

French Unions Stage Third Day of General Strikes Against Pension Reform

On January 31 and February 7, hundreds of thousands of workers and youth stayed away from school and work to make a political statement on the current economic crisis

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President Emmanuel Macron of France has introduced a bill within the National Assembly which would make significant changes to the pension system established as a result of working class struggles over the decades.

Macron and his neoliberal political party presented itself during the 2022 elections as a viable alternative to the ultra-right wing National Front headed by Marine Le Pen.

Despite the fact that many workers viewed Macron as a lesser threat to the gains made by the French unions, one of the first pieces of legislation introduced in the second administration of the incumbent has been the attack on pensions. The plan is to raise the retirement age from 62 to 64 while imposing higher contributions from the workers themselves by mandating that people be employed for 43 years to collect full pension benefits.

A broad coalition of French workers and youth have answered Macron's policies with a series of general strikes and mass mobilizations. On February 11, another day of demonstrations will be held aimed at filling the streets of Paris and other major cities throughout the country.

Transportation systems are being halted, employees in the oil and energy industries have impeded fuel deliveries and access to electric power, schools are being closed as teachers and students join other workers to oppose the Macron agenda. These periodic general strikes are highlighting the potential political power of organized labor and their allies among the youth and other sectors of the population.

On January 19, the 31st and February 7, 2.8 million workers and hundreds of thousands of youth responding to the call of the National Student Union, participated in walkouts and

marches. These manifestations have been largely peaceful although there were some clashes with police and property damage in Paris and other municipalities.

In light of the one-day general strikes during January and early February, the unions are contemplating even more militant initiatives against the pension reforms. These work stoppages are taking place amid higher rates of inflation not experienced in the western capitalist states since the 1970s and 1980s.

Unions representing the railway workers said they would continue their strike into Wednesday (Feb. 8) in order to emphasize the seriousness of the crisis. Oil workers also pledged to extend their stay away by another day.

Neoliberalism and the Plight of the Working Class

Despite the outpouring of unions and students over the recent period and the 2022 oil worker's strike, the Macron forces appeared to be firmly committed to their neoliberal agenda which places greater burdens on the very class which are most impacted by inflation. French-based multinational energy firms remain largely unscathed by the government's policy imperatives as Macron seeks to replace the decline in natural gas resources from Russia by negotiating new deals with Algeria and other states.

Although Macron was re-elected in June for another term of office, his political party failed to win a majority within the National Assembly. The French Senate is already dominated by the Republican conservatives and therefore the Renaissance Party of Macron, formerly known as the La Republique En Marche, will have to draw support for its pension reforms from the right-wing opposition.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon the unions and students to advance a broader economic program which provides specific alternatives to the ruling class parties which dominate French politics during this period. A coalition of Left forces in the National Assembly are attempting to sharpen the debate surrounding the pension reforms. The outcomes of this political debate will undoubtedly be influenced by the independent actions of the working class.

It will take militant and revolutionary initiatives of the workers and youth to defeat the neoliberal policies of Macron. Absent persistent agitation and organizing, the ruling class will prevail, setting the stage for even more draconian attacks on the wages and social benefits of the masses of people.

According to the Associated Press:

"French Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne defended the government plan Tuesday (Feb. 7) but suggested there was room for adjustments. 'I'm convinced there are points of agreement to be found. I'm convinced that we can improve this text together. It will be through debate, confronting ideas and, of course, respect,' she said, noting graffiti that appeared on the meeting place of the National Assembly, including a door marked with 60. If nothing is done, Borne said, taxes and social charges will increase, along with unemployment and lower purchasing power. That would cost retirees with modest pensions and 'all those who worked all their lives, and certainly not the big bosses,' she said." See [this](#).

The Russian special military operation in Ukraine has prompted sanctions by the European Union (EU) member-states and the United States against Moscow. These sanctions and the imperialist-engineered failure to negotiate an accord between Kiev and Moscow, have worsened the economic situation in Western Europe and other geopolitical regions of the world.

Simultaneously in Britain, unions representing railway, healthcare, educational and other workers have engaged in one-day strike actions as well. The Conservative Party government of UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has imposed an austerity budget on the workers employed in the public sectors of the country.

There is much at stake in the recent manifestations of the class struggles which are unfolding in France and Britain. Workers and oppressed peoples in North America should follow these developments in Europe in order to gain lessons for the ongoing assaults on their wages and living standards in the world's leading capitalist and imperialist state.

Consequently, the social plight of the working class in France and other European states are igniting industrial actions as witnessed in Britain since the beginning of 2023. The working class is becoming poorer while the energy firms and financial institutions are reaping huge profits.

A report on the actions of the trade union federations [says that](#):

“Speaking at the protest, head of the CGT, one of France’s main unions, Philippe Martinez called for ‘tougher, more, and more massive’ strikes, while Laurent Berger, general secretary of the CFDT, said: ‘We will try to be even stronger this Saturday [when more protests are planned]’. Mr Martinez said: ‘The government cannot remain deaf to the immense majority of workers [who oppose reforms]. It continues to be stubborn despite protests, so yes, we must go up a gear with more marked, longer, tougher, more numerous, more massive and extended strikes.’”

Numerous union leaders and opponents of the pension reforms see no other alternative to withholding their labor in protests against the policy changes. Through their actions the workers and youth are attempting to influence the National Assembly debate to reject the pension reforms.



The same above-mentioned article conveys the sentiment of the workers: “Virginie Gonzales, general secretary of the UGICT-CGT told BFMTV: ‘I fear that without blocking the economy, we will not be heard; or at least, not listened to.’ Ecologist MP Sandrine Rousseau added: ‘I’m very angry that the government is asking people who are already doing a lot of

work to take longer to get to retirement. Their bodies are in pain, they are exposed to psycho-social risks, burnouts, and a loss of meaning. 'Retirement is the reward for this work. I would say that a 'right to laziness' from the age of 60 is legitimate, and even before, perhaps.' She added that the reforms would also 'worsen' women's position at work."

The Capitalist Economic Crisis and the Role of the Working Class

A recent study by the French governmental statistical agency is predicting that the second largest EU economy will experience marginal growth during 2023. The forecast for far less than one percent growth is taking into account the industrial actions of the workers and youth.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has warned of the potential of a global recession by the concluding months of this year. Although the rise in inflation has somewhat eased, there are indicators which can impact employment and wages which are not keeping up with the rate of price hikes.

Food and energy prices in Europe are absorbing larger amounts of the salaries of workers. These realities are bound to prompt demonstrations and industrial actions in defense of the gains made during the labor struggles of the second half of the 20th century.

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