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By G. Dunkel

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## **2.5 million French workers defend pensions, defy gov't attacks**

Responding to a joint call from France's union confederations, 2.5 million angry French workers protested Jan. 31 in 250 cities throughout the country against the government's plan to increase the retirement age.



**Workers in France, young and old, defend their retirement rights.**

While the government and the unions disagreed about the number of workers in the streets, both sides acknowledge that it was a substantial increase from a similar nationwide protest that drew over 1 million workers into the streets Jan. 19.

The union coalition is calling for two more nationwide demonstrations, on Feb. 7 and Feb. 11 — when the French parliament will be wrapping up its debates on “pension reform.”

**Unions dispute government claims that pension fund's in crisis**

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President Emmanuel Macron's administration claims that the government pension system, which is set up as a pay-as-you-go plan, is running out of money. The unions dispute this claim, saying there is no imminent crisis. The General Confederation of Labor (CGT) has pointed out that by taxing the rich, raising the minimum wage and raising the general wage level, enough funds would come into government coffers to cover the projected deficit.

The Jan. 31 action severely impacted public transportation, schools, gas stations and government services of all sorts. France's electricity provider EDF was able to import what it needed, even though about 40% of its generating capacity was offline.

The government made a point of saying that the number of strikers was less than in the Jan. 19 protests. Workers in France have a constitutional right to strike if they give notice, and they have the right to request a "personal day." It appears that workers who needed their pay used a personal day to protest. It is very clear that there were more workers in the streets Jan. 31 than on Jan. 19.

### **How to count protesters**

The major cities in France — Paris, Marseilles, Nice, Lyon, Toulouse — all had major demonstrations with tens of thousands of workers in the streets. In Paris, union figures give the number of protesters at 500,000; in Toulouse, there were 80,000, and in Marseilles 205,000 came out.

(Le Monde has put up a very useful interactive map, in English as well as French, at [tinyurl.com/cvshz5nz](http://tinyurl.com/cvshz5nz))

It is clear that women feel that the details of this pension reform, in particular the requirements on the number of quarter years worked, disproportionately disadvantage them. Street performers dressed as "Rosie the Riveters" drew applause when they raised women's issues.

But the real surprising figures came out of France's small- and medium-sized cities. In Dinan, a seaside resort town in Brittany, northwest France, with 14,000 residents, more than 4,000 marched to protest pension reform. In Rodez (Aveyron), a small but economically developed city in southern France, over 10,000 people marched, nearly 23% of its population.

A director from the Harris Institute, Jean-Daniel Lévy, speaking on a Feb. 1 TV2 broadcast, explained that many of the participants from small cities and towns in the Jan. 31 protests were workers with hard, harsh production jobs — on their feet for the whole shift, sometimes outside — who were looking forward to retirement even more than

white-collar workers in the big cities. They see this reform as a major step in the bosses' campaign of forcing workers to remain on the job until they die.

### **What comes next**

It is abundantly clear that a strong majority of French workers oppose this reform. Among those already collecting a pension they have earned, a majority oppose Macron's plan.

Electric workers adopted a "Robin Hood" strategy in some big cities like Paris, Marseilles, Lille and small ones like Vienne in central France. They reconnected households that the company had cut off due to failure to pay. They also gave schools, hospitals and public institutions low-cost power. In Vienne, the EDF workers had to confront the cops.

Marchers in some small towns were videotaped bricking up the entrances to the offices of Macron's political party, Renaissance.

Some refineries and fuel depots have had short walkouts to let the bosses know that they are ready for a more sustained effort. Macron might lose the vote in the National Assembly, but he may still be able to sneak his reform into law by using a wrinkle in the French Constitution.

But can he run the country if enough workers decide to stop producing?

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