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By Isabella Arria

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## France rose up against Macron's pension reform, to finance the war?



Sources: Rebellion / CLAE

Some two million people marched last Thursday in dozens of cities in France against President Emmanuel Macron's project to delay the retirement age from 62 to 64 years and bring forward to 2027 the requirement to contribute 43 years to collect a full pension, while continuing to co-finance the war in Ukraine.

With this reform that was part of the re-election platform last year, France would still lag behind most of Europe in postponing the retirement age, but the issue is very sensitive in a society that feels special pride in its pension system.

The Macron government hides that the financing of pensions is a matter of its priorities: a day after the massive protests in repudiation of his project, the president announced that the military budget for 2024-2030 will be a third larger than scheduled, with a 60 percent

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increase in the item for intelligence, and a strengthening of nuclear deterrence systems, cyber capabilities or equipment in various areas of the world.

The Elysée seems to tell citizens that millions of workers will have to sacrifice themselves so that the elites continue with their imperialist and warmongering pursuits, and their costly alignment with Washington's geopolitical agenda.

The two main axes of the project, which the Executive defends as essential for the financial balance of the system, are the delay of the minimum retirement age from 62 to 64 years by 2030 and the increase of the contribution period from 42 to 43 years by 2027.

A pension reform project **that would be** approved with the support of the conservative party The Republicans. The others are detractors of this measure. Among them, the left-wing political parties, the extreme right commanded by Marine Le Pen and all the unions. Both in terms of economic policies and social values, Macron's program is firmly anchored on the right, because that is where the social basis for his reform program resides.

Some two million French people seconded on Thursday the call for mobilization launched by all French unions against the unpopular reform of the pension system that the Government intends to approve, with strikes and mass demonstrations in the streets. A large majority of the citizens of this country are against this reform," said Philippe Martinez, general secretary of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT).

The one in the capital was the most important demonstration of muscle of this national day of mobilizations, but the protests were repeated throughout the French geography, from Marseille to Nantes.

Despite the mass demonstrations, Macron, who was in Barcelona for a Spanish-French summit with Spanish President Pedro Sanchez, said the government would not back down from reform. "If we want to be fair between generations and save our pay-as-you-go system, we must make this reform," he said.

### **A neoliberal program**

Macron's neoliberal reform program – involving a labor law, unemployment benefits, pensions and privatizations – is quite drastic and has important consequences for income and status inequalities. This has aroused considerable social opposition in recent years, since the emergence of the "yellow vest" movement (*gilets jaunes*) emerged in November 2018, which continues to carry out protests until today (albeit more discreetly).

Given his rather narrow social base, Macron could only deal with these protests through a rather brutal police crackdown and the restriction of civil liberties. The standoff between

the French government and organized workers defending their acquired rights is not merely a technical issue, as the orthodox neoliberal Macron claims.

It is true that the sustained increase in life expectancy puts extraordinary pressures on pension funds and public budgets, as many people spend as much or more time outside the economically active population than within it; That is, they contribute to the pension system for less time than they benefit from it, thus creating a financial deficit.

It is also a fact that demographic aging generates new health and care expenditures that, in developed nations, are largely absorbed by the State. However, those who for decades have struggled to transfer the entire cost of these transformations to workers omit important contextual data.

Proposals to raise the retirement age almost never mention discrimination by companies against jobseekers over 40, and the near impossibility of accessing a formal post when they are over 60, which means that extending working life is not a mere personal decision. but a structural problem that can leave millions of people without a dignified retirement because employers deny them the opportunity to complete the years of contributions.

Neoliberal propaganda also shows that the pension crisis occurs in a context of continuous tax cuts for the wealthiest sectors, which have had the double effect of creating an unprecedented concentration of wealth and emptying the public coffers, with the consequent strangulation of social spending.

This month, the global organization Oxfam denounced that fiscal benevolence towards the owners of large capitals, coupled with other mechanisms of distribution of wealth upwards, allowed the 2,655 people with fortunes greater than one billion dollars to earn 2.700 billion dollars a day during the pandemic.

In the same period, the richest one percent of the world's population appropriated 63 percent of the new wealth generated, and corporate profit margins rose 60 percent, while wages saw an increase of just 4 percent.

In this context, it is clear that, before reducing the benefits of wage earners, Macron should tackle the colossal inequality and thoroughly review an economic model harmful to nine-tenths of the French.

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