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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

By Will Morrow
16.07.2020

French nurses denounce sellout as thousands protest on Bastille Day

There is mass opposition among nurses and other health care workers to the sellout agreement reached between the French trade unions and the Macron government on Friday. Thousands took part in demonstrations across the country yesterday on Bastille Day, including hundreds of nurses who marched to oppose the assault on the public hospital system during the coronavirus pandemic.

The agreement has been hailed by the Macron government and French and international media as an “historic” sign that health workers are finally receiving just recognition for their sacrifices.

This fraud was taken to new heights of cynicism with the homage given to health care workers at the official Bastille Day celebration at the Place de la Concorde in Paris. Macron, his wife Brigitte and other political figures who have slashed hospital resources applauded before a group of hospital employees, with television cameras panning slowly across their faces.



The protest in Paris

Reality was able to break into this spectacle only via a personal drone hovering above and carrying a sign reading, “Behind the homages, Macron strangles the hospitals.”

None of this has convinced health employees or the working population, which is overwhelmingly opposed to Macron’s accelerating austerity program. The agreements covering health care workers include a total of €7.5 billion of additional funding for wages and new positions. This is less than the €12 billion the Macron government handed over to just two companies, Renault and Air France, which have proceeded to lay off tens of thousands of workers. It is approximately 2 percent of the hundreds of billions pledged in March to prop up the debts of French banks and corporations.

It includes two successive wage increases of €91 per month, to be delivered in September 2020 and March 2021. Additionally, 7,500 new nursing positions are to be created—a drop in the ocean, equivalent to approximately two or three new positions per institution. There are already another 7,500 such positions across the country that are budgeted for but still unfilled—such are the horrendous conditions for nurses that have made it impossible to attract and retain staff.

The insulting wage rise follows 10 years in which nurses have not seen a pay increase. Nurses in France are among the worst paid in Europe, receiving on average respectively 13 percent and 29 percent less than their Spanish and German counterparts, who themselves are grossly underpaid. The €300 per month that the French unions claimed was their central demand in negotiations would have brought nurses to the median for the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Most significantly, the agreement includes nothing to address the hospitals' chronic funding shortfalls, which have been glaringly exposed by the pandemic. In the past 30 years, more than 100,000 hospital beds have been closed due to repeated funding cuts by both Socialist Party and Gaullist governments. The agreement also allows hospitals greater flexibility in extending employees' work week beyond the official 35-hour maximum.

"Even 300 euros would not be a lot compared to what we have lost in the last 10 years," said Dominique, a hospital administration worker with more than 30 years who came to the Paris demonstration. "It's shameful. We see the working conditions that have gotten worse. They are continuing to close beds. They want to privatise everything. We are fighting here for the public health system, so that everyone can have access to health care. That's why we're on the street today. I'm here for myself and the generation to come."



Dominique

Dominique denounced the unions' role in negotiating and signing the agreement. "I have been against the unions for years," she said. "I don't trust them. It's more than a year and a half that we have been protesting and striking in the hospitals. Everyone knows what our demands are: for more money, more resources. They keep going to these negotiations with the government. It is just to draw us out. They don't belong on our side. For me, they're bought."

"There are a lot of staff who are leaving the public system," she added. "That's the purpose. They want people to leave so they can privatize. The government gives billions to private companies that are laying off employees. It's open and in front of our eyes. We're exhausted and angry. We are not slaves, but today we are just surviving. What will become of the lives of our children? Are they to be slaves?"

On Facebook, nurses have posted statements denouncing the union sellout. The agreement was signed by the French Democratic Labour Confederation (CFDT), the National Union of Autonomous Unions (UNSA), and Workers Force (FO). This provided the necessary number of signatures to ensure its passage.

Knowing that the agreement would pass regardless, the SUD union and the General Federation of Labour (CGT) have postured as critics of the agreement. The CGT itself declared that it may eventually sign the agreement, with Mireille Stivala declaring that while it may be “disappointing, we have to acknowledge all the same that it’s thanks to the mobilisation of staff over recent years, and thanks to the trade unions, that we’ve been able to [obtain] ... this wage increase.”

“The unions are worse than the employers, and that’s why we’re getting nowhere with social policies,” commented a nurse, Lydie, on the Inter-Urgences Facebook page. “I agree with the word ‘mascarade,’” said Gwenaëlle. “We are not asking for charity but a fair wage increase.” Augore commented, “I no longer have any confidence in the trade unions after this. I’m ashamed of all of it. I’m fed up.”

At the Paris protest, Émilie, a young nurse with five years’ experience, described the conditions during the height of the first wave of the pandemic in France. “I was in an area that treated coronavirus patients,” she said. “We were given only surgical masks, which don’t protect the wearer from catching the virus. Some of the patients tested positive with the serological test but negative with the rapid nasal test, which has many false negatives. They were kept without masks and treated as though they were negatives.

“I am not principally concerned with a wage rise. What we need is more resources, human and material. Throughout whole shifts in the night, often I have nothing. I don’t believe there will be a change though. Or it will not be sufficient. The unions signed this agreement, except Sud and the CGT. But I don’t trust them either.”

The Socialist Equality Party urges nurses and health care employees to take their struggle out of the hands of the pro-corporate trade unions by forming independent rank-and-file action committees, controlled directly by workers themselves, to organise a struggle for a well-resourced, high-quality public health care system, and to appeal directly to workers across Europe and internationally. This must be based on a socialist programme to reorganise society’s resources according to social need rather than private profit.

World Socialist 15.07.2020