

1.5 million march amid mass strike in France against austerity and inequality

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In the largest such industrial action to hit France in decades, tens of thousands of rail, government and education workers walked out on strike, as 1.5 million people marched or struck yesterday against plans by French President Emmanuel Macron to slash pensions.

The strike is part of a broad international resurgence of class struggle against social inequality and military-police repression.

Striking workers in France are joining mass protest movements in Iraq, Lebanon, Chile, Colombia, Hong Kong, Algeria, and strikes among US auto workers and teachers, as well as British rail workers. Yesterday in France, workers at the National Railways (SNCF), teachers, and workers in Paris mass transit, hospitals, airports, energy, ports, as well as students and lawyers marched together.

The strike demonstrated the enormous social power of the working class mobilized in struggle. Rail traffic was stopped across France, with just one in 10 high-speed trains (TGV) and 3 to 5 percent of Express Regional Trains running. According to SNCF management, 85.7 percent of train drivers and 73.3 percent of train controllers declared they were going on strike.

In Paris, mass transit also virtually stopped. The Independent Paris Transport Authority (RATP) announced 11 of 16 metro lines were shut, and only limited service available on the others.

Strikers blockaded fuel depots, and workers at 7 of France's 8 oil refineries were on strike, threatening in the longer term to cause fuel shortages across the country.

According to statistics presented by the junior minister for the public service, Olivier Dussopt, 32.5 percent of government workers (including education, post office, and former France Telecom workers) joined the strike. Among schoolteachers, 51.15 percent of primary schoolteachers and 42.32 percent of secondary school teachers also went on strike. Many children stayed home, or had to be taken to emergency service centers run by city authorities.

Several major French airports were seriously impacted by the strike—including both major Paris airports, Nice,

Marseille, Lyon, Toulouse and Bordeaux—due to strikes by multiple categories of workers, including air traffic controllers in the south.

The strike will continue in multiple industries during the coming days. Union sources said rail traffic would be badly affected until Monday, and airlines said they would cut 20 percent of their flights on Friday. Many teachers are expected to be on strike today. One truckers' association, IOTRE, had announced last night that it would carry out 15 blockades today to protest against the Macron government's tax hikes on fuel.

Strikers marched in the hundreds of thousands in gatherings organized across France. The unions announced 250,000 protesters in Paris, 150,000 in Marseille, 100,000 in Toulouse, 40,000 in Lille, and tens of thousands in Montpellier, Bordeaux, and Nantes, as well as 285,000 altogether in approximately 40 other cities. In several cities, authorities refused to provide to the press any figure whatsoever on the number of marchers.

Without formally endorsing the union bureaucracies, well-known "yellow vest" protesters, including Éric Drouet, Priscilla Ludosky and Maxime Nicolle, had called on their supporters to join the protests.

Clashes broke out between security forces and protesters in several cities, including Lyon, Nantes, Rennes and Paris, where the security forces prevented large parts of the march from moving, then attacked them, first on Republic and then on Nation Square.

The Macron government had organized a massive police deployment—comparable to those for the largest "yellow vest" protests last December—but which was absolutely unprecedented for a social protest organized by the trade unions.

L'Express magazine reported that "overall, 108 security intervention units will be deployed across France: 60.5 mobile military police and 47.5 riot police. They will be overwhelmingly assigned, apart from the Paris area, to the south, southeast, and the north, leaving the north, the west and the southwest somewhat understaffed. 180 motorized

teams of the BRAV (Brigades for the repression of Violent Action) will be deployed. In terms of technical means, six water cannon will be prepared for action, and three drones will overfly Paris.”

An anonymous high-ranking security official said he was “very worried” about the Paris protest and claimed that “we are in a pre-insurrectionary situation.”

In Paris, the security forces mobilized armored cars, water canon as well as soldiers and riot police armed with assault rifles to barricade the Elysée presidential palace and other state venues. Between 6,000 and 8,500 riot police were mobilized. At 8pm there had been 90 arrests, including 71 preventive detentions, in addition to 11,490 who had been preventively detained and searched.

The December 5 strike is the product of a new stage in the class struggle, with the radicalization of growing layers of the international working class. The call for the strike went from the SNCF, where the unions worried they would lose control, after two major wildcat strikes shook the railways in the autumn, against SNCF privatization as well as wage cuts and the introduction of two-tier work. Once the call was launched, however, ever broader sections of workers tried to take the opportunity to join in a legally-approved strike.

This mobilization reflects broad, growing opposition to European Union (EU) policies—the public-sector wage freeze and drastic attack on pensions and other social rights. Macron is eliminating multiple special pension funds and moving towards retirement based on “points,” with no pre-set monetary value. The state has rejected aspirations for more social equality and better living conditions for workers with contempt, instead planning deep cuts to pensions, health care and other key programs.

There is widespread opposition among workers to the capitalist social order, as well as legitimate mistrust of the unions, who are negotiating the cuts with Macron and had, until now, organized no significant strike action since his election in 2017.

More broadly, none of the problems driving yesterday’s strike had a national character; all of them—low wages and social austerity, the exploitation of workers in understaffed workplaces, social inequality, military-police repression of any opposition to the diktat of the banks—are international problems that have mobilized tens or even hundreds of millions of workers internationally this year. Resolving these problems requires the expropriation of the billionaire financial aristocracy that dominates economic life through the international financial markets.

This requires workers to make a break with the nationally-based union bureaucracies, and to build committees of action, independent of the trade unions, so they can take the struggle out of the hands of the union and

link it to the struggles of their class brothers and sisters around the world.

For decades, “social dialogue” between unions, employers’ groups and the state in France has only served to impose a social regression on the working class. Indeed, top Macron government officials rushed to promote the trade unions during the strike, and made clear that they knew the union bureaucracies intended to accept the pension cuts and strangle any political struggle against Macron.

The head of Macron’s parliamentary group in the National Assembly, Gilles Legendre, said, “no trade union seriously thinks that (he) will give it up.” That is, the unions are, in fact, looking for a rotten compromise with the state and the employers’ groups to impose on the workers, which would include virtually all of the cuts laid out by Macron.

In the war room he set up at the Transport Ministry, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe declared, “Overall the strikes and protests have unfolded as planned. Many protests were organized today in France, most are going well. ... I want to pay my respects to the trade unions for their organizational success.”

Such comments vindicate the warnings made by the Socialist Equality Party and its call for the building of committees of action, independent of the trade unions, to prosecute the struggle. Workers will gain nothing from a struggle within a purely national framework, controlled by union bureaucracies that are closely tied to the state. The way forward is to take the struggle out of the unions’ hands and turn towards a socialist, internationalist and revolutionary perspective to unite their struggles with those of their class brothers and sisters around the world.

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