Britain, unions continued their battles against austerity and the failure of the Conservative government to address the declining standards of living due to inflation. Workers in the education, healthcare, transport, passport and railway sectors have participated in strikes for months.

In the education sector, the National Union of Head Teachers (NUHT), among other unions, have held periodic strikes over the last several months demanding higher pay and improved conditions of employment. Recently the government has made an offer to the education, healthcare and other unions aimed at ending the strikes, yet no decisions have been made.

According to the National Education Union (NEU), real wages for experienced teachers have declined by 20 percent since 2010. Many within the profession are leaving to seek higher pay in other sectors. The unions are demanding salary increases commensurate with the rate of inflation.

Unions have announced that on April 28, 133,00 workers will strike in various public sectors in Britain. The Conservative Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has pursued a draconian policy of wage cuts despite the inability of the government to curb inflation.

These developments portend much for the future of the capitalist states amid a rash of bank failures in the United States and Switzerland. Central banks in the U.S. and Europe are continuing to raise interest rates while the cost of living increases for working families.

Silvergate, Silicon Valley, Signature and Credit Suisse financial institutions have been the focus of multi-billion dollar bailouts by central banks and larger firms which agreed to provide the necessary liquidity to prevent further economic instability. However, these rescue operations will become more difficult if there are additional bank failures reminiscent of the Great Recession of 2007-2008.

Trade unions, Left parties and mass organizations within capitalist countries must begin to think beyond the acquisition of wage increases and improved working conditions. A different system of ownership and wealth distribution could very well be the only real solution to the overall malaise plaguing the working class and oppressed around the globe.

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