

France Remains Tense After Pension Reform Bill Is Signed Into Law

Workers call for another mass mobilization on May Day

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Global Research, April 26, 2023

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

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A Constitutional Council decision in Paris on April 14 upheld the legality of the pension reform legislation which has been the spark for a series of general strikes since the beginning of the year.

The highest court in France decided that the bill was in congruence with the constitution and therefore should be enacted.

Millions of French workers and youth have taken to the streets while staying away from jobs and schools to protest the decision by President Emmanuel Macron to raise the retirement age from 62 to 64 years. As a result of the reform, the social security act has changed the age of eligibility by two years.

Now, according to French law, employees will have to provide 43 years of service in order to collect full benefits during their retirement. This is taking place amid a rise in inflation not witnessed in the capitalist states since the early 1980s.

Immediately after the decision by the Constitutional Council and Macron's signature on the legislation, people went into the streets to demonstrate against the government. Some of the protests turned violent as police utilized excessive force in efforts to clear crowds from the commercial areas of the cities.

The leading trade unions in the country made a final appeal to Macron urging him not to sign the bill since several clauses within the legislation had been rejected by the Constitutional Council. However, the president maintained the same position claiming that if the reforms were not instituted the entire retirement system would become insolvent.

In addition, to the upholding of the legislation by the Constitutional Council, the judicial body

declined to authorize a national referendum on the question. Macron himself refused to allow a final vote within the National Assembly and imposed the law by decree.

However, workers are continuing to demand the abolition of the new pension reforms. There have been militant actions on a daily basis since April 14. Anger and dissatisfaction have reached unprecedented levels against Macron and his political party which is neo-liberal in its policy orientation. Despite the labor unrest in France, the Left parties in the National Assembly are divided and in a minority.

Even though the Left is relatively weak in the legislative apparatus of the state, Macron could not risk defeat. The president felt compelled to act in a dictatorial manner while the Constitutional Council and the security apparatus provided the legal and repressive mechanisms aimed at suppressing dissent.

[One news agency](#) said of the current mood among the workers that:

“Labor unions have called for a further nationwide strike day on April 28. As of April 21, the impact of the strike is not known. Based on recent nationwide industrial action, it is likely that the SNCF national rail network and the Paris region public transport operators will run between 50 and 75 percent of trains. If air traffic control (ATC) staff join the strike, flights will likely be reduced at Paris-Orly (ORY) and some other regional airports by around 20 percent. Government servants, teachers, and healthcare workers may also join the action. Some staff at private companies will likely participate in any such labor actions, resulting in business disruptions and closures.”

Undoubtedly, the French police will be called upon to engage in brutal tactics to prevent the demonstrations from blocking streets and roads. The police have been accused of brutality since the beginning of the industrial actions in January.

Several human rights organizations including Amnesty International have criticized the law-enforcement agents for utilizing brute force. Similar police behavior was witnessed during the “Yellow Vest” protests in 2018-19 when people demonstrated for weeks over the rise in toll fees for the highways.

A report published by the [Financial Times](#) noted this phenomenon of state repression when they emphasized:

“Lawyers and human rights groups have criticized the methods used by law enforcement, such as preventive arrests to deter protesters and collect intelligence on activists and forceful crowd control methods. An official from the UN urged French police to avoid excessive force, and the EU’s human rights watchdog questioned the proportionality of the crackdown. In March alone, more than 2,100 arrests were made with only a fraction leading to charges, two people from the environmental protest at the Sainte-Soline reservoir remain in a coma, and 286 protesters have been injured, including one who lost an eye and another a thumb.”

Therefore, it appears that the French government has nothing to offer workers and youth other than more austerity, legislative indifference and brutality by the security forces. Rather than impose higher taxes on the large financial institutions and energy corporations which are making huge profits from the people, the class contradictions inherent in a decaying capitalist system are being borne by the masses.

Crisis Rooted in the Imperialist System

The rightward shift in domestic policy in France is reflective of the worsening economic conditions for workers within the European Union (EU) states. In many capitalist countries the living standards of the majority of people have declined precipitously in the last decade.

The war in Ukraine which was initiated by the United States and their NATO allies has disrupted the supply chains for energy resources causing tremendous difficulties for working families. Heating, electrical, transportation, housing and food costs have skyrocketed as the proxy war against Russia is requiring billions of dollars in taxpayer funds every month.

Macron in his desperation for energy resources and trade opportunities has travelled to Algeria and Nigeria seeking larger imports of natural gas from these African states. Recently, the French president spent three days in China holding talks with President Xi Jinping and other leading officials of the government. Even though the Chinese government opposes the war in Ukraine and is seeking a negotiated settlement to the conflict, Macron is being forced to act in ways which are contrary to Washington's foreign policy imperatives in Asia.

In the United Kingdom, strikes within key industries and public services are ongoing as well. Unions have shut down rail lines, schools, medical services, passport offices, etc. These strike actions are scheduled to continue for the next several months.

Junior physicians have held strikes demanding an increase in pay and improved working conditions. Airport security employees are planning work stoppages along with maritime and coastguard agencies.

An [Evening Standard](#) report on the labor situation quoted Public and Commercial Services (PCS) General Secretary Mark Serwotka as saying:

"They seem to think, if they ignore our members, they'll go away. But how can our members ignore the cost-of-living crisis when 40,000 civil servants are using food banks and 45,000 of them are claiming the benefits they administer themselves? It's a national scandal and a stain on this Government's reputation that so many of its own workforce are living in poverty."

PCS is planning for 133,000 of its members to strike on April 28. This will impact the maritime industry along with coastguard agencies. Amazon employees are also striking, saying that the meager wage increase offers made by management were insulting.

Britain's Conservative Party government of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has no intentions of relenting in their draconian economic program. As working people in the UK fall deeper into impoverishment, the administration continues to prioritize ruling class interests.

These developments in the UK and EU states portend much for the working class in the U.S. which is battling inflation and a resurgence in layoffs in the high-tech and service industries. The administration of President Joe Biden and the previous Democratic Party dominated House and Senate failed to enact long term social spending legislation to reduce the rising levels of poverty.

There are the possibilities of strikes at UPS and within the automobile manufacturing industry this year. Racial tensions remain high also with the ongoing killings by police and

vigilantes of African Americans.

The crisis of capitalism and imperialism must be addressed with a political program for social transformation. This will require the organization of the workers and oppressed peoples into independent political parties and formations so they can be equipped to meet the monumental challenges ahead.

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Featured image: The protests continue across France. This in Paris on 6th April. Source: John Mullen

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