

Macron Forced to Back Down over Pension Reform Amidst Raging Protests

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Once again the French have shown the world now to protest, and that protesting works. President Emmanuel Macron was forced to roll back his plans for pensions reform over the weekend as demonstrators took to the streets on Saturday in what was entering a second month of social unrest. Paris had come to a standstill over the festive season; trains, including the metro had ground to a halt, save a couple of main lines during peak times, as commuters and shoppers stayed at home.

It has been agreed to scrap for the time being, a plan to raise the full-benefits retirement age from 62 to 64. France currently has a pensions deficit of around \$19 billion, and although Macron's proposals would have gone some way to fixing it, the President is going to have to rethink his approach. The idea is to wait until at least April, by which a report into the pensions deficit should be ready.

Macron has seen unprecedented protests during his tenure so far. Indeed this latest one is the longest in modern French history. Although it has been given minimal coverage in the corporate media, Yellow Vest demonstrations for economic and social justice have been a weekly feature of the Macron presidency since as far back as October 2018. But this hasn't stopped 'Manu' -as some call him - from trying to implement a range of reforms which workers feel undermine their rights. Forced to abandon his fuel tax rise back in 2018 as a result of protests, he then embarked on a series of other reforms, the latest of which has been to pensions. And despite being reported in mainstream media as being merely a retirement age increase from 62 to 64 for certain professions, what Macron proposed was not quite as harmless as is being portrayed.

Referred to by France's CGT union as a 'smokescreen', the pension reforms were to replace France's 42 separate pension regimes with a points system. But opponents say by doing that, people would be required to work for longer or be left with less money when they retire. It would also abolish benefits like early retirement for certain groups of workers. And far from women being 'big winners' from the reforms as the government maintains, it seems the [opposite](#) could be true, with widows, divorced women and mothers who take career breaks to raise their families, being particularly penalised. As a result, the majority of French support the strikes - around 62% according to an [RTL poll](#).

One might think that Macron would have learnt some lessons from his predecessors. Alain Juppe, Prime Minister under Jacques Chirac, tried to overhaul pensions in 1995, leading to three weeks of strikes which equally resulted in a government U-turn. But Macron has had a ruthless, defiant approach towards the protestors since the outset; determined not to give in

to their demands. Even before he became President, he [proclaimed](#) in response to a question about pushing through economic reforms 'if we get a few protests, it won't be a show-stopper'. And this attitude is what is at the heart of the demonstrations against the government. For it is Macron's lofty, high-handed approach which has irked people from the very beginning.

The idea that people's feelings towards the reforms are somehow irrelevant – the very people who are powering the machine that is the city of Paris – is gravely wrong, and will only inspire more French to take to the streets. These people are no different from those who led the revolution of the 18th century, and it would be a mistake to think that they will accept to be dictated to by a powerful elite any more than their ancestors did. The mood in the streets has been militant of late; emotions are running high.

The French people have proved that they are a force to be reckoned with. It is to Emmanuel Macron's detriment if he underestimates them. Currently he is presiding over one of the most socially turbulent periods in France's modern history. If he is to save his legacy at all, he must begin by respecting the citizens he presides over, and ultimately, by respecting the key message of the republic: freedom, equality and fraternity.

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