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French prime minister vows to impose pension cuts despite growing strikes

Since December 5, French public sector workers have been on strike against planned pension cuts opposed by two thirds of the population, shutting down mass transit, train transport and education. Yesterday, before trade unions and employers' groups at the Economic, Social and Environmental Council (CESE), Prime Minister Edouard Philippe spoke and announced that he would ram the cuts through despite growing opposition. He demanded an end to strike action and stepped-up talks with the trade unions, who have been negotiating the cuts with Macron since 2017.

Philippe provocatively rejected all the strikers' main demands outright, vowing to impose a system of pensions "by points," eliminate special pension systems in the public sector, and increase the legal retirement age from 62 to 64.

He told the CESE, "I am determined to pass this reform. We will gradually transform the pension system... We will place a fairer system on solid financial bases, by working somewhat longer and ending the special pension systems." He would prepare a draft bill for the end of this year, submit it to the council of ministers on January 22, and to the parliament in February.

This confirms that the French government has no intention to compromise, and that the confrontation between the working class and the financial aristocracy represented by Macron will continue and escalate.

There is nothing to negotiate with President Emmanuel Macron's government. Behind the talks that it holds with the unions, the government is planning to unilaterally slash

pensions via a reform that faces overwhelming popular opposition, especially among workers. Strike action must be escalated, based on the perspective of bringing down the Macron government.

Macron is determined to cut the total sum retirees obtain from the French state by tens of billions of euros per year, massively redirecting wealth from the workers to the wealthiest in society. Bernard Arnault, now the world's wealthiest man, saw his net worth increase by €23 billion last year alone. This would be enough by itself to fill the projected deficit of the pension system, which could grow to €8 to €17 billion by 2025. However, while it gives vast tax gifts to the super-rich, it plans deep cuts to pensions that would devastate tens of millions of workers.

The system of pensions "by points" does not attribute a future monetary value to the pension a worker will receive in exchange for helping pay for current retirees' pensions during his working life, but a vague number of "points." A 2016 video of ex-Prime Minister François Fillon, now gone viral, explains the content of this change. He says that such a system "allows something that no politician will admit, to reduce each month the size, the value of the point and so to diminish the value of the pensions."

Another key part of the reform is Macron's attempt to buy off the security forces so that they will continue to try to crush growing social opposition to the diktat of the banks. Philippe announced that police, fire and military personnel will get an exception and be allowed to retire at 62.

Philippe's made claims about the pension reform to calm popular opposition that did nothing to change its reactionary character. He promised that the first generation of workers affected by the reform would be those born in 1975 rather than 1963. For public schoolteachers, "the mechanical application of the new rules would lead to a substantial loss of their future pensions. We will inscribe in the law a guarantee that the level of teachers' pensions will be comparable to the level in the public service."

This is a crude attempt to mislead the public, however, as Macron's reform would slash pensions in the public service as well.

Philippe claimed that this pension reform is a necessary response to the growth of mass unemployment and precarious working conditions of workers in France and internationally, which he presented as logical and inevitable. "France has been characterized by a high level of unemployment for a long time. Studies last longer, careers are interrupted, part time work has grown. That is simply the world we live in," he said.

These conditions underscore the bankruptcy of capitalism internationally and in France. According to Philippe, however, this shows the necessity of ending the current pension system, closely connected to a job that workers would hold their entire lives, to a more flexible points system that allows pension benefits to be slashed.

Macron is working closely with international financial corporations that would reap enormous profits from the slashing of the current system and the introduction of private retirement accounts. In 2017 the satirical weekly *Canard enchaîné* revealed that Macron had met with management of BlackRock, a US-based global investment fund that is “highly interested in opportunities raised by the reform of French retirement system that are potentially worth several trillion.”

This underscores that workers who have mobilized in struggle against Macron’s cuts face a struggle against both the French and the international financial aristocracy. In this struggle, which has seen broad sections of rail and transit workers, refinery workers, public school and airport workers take strike action and shut down large parts of France, the key ally of French workers is the international working class.

A powerful international upsurge of the class struggle is underway. Strikes are mounting in protest against the December 12 elections in Algeria, following walkouts by autoworkers and teachers in the US, and a wave of mass protests from Lebanon and Iraq to Chile, Bolivia and Ecuador. This is the social force that can be mobilized against Macron, the financial aristocracy and its program of precarious employment and endless austerity for workers internationally.

For this the struggle must be taken out of the hands of the unions, who work closely with Macron and are seeking to negotiate a deal with him. Workers need their own committees of action, as places where they can plan, discuss, and coordinate strikes and political opposition to the Macron government, and coordination with workers in struggle internationally.

The unions are financed by and deeply integrated into the state and the ruling elite, and while they continue to pledge strike action against the law, Philippe has made clear that he planned to rely on the unions to manage and oversee his pension cuts:

“We will put into place starting next year a governance program that will give to the social partners (i.e. the unions and employers federations) the main management tools. They can then work out a way to return to budgetary equilibrium.”

The same unions who are negotiating the reform with Macron and dictating the pace of strike action will then receive a substantial payoff to work with the state to cut pensions in order to ensure the program remains on a balanced budget.

On this basis, Philippe concluded by asking the trade unions to end the strike: “From today, I would like the presidents of state-owned enterprises begin a dialog with the trade unions to stop these strikes.”

Conscious that Philippe’s speech will not calm but rather inflame workers’ growing anger, the unions have issued a few hypocritical criticisms. On TF1 television, General Confederation of Labor (CGT) leader Philippe Martinez said, “Clearly, two very different visions of society are competing here, his and that of the CGT... I don’t think, given the anger in the country, his will be accepted.”

Laurent Berger of the traditionally pro-government French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT) objected to Philippe’s raising of the retirement age with a full pension to 64. On LCI, he invited “workers to join on December 17 an all-trade-union protest we have proposed.”

While the trade unions call protests, all are seeking to formulate sort of agreement acceptable to the Macron government to present to the workers and justify a sell-out. The decisive question in the struggle against Macron’s cuts remains organizing workers independently of the unions and arming them with an international, socialist perspective to oppose austerity.

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