

Truckers announce strike against attack on Labour Code in France

By Kumaran Ira
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After a one-day protest strike Tuesday against French President Emmanuel Macron's decrees aiming to destroy the Labour Code, truckers have announced that they will take strike action. However, the government has announced that it will not back down on the labour decrees that it has negotiated with the trade unions and business groups. It is insisting that the decrees will go into effect at the end of September.

The decrees aim to increase French companies' global competitiveness by giving them more flexibility to hire and fire, tear up and rewrite contracts, cut wages, and attack social benefits.

On Wednesday, the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) and Workers Force (FO) unions called for extendable strike action starting on September 25 to demand the retraction of the decrees. The transport federations of the French Democratic Labour Confederation (CFDT) and the French Christian Workers Confederation (CFTC), who refused to join the CGT protest strike on Tuesday, called a strike for September 18.

Jérôme Vérité, the general secretary of the CGT transport federation, declared, that "of course," fuel depots in France would be a target. "This will be a strike that will have very concrete impacts on the French economy," he said. Patrice Clos of FO said there would be "strong and powerful actions."

In a communiqué, the CFDT asked workers to "make their anger known" against the "social typhoon" that the decrees will cause in the transport industry.

The government is promising, however, not to give an inch on the decrees and is insisting that demonstrations "are not supposed" to modify the content of the decrees. After the first day of action on Tuesday, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe warned that strike action would have no impact on the policy his

government would adopt.

He said, "I respect opposition, it exists, it is there, I am listening to it." However, he stressed that he had no intention of giving in to opposition to his unpopular measures, asking, "Where will democracy be if the parliamentary majority is systematically put in question?"

In fact, it is the government that is trying to trample democracy underfoot. After record abstention in the second round of the legislative elections, Macron's parliamentary majority was in fact elected by a minority of France's registered voters. Now that Macron is trying to destroy the social rights of the working class, 68 percent of the French population oppose his decrees, and 55 percent of the population supports strikes against this policy, whereas Macron's approval ratings have collapsed down to only 30 percent.

Philippe's intransigence underscores that workers cannot obtain a victory in this struggle under the leadership of the trade union bureaucracies. They have negotiated the labour law with Macron and will not carry out any serious struggle against it. The unions and their petty-bourgeois political allies, Jean-Luc Mélenchon of Unsubmissive France (LFT) and the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), are hostile to the revolutionary mobilisation of the working class that is the only way to stop the austerity offensive of Macron and the European Union (EU).

Now, Macron intends if needed to use all the repressive powers granted to him by France's reactionary state of emergency against the workers, to ram through his decrees.

The political lessons of previous strike struggles against government austerity measures must be drawn. Even when truckers and refinery workers mobilised in

powerful strikes in 2010 and 2016, the trade unions isolated them, and the conservative and Socialist Party (PS) government sent riot police to requisition the workers and break the strike.

In 2016, after four years during which they mounted no opposition to PS President François Hollande's attacks on the working class, the trade unions were forced to call strikes to avoid the eruption of wildcat strikes and protests by workers and youth hostile to the labour law of the PS. But the PS managed to ram the labour law through by mobilising the police-state apparatus under the terms of the state of emergency to crush the strikes and to assault protest marches.

The actions carried out by the unions and their political allies simply aim to avoid being outflanked on their left by rising social anger in the working class against Macron. The unions—which are petty-bourgeois bureaucracies without a mass membership base, financed to the tune of 95 percent of their €4 billion yearly budget by the state and the employers—neither have the ability nor the intention to lead a determined opposition to Macron's attacks.

In fact, Macron's decrees, which aim to grant the unions a "union check" financed by the employers and pay out subsidies to the unions to "train" union officials, give the unions a major role in legally approving new contracts cutting their members' working conditions and violating the Labour Code. This is because the government is confident that they are trusted tools of the state machine against the interests of the working class.

After the truckers' strike was announced, government spokesman Christophe Castaner warned Thursday that, as in 2010 and 2016, the government will move rapidly to forcibly reopen fuel depots if they were blocked by strike action.

"The principle of taking strike action is fair, but the principle of holding France hostage cannot be so," Castaner said on France Info. "And so we cannot imagine that a few dozen or a few hundred people could hold up traffic in our country."

Without stating explicitly that he planned to mobilise the police forces, Castaner stressed that the government would crush blockades of the fuel depots, stating that "it will be necessary because one cannot paralyze France, one cannot prevent people from going to work."

Castaner's comment is a warning to workers entering into struggle against Macron's government and facing the state of emergency, which Macron intends to make permanent by writing its main provisions into common law. To block the rise of a police state in France imposing a historic regression in social conditions via an authoritarian crackdown, workers must organise independently of the trade unions and in opposition to the pseudo-left parties close to the PS, that first introduced the labour law last year.

The working class must build new organisations of struggle to replace the empty shells of the trade unions, and above all, a new political leadership to mobilise political opposition to social cuts, and unify workers across Europe in a struggle against austerity and militarism. This is the task that the Parti de l'égalité socialiste (PES), the French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, sets itself.

The PES insists that the confrontation with Macron cannot be waged as a trade union struggle, but as an international, revolutionary struggle for socialism and to defend all the social rights that workers won in Europe during the 20th century, which are now under threat. In this struggle, the natural allies of workers in France are the workers of the rest of Europe and the world, fighting militarism and the rising danger of police-state rule.

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