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Calls grow for mass December 5 protest strike against French pension cuts

There is growing support for strike action on December 5 against President Emmanuel Macron's pension cuts and austerity measures. Initially, five unions in Paris mass transit had called for a strike on December 5 to postpone calls for further action, after a widely-followed September 16 strike and wildcat strikes in the National Railways (SNCF). Now, fearing growing social anger among broad layers of workers, the unions are reluctantly calling for broader strikes. There are signs that the mobilization could be large and could paralyze the French economy.

Beyond the maneuvers of the union bureaucracies, anger at Macron's austerity and police repression is spreading among broad layers of workers. Calls for strike action are widely popular. According to various polls, 70 percent of the population expects strikes will continue after December 5 and 69 percent support the strike. Support for strike action is stronger among manual workers (74 percent) and state employees (70 percent).



Railworkers on a Paris demonstration

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The growing social anger in France is part of a broad international resurgence of class struggle, with US auto strikes and mass protests driven by anger at social inequality in Algeria, Catalonia, Chile, Lebanon, Iraq, and Hong Kong. In France, the “yellow vest” movement, organized independently of the unions on social media, celebrated its first birthday on November 17.

Many sections of workers are now planning to take strike action on December 5. Laurent Djebali, the assistant general secretary of the National Union of Independent Unions (UNSA) for Paris mass transit, told the right-wing *Le Figaro*: “Starting on December 5, there will be no subway, no regional mass transit, and very few buses.”

Multiple railworkers’ unions are announcing indefinite strike action, as the state prepares to introduce a multi-tier workforce in January 2020 at the SNCF. The unions are reeling after ordering workers to return to work with no concessions in two wildcat strikes amid broad anger at pension and wage cuts and the partial privatization of the SNCF.

The communiqué of railworkers at Châtillon as they took wildcat action last month explained: “We can no longer accept working at near-minimum wage salaries, that have been frozen five years, understaffed and amid increasing resignations from the job. We are ashamed at how the SNCF plays with passengers’ security and comfort, to boost flexibility and profits. ... Enough restructuring, low wages, job cuts and understaffing!”

Alongside the railworkers, truck drivers will take strike action on December 5, together with Air France, where eleven unions have announced strikes “across the country.”

Hospitals, which have seen strikes since March to protest poor conditions facing patients and staff, will take strike action against the Health 2022 Law and its attacks on the medical system. Healthcare workers will also march in the streets on December 5.

More broadly in the public sector, three education unions are also calling for teachers strikes. Strike movements are also expected among firemen, electricity workers, the ports and the Post Office. Students and lawyers are also expected to march.

A confrontation is brewing between the working class and the Macron government that poses critical political issues. The union bureaucracies, who negotiate and work closely with Macron and proved hostile to the “yellow vest” protests, are decisively opposed to a political struggle against Macron. They have called a strike, and workers are seizing on this opportunity to take action, but they are only doing so in a desperate attempt to keep control of the situation. They will prove to be bitter enemies of the workers, working to organize the defeat of the strike they feel forced to call.

Thus Laurent Escure of the UNSA union warned employers that “Anger is festering in certain sectors.” He begged them to “take certain decisions as quickly as possible” because “if we do it after the 5th, it will be in a danger zone.” That is, Escure is proposing to reach a filthy deal they would try to impose on the workers as soon as the strike begins, to argue that it should be wound down and turned into a purely symbolic protest.

It is critical for workers to take the struggle out of the hands of the trade unions and build their own committees of action, independent of the unions. These committees could organize strikes and actions alongside workers and youth entering into struggle around the world, building the unity in struggle of the international working class. Within this process, the Socialist Equality Party will insist on the necessity of a movement to transfer political power to the working class in France and internationally, in order to expropriate the financial aristocracy.

The working class is entering into struggle against a financial aristocracy determined to impoverish the working class, whether it be through attacks on health care, pensions or beyond. Macron intends to end France’s 42 retirement plans and introduce a system of retirement “by points” of indeterminate monetary value set by the government. One teacher calculated on BFM-TV news that he would lose €900 per month if this reform were to pass.

The ruling party, Macron’s Republic on the March (LRM) is denouncing workers striking on December 5 with all the financial aristocracy’s class arrogance against the workers. Last Thursday, Health Minister Agnès Buzyn said the strike had “very selfish demands.” National Assembly chair Richard Ferrand declared Sunday that this is “a mobilization to preserve inequality.”

It is a provocation to claim that workers with special retirement systems promote inequality. What is driving inequality, is a parasitic layer of billionaires that devour vast social wealth produced by the workers. The expropriation of their wealth is an urgent and essential measure.

While Macron slashes wages and social benefits, France’s 13 wealthiest billionaires added nearly 24 billion euros to their net worth last year, making France the country in the world where billionaires were getting rich the fastest—despite a stagnant economy since 2008. Through the purchase of Tiffany, Bernard Arnault has recently become the world’s richest man, with a net worth of over \$106 billion. Macron’s policies aim to further boost inequality by yet again boosting their net worth by tens of billions at workers’ expense.

The state is signaling it intends to make no concessions on austerity, despite its concern at the explosive situation. Macron cancelled his appearance at the COP25 ecological conference in Madrid and shortened his trip to the NATO summit in London. Speaking to students in Amiens, he denounced the French population: “I get the feeling, listening to us collectively, if you listen to radio or turn on the television, that everything is awful. ... Right now our country is, I think, too negative about itself.”

Prime Minister Edouard Philippe met Monday and Tuesday with the unions and employers’ federations, announcing nothing but proclaiming their “very great determination.” The strike “will take place” said Geoffroy Roux de Bézieux, the head of the Medef employers’ federation, who said he expected “difficulties” from the strike.

The only way forward for workers faced with the inflexibility of the ruling class is the expropriation of the financial aristocracy. It thus poses the question of the transfer of political power to the workers on an international scale and the construction of a socialist society.

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