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Millions march in France against Macron's pension cuts

Two million people struck or marched in protests yesterday called by union federations against President Emmanuel Macron's pension cuts. Polls show around 80 percent of the population oppose the cuts, which would increase the minimum retirement age to 64 with a minimum pay-in period of 43 years. Strike calls were widely followed by rail and mass transit workers, school staff, and electricity and refinery workers, and 200 protest marches were held in cities across France.

Trade unions reported that 400,000 people marched in Paris, 140,000 in Marseille, 38,000 in Lyon, 60,000 in Bordeaux, 50,000 in Toulouse and Lille, 55,000 in Nantes and 35,000 in Strasbourg. Moreover, many smaller cities saw large turnouts that surprised police authorities. There were 25,000 in Orléans, 21,000 in Le Mans, 20,000 in Nice, 19,000 in Clermont-Ferrand, 15,000 in Tours, 13,000 in Pau, 10,000 in Chartres, 9,000 in Angoulême and 8,000 in Châteauroux.



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Over 140,000 people marched in Marseille against Macron's pension cuts. [Photo: WSWS]

Clashes broke out between police and protesters in Lyon and in Paris, where 3,500 riot police were on duty and, as during “yellow vest” protests against social inequality in 2018-2019, reinforced the police guard on government buildings.

Macron’s cuts are being overwhelmingly rejected. Amid a wave of strikes across Europe and internationally against austerity and inflation, an explosive confrontation is emerging between the working class and the Macron administration. Indeed, French officials went on television last night to boast that they would ram Macron’s cuts through despite overwhelming public opposition.

Public Service Minister Stanislas Guérini told TF1 that Macron would not change the cuts in response to the protest. “There were a lot of people today, we should not minimize that fact,” Guérini said, but he added that the cuts were “the product of social dialog” between the union bureaucracies and the state. “The mobilization does not change our plans,” he concluded.

The “president of the rich” aims to cut €13 billion per year from pensions, as European Union states hand out trillions of euros to banks and corporations in massive bailouts and spends billions to send tanks and other weapons to Ukraine for war with Russia.

Protesters who spoke to the WSWS also cited the recent Oxfam report on inequality produced by the capitalist system. The report, which revealed that two-thirds of new wealth created since 2020 has gone to the richest 1 percent of society, also noted that France’s top 10 billionaires have increased their wealth by €189 billion since 2020. The fortune of French billionaire Bernard Arnault, currently the world’s wealthiest man, now stands at €213 billion.

One statistic exposes the oligarchic interests Macron serves: the €13 billion he wants to cut from the France’s yearly pension budget is less than the amount of profit Arnault has added to his personal fortune each year since 2020, when his fortune stood at €79 billion.



Priscillia [Photo: WSWs]

Priscillia, a caregiver, told WSWs reporters at the protest in Paris why she rejects Macron's cuts: "With the difficulty of work, it's impossible. We are not office workers, we are not government ministers, we are health care workers. We cannot last until 64, it's not physically or psychologically possible. I use my body a lot to lift people, even if there is mechanical assistance, we use our physical strength. We already have many colleagues on disability because of that."

She also stressed her "disgust" at mounting inflation, which is impoverishing workers in France and internationally. "Everything is expensive, and salaries are not going up. We have to watch very carefully what we eat, we have to cut out the small pleasures like restaurants, going out, taking vacations."

About Macron's reckless decision to send tanks to Ukraine for war with Russia, she said: "I worry about what can happen between Russia and France, and I also worry about the French people."

Priscillia spoke of her anger at the gulf between Arnault, raking in tens of billions of euros each year, and workers struggling to get by: "It is disgusting, it is we the poor who will pay for people like that. Today, if both people in a couple are not working, it's impossible to make ends meet. As a public sector worker, it is extremely hard to find a place to live.

We make too much money to obtain social housing, but we are too poor to afford private housing on the market.”

WSWS reporters in Paris also spoke to Ludovic, who said: “I am a professional firefighter, I have a pension system, and now I’m learning they will make me work two years more before I can retire. It’s a physical job, I’m sure I cannot last until the end. With work at night and by day, working 24 or 48 hour shifts, the physical demands of this job mean that we have seven years shorter life expectancy than the average in France.”



Ludovic [Photo: WSWS]

Ludovic warned that Macron’s pension cuts aim to make workers work until they die. He said, “In the fire station where I currently work, I have never seen a retirement party. The last two colleagues who left, they went straight to the cemetery before they could retire. I had one colleague who died of a massive stroke a week after starting to retire, a second died of cancer. Our profession is known to be dangerous because of all the toxic smoke we breathe on our missions.

“I started work at age 19. I want to have free time when I retire and not just die,” Ludovic said, stressing his anger at the obscene enrichment of the financial oligarchy: “It’s sick that

we are being asked to give things up, either in our daily lives or in our pensions, when these people are given unlimited opportunities to soak up wealth.”

Catherine, a social worker, told WSWs reporters in Marseille she wants to fight the systematic assault the ruling establishment is waging on the social rights of the workers. “Everything earlier generations built is under attack,” she said.



Protesters in Marseille hold a sign saying "Macron's rule = Lies, Corruption, Racketeering, and Oppression" [Photo: WSWs]

She added, “They are destroying all our rights: unemployment insurance, welfare payments, public hospitals are being wrecked, now pensions. This has to stop. The government hands out billions to super-rich corporations and asks for nothing in exchange, we have no idea what they do... I work with people who struggle, eat in soup kitchens, don’t heat their homes, and must pawn what little they still have. They are sad, worried about their future and those of their children. They are worried about getting sick.”

Catherine also emphasized the growing distrust of broad layers of workers towards the corrupt negotiations between the union bureaucracies and the Macron government: “The unions no longer represent the workers, they have compromised themselves... Yes, the unions are waking up, but one can no longer simply rely on the unions, that is no longer possible. We are attacked on all sides, we have to all revolt together.”

French union confederations, including the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT), the social-democratic French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT) and Workers Force (FO), met last night and announced a new strike authorization for January 23 and a new one-day nationwide protest on January 31. Well aware of explosive social

anger in the working class, the union bureaucrats are desperate to posture as opponents of Macron, even though they negotiated the cuts with him.

Workers cannot give any confidence to the CGT, CFDT or FO bureaucracies, however. They isolated the 2019-2020 rail strike against these pension cuts, which let Macron pass the cuts in March 2020. He only withdrew the cuts, as strikes grew across Europe against EU inaction on COVID-19, out of fear of an uncontrollable social explosion. Now, with the complicity of the union bureaucracies, Macron is returning to try to pass the pension cuts again.

Bitter experience shows that the façade of trade union “unity” will collapse with the escalation of the class struggle between the financial oligarchy and the working class, as union bureaucrats try to prop up the capitalist state machine against the workers.

The best allies of workers in France, struggling against global problems like inflation, war, the COVID-19 pandemic and social austerity, are their class brothers and sisters in other countries. Strikes are erupting internationally. A national strike of nurses, together with calls for strikes in transport and education, is underway in Britain, while Portuguese teachers are on a nationwide strike. As nurses’ and teachers’ strikes spread in the United States, demands are growing among US rail workers for a strike against a draconian concessions contract imposed by the Biden administration.

The way forward for workers is to take their struggles out of the hands of the union bureaucrats, building a powerful network of rank-and-file committees that can unify workers across national lines, in a struggle to bring down corrupt capitalist governments like that of Macron and destroy the power of the financial oligarchy through a struggle for socialism.

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