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Samuel Tissot and Alex Lantier

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Millions of workers in France join third mass protest against pension cuts



Protesters march during a demonstration against plans to push back France's retirement age on February 7, 2023 in Paris. [AP Photo/Michel Euler]

Tuesday saw France's third nationwide strike and protest against President Emmanuel Macron's pension cuts. According to trade union statistics, over 400,000 people marched in Paris and a total of 2 million protested nationwide, while millions more went on strike and stayed at home. The unions reported large protests in many cities, including 180,000 in Marseille, 80,000 in Toulouse, 70,000 in Lille, and 50,000 in Bordeaux.

University and high school students also joined in the protests, with 15 faculties occupied and 200 high schools mobilized, according to a count by officials of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France (LFI) party. On Tuesday morning, police assaulted and gassed high school students at Lycée Racine in Paris.

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Mass anger is rapidly mounting at Macron's insistence to ram through the cuts in the face of overwhelming popular opposition, in order to divert a staggering €413 billion into military spending and shipments of tanks to Ukraine for war with Russia. Macron evidently intends to escalate the war and the assault on workers' living standards with utter contempt for the majority of the population that opposes him. He is dealing with mass opposition to imperialist war and austerity simply by sending hordes of riot police to assault anyone who protests.

Bitter clashes broke out as police assaulted demonstrators in Nantes, Rennes, and Paris, where police repeatedly charged and beat peaceful protesters. Riot police units even attacked the security detail of the trade unions at the head of the march in Paris, after which riot police faced off against the protesters, including units of striking firemen who put on their gear to withstand tear gas.

WSWS journalists spoke to protesters in Paris and Nice. In Paris, the WSWS spoke to Simon, an LFI supporter handing out his own homemade leaflet, calling to build strike funds to support workers in prolonged strikes against Macron and the state. Indeed, the French union bureaucracies, despite their multibillion-euro yearly budgets, never pay any strike pay, ensuring that workers can only remain a short time on strike before economic pressures force them back to work. Thus the union bureaucracies, with the complicity of LFI, help social cuts and military budgets pass.

Simon attacked the unions' role in demobilizing a struggle against Macron: "The union confederations are calling for a strike in unison, but I have the feeling that already they are not doing their job to that end. There should be a real fundraising campaign, aimed at the 72 per cent of French people who reject the reform, to put money into strike funds to cover the loss of wages incurred by workers in strategically important jobs who are going on strike. This will have an impact on the economy."



Simon at the February 7 protest against pension cuts in Paris. [Photo: WSWS]

He described the union bureaucracy's policy of "social dialogue" with Macron and the employers' organizations as "consensual go-between, as it has been for decades. ... I feel I have to speak out about this, so we can get off the beaten track of the unions."

Simon also denounced the massive rearmament campaign undertaken by Macron and the delivery of arms to Ukrainian forces: "We're talking about 400 billion invested in the army while we're being asked to work two years longer. These are political choices. The interests of France, of a certain France, of French imperialism, take precedence. We, the citizens, have no say in this. It is unacceptable and intolerable."

Simon stressed his support for building an international movement in the working class against the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine. He said, "I stand in solidarity with all workers. I know that there is a good part of the workers in Russia who are rebelling against Putin's policy, who are also mobilizing to reject it. We must show solidarity."

When told about the Socialist Equality Party's call for the construction of rank-and-file committees internationally, Simon responded, "It's absolutely necessary, there is no one way of action that prevails over another. The need to build an international movement seems to me to be paramount."

Simon said the working class should “[d]eclare an economic war, us workers against the financial aristocracy. Blocking the institutions and putting a dent in the GDP, that's my approach. I'm for any movement to give power to the people. The question is how far the people are prepared to go.”



A protester in Paris holds a sign saying: They can take 2 years away from 68 million Frenchmen, but they can't tax 109 billionaires 2 percent" (to make up the shortfall in pension financing)?" [Photo: WSWS]

In Paris, the WSWS also spoke to Jordan Robichon, a delegate of the Stalinist-led General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union in the energy sector. He said, “The red line has already been crossed some time ago: inflation, housing problems. The French people has just been getting hit for some time. The pension reform is the last straw. ... We are not at all on the government’s line to impose two more years of work on us. Life is priceless. We will fight to the end. In electricity and gas industries, we are mobilized to defend our pensions against this unfair and unjustified reform.”

Asked about the NATO war on Russia in Ukraine, Jordan said: “I would tell our president to take care of what is happening in his own country and the concerns of the French people before sticking his nose in other people’s business, when the French people do not necessarily agree with his posturing. I don’t have criticisms of the Russian or Ukrainian governments. But I am thinking of all those being massacred without having done anything. This is always what happens today, the strong decide and the weak suffer.”

Reflecting the increasingly angry mood developing in the working class, Jordan also told the WSWS: “Today we are demonstrating peacefully, but if the government doesn’t listen to the mobilization of the French people, we’ll see where that ends up taking us. When you’re coming up against a wall, sometimes you have to know how to smash it.”

In Nice, the WSWS spoke to Marie, a worker in a child protection association. She said, “We have a government which, law after law, destroys social protection systems for which previous generations have fought, and which make it possible to build a more just society. This society is becoming more and more unequal.” She added, “The problem is global ... capitalism pushed to the extreme which crushes lives on a global scale. The problem is the distribution of wealth on the scale of each country, and obviously on the scale of the planet.”



A protester in Nice holds up a sign saying "We die at work so that (billionaire) Bernard Arnault can get richer." [Photo: WSWS]

Josette, a retiree, told the WSWS, “I am 77 years old, and I am on the street for my children and grandchildren, so that their pensions are not those decided by the current government.”

Asked about her opinion on France's participation in the NATO war on Russia, Josette replied, "the National Education system, the civil service, the hospitals, the public services are very sick. It's going to become an internal war in this country against Macron."

The union bureaucracies and their political supporters, like Mélenchon, are loudly insisting in the media that they will convince Macron to back down on his cuts if workers support them. CGT boss Philippe Martinez blamed the struggle on Macron's "over-sized ego" on RTL yesterday morning, then went on BFM-TV yesterday evening to criticize Macron for making the cuts "a personal affair."

In similar remarks Tuesday afternoon, Mélenchon appealed to Macron to be "reasonable" and to prepare to withdraw the reform.

These are simply lies to try to lull workers to sleep. In reality, France and all of Europe have been plunged into an intensifying NATO war on Russia, a deepening economic crisis with a vast surge in inflation, and a rapid growth of the class struggle. Under these conditions, it is useless to appeal to Macron to change his mind. His attacks on the working class are driven by a mortal crisis of world capitalism, and the united determination of all the major NATO powers to wage imperialist war abroad and class war at home.

In the last weeks, the European working class has been on an accelerating political offensive. There have been mass health strikes in Belgium and Spain, tech strikes over wages in Finland, anti-war protests in Denmark, and a massive mobilization of a half-million workers in Britain.

To successfully oppose Macron's pension cuts, the struggle must be taken out of the hands of the union bureaucracies and their pseudo-left supporters. These bureaucracies divide the working class along national lines, negotiate cuts and below-inflation wage deals and block opposition to the war in Ukraine. The way forward is to build independent rank-and-file committees in the working class to unify the struggles of workers internationally against austerity and war, linking them to a Trotskyist perspective for a struggle for workers' power and the building of socialism.

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