

France: Nationwide Prolonged Strikes of Workers & Employees

A year ago, in November 2018, it was the Yellow Jacket movement that broke out in France.

A few months later, it was the status of the SNCF (French National Railway Company) and that of the railway workers provoked the strike by railwaymen. SNCF was split into several public limited companies, the rail network opened to competition with the planned elimination of thousands of kilometres of lines. The status of railway workers dating back more than a century was abolished. This status gave guarantee of employment, and a recognition of hard and difficult nature of railway work by a retirement age of 52 for mobile workers and 57 for sedentary workers. The periodic strikes organised by the unions—18 strikes of 2 consecutive days over 3 months—wore out. It was then unemployment insurance that was attacked in autumn 2019, making it more difficult to obtain the right to access unemployment benefits. In addition, there has been a major attack on the national education system, reforming the last two years of secondary education and increasing social selection at the entrance to higher education.

President Macron is attempting to unify 42 separate state-funded pension programs into one amalgamated system that he argues would be more fair and transparent. However, this would mean many unions would have to give up hard-earned benefits for their members to accept a national standard, including a higher retirement age, as the president attempts to mold France into a new, neoliberal image.

The recipe is simple: keep the share of pensions in public spending at the current level, at less than 14% of GDP, while the number of pensioners will increase by 1.5% by 2050. Mathematically, this would result, at constant Euro, in the distribution of the same money supply among a growing number of pensioners, thus reducing pensions and impoverishing pensioners.

Today, more than 84% of the working population belongs roughly to two pension schemes: The private sector employees (19 million employees) who today receive 50% of their average reference salary as a pension from a public pay-as-you-go pension fund, calculated in annual instalments, and around 20% from a national supplementary pension system (ARRCO-AGIRC) in a points system.

The civil servants of the State and local authorities (4 million employees) paid directly by the State and by a local authorities' pension fund.

The Macron government launched a major propaganda battle with the support of all the major media to denounce “the profiteers of a retirement system on the brink”.

As early as September 2019 SUD Rail and UNSA Rail launched a call for a renewable strike from 5 December in against the change of pension schemes, followed by FO and the CGT. Even the CFDT railway workers called for a strike on 5 December. In parallel with the calls in the energy sector, in all sectors of the civil service, lawyers' unions and youth organisations launched calls for strikes and demonstrations. Even police unions announced “a symbolic closure of police stations”. A national inter-professional call for 5 December was launched by all trade union confederations.

With 800,000 demonstrators according to the police and 1.5 million according to the CGT, the strength of the demonstrators and strikes reminded people the strongest days of strikes and demonstrations in all sectors.

Nationwide protests against the government of Emanuel Macron entered their seventh continuous week today by 21 January, as between 187,000 (a government estimate) and 250,000 people (the unions' count) took to the streets. Led by transport unions, mass protests occurred across the country, including in Paris, Lyon, Grenoble, Nantes, Dijon and Angers. Meanwhile, in Nice, there was a party atmosphere as activists organized a torchlight evening demonstration. The protests now constitute the longest and most intense actions against the government since the famous May 1968 “revolution,”

For weeks, transport unions have blocked the capital's arteries, with the large majority of Paris' famous metro lines closed or virtually unusable. Likewise, suburban and national services have been canceled, with many people's Christmas and New Year plans affected.

Transport unions are the most organized and committed resistance to Macron's agenda and have shut down many of France's port cities, including Calais, Dunkirk, Le Havre, La Rochelle and Marseille, calling for “dead ports” over the weekend. Yet as the strike continues into its seventh week, its intensity has waned, with many strikers forced to go back to work after their funds ran dry. However, just as the enthusiasm from transport workers has waned, they have found allies in strange

places. French lawyers, whose union has managed to build up an impressive •2 billion surplus in pension funds, have struck in opposition to the plan that they fear would see it liquidated. Across the country, legal workers have theatrically thrown their gowns down in a symbolic challenge to the government. And school teachers also walked out en masse. Other groups have found particularly creative ways to fight Macron’s vision. Striking ballet dancers performed a free show on the steps of the famous Palais Garnier opera house in Paris, while a week later, the Paris Opera orchestra staged their own al fresco concert. Meanwhile, employees of the Louvre Museum shut the building down, blocking the entrance at the famous glass pyramid, telling visitors that “the Mona Lisa is on strike” and arguing that Macron’s plan would “lower everyone’s pensions.”

A report in *The Monthly Review* observed, “ the protests are the longest and among the most intense since those of May 1968, a generation-defining movement of wildcat strikes and sit-ins that led to a government, fearful of a socialist revolution, hastily decreeing sweeping worker and citizen rights programs that characterize French society today. The French worker’s confidence and disdain for the authority of bosses emanates from the spirit of that movement. For decades, even conservative presidents feared the power of organized labor. However, Macron has been clear in his intentions to end the welfare state. Time will tell if his plans will succeed. But from the looks of things, there are a considerable number of people who oppose them.”
