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France

French rebellion against pensions cuts still strong

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Millions of French citizens are participating in the sixth national strike wave against President Macron's proposed pension reforms. Despite the government's efforts to push the reforms through parliament, the mobilisation continues to gain momentum

Commentators on TV had to accept that the sixth national strike wave against President Macron's attempt to make workers retire at 64 rather than 62 was as well supported as previous days. Even the official Interior Ministry figures said there were 1.3 million people who demonstrated in more than 200 towns and cities, while the biggest trade union, the CGT, said there were 3.5 million. One of the strongest features of the mobilisation is the nationwide extent of strikes and demonstrations.

Big demonstrations took place in the major cities—at least several hundred thousand in Paris (the CGT claimed 700,000) and tens of thousands in places like Marseille. [1]

Millions of people are continuing to give up a day's pay to participate in the mobilisation. One person who spoke with the *Nouvel Observateur* claimed that it had already cost him about €600, but it was worth it to maintain the right to retire at 62. Workers would also have to put 43 years of pension contributions into the pot to get a full pension.

Trains were stopped, schools emptied, and planes were cancelled as the air traffic controllers took action. Another area where there had already been strikes on other issues was the energy sector, where there was strong support. Students and youth were prominent at the demonstrations. Some schools and universities were blocked.

Unlike Starmer's refusal to stand on the picket line with workers in struggle, all political currents of the political wing of the labour movement was on the streets. The opposition in parliament is led by the NUPES (New Ecological and Social People's Union), which groups La France Insoumise (LFI, France Stand Up/Unsubmissive France), the Socialist Party, the Greens, and the Communist Party. It has fought for many hours in parliament. It proposed thirteen thousand amendments to prevent a vote on the seventh article, which raises the retirement age to sixty-four. As Marlon Ettinger notes in a recent Jacobin article:

They've also presented their own counter-bill: to lower the retirement age to sixty, with forty years of contributions for a full pension, and a minimum full pension payment of €1,600 a month.

The bill now passes to the Senate, the upper chamber. Macron's team is in intensive negotiations with the traditional mainstream right wing party, the Republicans, to get a deal in order to put the new law on the statute book.

Marine Le Pen's hard-right RN (National Rally) party is the largest single opposition party in parliament, and it opposes the pensions' 'reform' too. However, she accepts the bogus argument that the money is not there. Her solution is to restrict welfare and other payments to non-French nationals and for the government to boost the birth rate (of the white French, of course) so that there will be enough workers to pay for the pensions. Her opposition to raising the pension age was an important plank in her relatively successful project of making the RN attractive to working people. It was opposed by her father at the time. She wanted to give the RN social and welfare policies that could appeal to traditionally left voters.

Le Pen also pushed for the parliament to vote on the notorious Article Seven, which raises the age to 64, in order to make the state of opposition clear. The LFI, by far the largest left party led by Jean-Luc Melenchon, opposed this for solid tactical reasons. If this vote to increase the pension age is passed, Macron could counter-pose the legitimacy of parliament against 'disorder' on the streets. The smaller, less radical parties in the NUPES, like the Socialists, Communists, and Greens, criticised Melenchon's position. Thankfully, the article was not voted through.

Grèves, manifs, blocages, Macron dégage! (strikes, demos and blockage, Macron drop the plans!)

At the same time, Melenchon has called for a referendum and the dissolution of the assembly. All the opinion polls register overwhelming opposition to Macron's scheme, ranging between 65 and 70 percent. It is clear that parliamentary opposition, although necessary to popularise the issues, is not sufficient to win this battle.

Trade union membership is much lower in France, but there still exists a capacity to join with the labour movement and political parties around a big political issue that affects everybody. [2] In Britain, we have seen more than a million people take strike action to defend salaries and working conditions, but it is still fragmented. The TUC will make some tepid attempts at some fragile coordination but is unable to generate the sort of centralised action we see in France. Paradoxically, in Britain, we have one united trade union confederation whose unions are nearly all affiliated with one political party. In France, they have been divided at least three ways in tandem with the political currents, but they have been able to come together effectively in previous big battles and in the six days of action we have seen so far.

The mobilisation continues in France, with some unions threatening to declare 'renewable' strikes where one- or two-day action can be reconfirmed and continued in an ongoing way. Calls for a general strike to kill off Macron's proposals have been made by the left wing of the movement, by currents like the NPA (New Anticapitalist Party) and LO (Lutte Ouvriere). Olivier Besancenot, spokesperson and former presidential candidate for the NPA, when questioned on BFM TV, said:

From March the seventh we have to really get tougher. A general strike is the only way we are going to win.

[3]

Today, Thursday 9 March, strikes in protest at the pension changes are continuing. In the refineries, the electricity and gas generation sectors, on the rail, the Paris tube, the garbage collectors in Paris, and by the air traffic controllers These strikes are not total, but they are having real effects. Twenty to thirty percent of flights are cancelled as is one in three trains. Rubbish is piling up in the streets.

Grèves, manifs, blocages, Macron dégage!

9 March 2023

Source [Anti*Capitalist Resistance](#)

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[1] See the video [here](#).

[2] Although membership of trade unions is low the trade unions have shown their capacity to mobilise. In elections for workplace representation non-union members vote for lists presented by trade unions. If a union reaches a certain level of votes in these elections it is considered “representative” and a negotiating partner.

[3] See interviews with Olivier Besancenot (in French) [here](#).