

French Unions Stage One-day General Strike Against Pension Reforms

A united front of labor and youth organizations are discussing how to move forward after the massive impact of “Black Thursday”

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Over a million French workers and students participated in a general strike on January 19 demanding that the proposed pension reforms drafted by President Emmanuel Macron be halted.

The bill to be voted on in the French Assembly would raise the retirement age from 62 to 64 while increasing the level of contributions into the pension system by employees.

Demonstrations were held across the country with the largest taking place in Paris where hundreds of thousands marched in protest against the Macron program of neo-liberalism which is seeking to burden workers amid an inflationary spiral and energy crisis not experienced in decades. In solidarity with the trade unions, students from high schools and universities joined the strike and marches as well.

This nationwide industrial action came just three months after a strike within the oil industry where trade unions responded to the hardships resulting from the rise in the costs of living including heating and transportation costs. Macron, who won re-election during 2022, gained the votes of many workers due to the fear surrounding the campaign of far-right political leader Marine Le Pen. Nonetheless, despite the continuation of Macron’s tenure in the presidency, workers are facing the prospects of a precipitously decline in living standards.

The social situation in France resembles the crisis which has grown rapidly throughout the western capitalist states. The post-pandemic slump in economic growth threatening recession, coupled with the often unstated and negative consequences of the exponential climb in military spending to maintain the Ukraine war against the Russian Federation, has spawned a global spike in energy prices and other consumer goods.

Unions within the energy sector played an important role in the recent manifestation. The

[French daily Le Monde noted that:](#)

“On January 19, employees of the electricity and gas industries responded en masse. Within the main electric company EDF, 44.5% of workers were on strike at midday, according to management. The number was 40% at the gas company Engie (formerly GDF Suez), and 52% and 41.4% according to its subsidiaries GRTgaz and GRDF. Finally, in the oil industries branch, the strike reached even higher rates: from 70% to even 100% in some refineries of the TotalEnergies group, said the CGT union.”

Public schools were impacted by the general strike with some buildings closing completely as both teachers and students responded to the call for a work stoppage. Railway lines locally and regionally were largely ground to a standstill.

Theaters and other public facilities were closed due to the strike. Public television and radio outlets went silent during large parts of the day in solidarity with the nationwide efforts against the pension reforms.

By and large the demonstrations were peaceful. However, in Paris 30 people were reported arrested in clashes with police before and during the demonstrations. Merchants boarded up their businesses and some were subject to broken windows and other forms of property damage.

Several people were injured during the demonstrations on January 19. One engineer who lives in the French-controlled island of Guadeloupe in the Caribbean, while photographing the events in Paris, was attacked by the police causing serious damage requiring surgery. His lawyer has filed a complaint against the police services which responded by saying the injury occurred within the context of violent demonstrations in the city.

The severity of the plight of French workers and youth was articulated by a number of union leaders and leftists inside the country. The one-day strike brought together a broad spectrum of organizations represented by 8 major unions and five student organizations.

Guardian correspondent Angelique Chrisafis [noted in a report](#) on January 19:

“Philippe Martinez, head of the CGT union, told the broadcaster Public Senat that the planned pension change ‘bundles together everyone’s dissatisfaction’ with the government. He said the rare united front among workers’ representatives showed the problem was very serious. He called the pension changes ‘unjust ... dogmatic and ideological’. Laurent Berger, the head of France’s largest union, the moderate CFDT, told BFMTV: ‘There is a lot of anger.’ The pension changes still need to go through parliament, where Macron’s centrist grouping has lost its absolute majority. The government is hoping to pass the bill swiftly with the support of lawmakers from the rightwing Les Républicains.”

Macron has maintained that the pension reforms are necessary to maintain the solvency of the retirement system. The president claims that the reforms are part and parcel of his mandate emanating from the 2022 elections. However, the majority of workers who voted for Macron were not doing so in order for the French government to reduce their pension benefits.

The French Labor Ministry’s position is that the reforms would keep the public pension

system from going deeper into debt. Labor Minister Olivier Dussopt told the LCI Television that the reforms were absolutely indispensable and fair to the workers. According to the Labor Ministry, delaying the age of retirement while at the same time extending periods for workers to pay into the system, would add 17.7 billion euros (approximately 18 billion US dollars) to the system purportedly ending its deficit by 2027.

Can the Alliance Remain United to Fight for the Interests of the Workers and Youth?

There was a debate which emerged after the January 19 actions as to the next steps in the struggle to defeat Macron's pension reforms. On that same evening, 13 organizations representing eight unions and five student organizations met in order to map out a strategy for the coming period.

The General Confederation of Trade Union (CGT) called for daily actions between January 20 and the 31st when the draft measure is presented to the French Council of Ministers. This proposal could not get unanimity and was not adopted by the coalition.

Others called for mobilizations on January 23 as a continuation of the pressure exerted four days before. It appears as if January 31 has been agreed upon as another day of strikes and mass actions.

Nonetheless, unions are continuing to put forward other forms of industrial actions extending into early February. In addition, 600,000 people have signed an online petition opposing the pension reforms.

The coalition of forces which organized the general strike said that the turn out far exceeded their expectations. Not only did the workers and youth flood the streets of Paris, medium-sized and small cities were shaken by the mass character of the demonstrations with 3,000 marching in Dole, central France, and approximately 1,500 in Chaumont, in the eastern region of France.

[Le Monde in a report](#) on the aftermath of the general strike pointed out:

"In some sectors, the situation could even further escalate. The national federation of the CGT for the chemical industry called for a 48-hour strike, starting on January 26, and a 72-hour strike, starting on February 6. Workers could also be asked to 'shut down refining facilities.'

'We are fully aware that one day will not be enough to make the government back down,' said Eric Sellini, a CGT representative at TotalEnergies, on BFM-TV last week, acknowledging that fuel supplies to petrol stations could be affected."

International Significance of the French General Strike

These developments in France, one of the leading capitalist states in Western Europe and internationally, portends much for the worsening crisis impacting the working class and impoverished around the globe. As the United States administration of President Joe Biden pushes his militarist program for war in Ukraine against the Russian Federation combined with further hostility towards the People's Republic of China and the Islamic Republic of Iran, resources for funding pension systems and social benefits gained by the unions over the last eight decades will be diminished.

France, being a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), has become involved in the Ukraine situation due to the imposition of unprecedented sanctions against Moscow and the constant supply of resources for military purposes. As the NATO project in Ukraine requires greater commitment in regard to providing weapons to the Zelensky administration, the energy shortages and increasing inflation will undoubtedly have a disproportionate impact on working people.

The link between the economic downturn and the expanding military budgets within the imperialist states should be raised by the French workers in order to provide a clearer picture of the contemporary situation. In the 21st century, the incompatibility of high military spending and rising living standards among the workers has been fully exposed. In order to ensure the social gains of the working class and its further progress, a struggle against the capitalist system and its wars of conquest must become a central focus of the movement against austerity.

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