

“Our job is like working in a slaughterhouse”

French retirement home workers strike to defend elderly, working conditions

By Anthony Torres
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On Tuesday, an unprecedented strike of workers at French retirement homes for dependent elderly people (Ehpad) and home care service companies was largely observed by workers after being called by trade union confederations, associations of managers of elderly care services and retiree organizations.

Ehpad personnel are subject to anti-democratic “minimum service” laws banning them from fully using their constitutional right to strike. However, their demands were widely reported in the media. Rallies were held across France, including in Nantes and Lyon (where 600 workers marched in each city, according to police figures), in Strasbourg (nearly 500), Limoges (200-300), Marseille (between 100 and 200), Nice (100) and Lille. In Paris, several hundred workers came together and marched at mid-day near the Ministry of Health and Solidarity.

The media anxiously followed the retirement home workers strike, as it comes amid a broader international mobilization of the European working class against austerity, particularly in Germany.

The WSWS interviewed Vincent, an Ehpad worker, who said: “You have to understand, there is a culture of self-sacrifice among health care workers and rest home workers in particular. Moreover, we have to carry out a minimum level of service, and since we are already short on personnel, all the strikers are requisitioned and forced to work. I was on strike but requisitioned. So I was forced to work, but in my Ehpad, 100 percent of the care workers were on strike! ... It is certainly a very explosive profession.”

Asked why he was on strike, Vincent replied, “We are taking strike action to obtain the financial, human, personal and material means necessary to provide

humane care, a level of support that is helpful and considerate for the elderly. Currently, that is in no way the situation that we are in. In fact, we are further and further from it. We mistreat people from evening to morning, and it is solely the fault of all the successive governments, whose take their budgetary restrictions as their sole compass.”

Asked what he meant by “mistreating” the elderly, Vincent replied: “Concretely, we have at most 30 minutes to help wash a person aged 92 (that is the average age in my Ehpad, I think), who suffers from multiple ‘pathologies’ linked to advanced age, handicaps, dementia, etc. We would need twice that amount of time, on average, to give an acceptable level of care.”

Vincent added, “Human relationships should be our main goal, but our job is like working in a slaughterhouse. ... For example, in normal times, we should make sure that each resident gets a shower every 15 days. Those are the Eh pads’ official protocols. But for several months, we have been far from that, some residents have not had a shower for over a month. This situation is becoming permanent.”

He continued, “There are nearly 730,000 people currently placed in this type of establishment. Of French people aged over 90, one in three are concerned. One-third of our patients have neuro-degenerative disorders. To take care of them, we have only six workers per ten elderly people, against a ratio of one to one in the Scandinavian countries. This imbalance forces workers to carry out daily tasks like on an assembly line, and the human relationship falls away. The degradation of working conditions generates very high levels of workplace accidents and

absenteeism.”

The impossible work rhythm demanded of Ehpads workers and the treatment of patients that flows from it leads to severe physical and psychological strain on the workforce. According to Vincent, “In my Ehpads, I would say 85 percent of colleagues over 45 have serious muscular or skeletal problems that lead to repeated work stoppages, resorting to therapeutic periods of part-time work, and so on. ... Of course, then there is burn-out, work-related depression, and people just ‘losing it.’”

French president Emmanuel Macron’s policies, denouncing workers opposed to his austerity policies as “lazy,” express the class arrogance of the financial aristocracy, which is utterly impervious to the needs of the masses.

Macron has handed billions of euros to the rich by canceling the Tax on Wealth (ISF) and is calling for tens of billions of euros in military spending increases. But he is giving nothing to health, as the baby boom generation is due to start entering into Ehpads. The 50 million euro [\$US 62 million] budgetary increase overseen by Health Minister Agnès Buzyn amounts to a few crumbs. Moreover, during the 2017 presidential election, Macron announced his plans for large cuts to social security, which funds French health care spending, to take place toward the end of his term.

Unacceptable care and the degradation of working conditions in the Ehpads and in health care more broadly are the result of decades of budgetary austerity in France and across Europe. After having handed over hundreds of billions of euros to the banks after the 2008 Wall Street crash, European governments have carried out austerity policies aiming to roll back all the social gains won by the working class in the course of the 20th century.

The Ehpads workers’ fight expresses a growth in social anger toward governments and trade union bureaucracies across Europe, and a rising sense that only revolutionary struggles will allow workers to advance their interests.

Vincent bluntly declared that he expected nothing from whatever the government might announce: “Its mission is to continue the work of destroying the social rights of the workers. Unless the anger begins to really spread ...”

Noting that “the deliberate demolition of all the

workers’ past gains has been patiently implemented by every successive government,” Vincent stressed the need to take the struggle out of the hands of the trade unions.

He said, “Caregivers, residents and Ehpads residents’ families should organize committees, demanding the principle of one caregiver per resident at a minimum. The government will try to toy with us, as it does every time there is a social explosion in one or other part of the economy. But draw a balance sheet of the last decades. What were the great new social conquests for the workers in the last 30-40 years? There were none.”

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