

French strikers march as Prime Minister Philippe offers cosmetic changes to pension cuts

By Alex Lantier and Anthony Torres
13 January 2020

Hundreds of thousands of French strikers and “yellow vests” marched against President Emmanuel Macron’s pension cuts Saturday, as Prime Minister Edouard Philippe offered cosmetic “provisional” concessions. The purpose of these cynical measures is to allow the trade unions to gradually wind down the strike by maintaining uncertainty about the content of the cuts at least until May, while giving Macron sweeping new authority to slash pensions.

As strikers marched in cities across France, Philippe issued a letter proposing to organize a four-month conference between business federations and the unions on pension financing. An analysis of Philippe’s letter makes clear, in fact, that he is not making any substantial concessions whatsoever. Under his plan all the basic components of Macron’s cuts, in one or another way, will go into effect.

This again underscores that trade union negotiations are a trap, as there is nothing to negotiate with Macron. An irreconcilable confrontation has emerged between the Macron government and the international financial companies backing it, like BlackRock, and the French and international working class fighting against social inequality and militarism. The way forward for workers in struggle is to form committees of action, independently of the unions, to coordinate a struggle to bring down Macron.

Philippe’s letter preserves the possibility of imposing all Macron’s cuts. These include creating pensions measured in ‘points’ calculated over the last 25 years rather than 15 years or 6 months of a worker’s salary, and whose value the state can cut arbitrarily each fiscal year a new generation of workers retire; the elimination of special public sector pension plans; and a two-year increase in the “equilibrium” retirement age to 64.

Philippe’s letter indicates only “provisionally” that he may not impose the last attack, if the unions find some other way of cutting social spending.

He writes, “I confirm the government intends to build a universal pension system by points... The special pension plans will be eliminated after a transition period defined in December. All French people will be affiliated to the universal scheme.”

It adds, “The imperative of balancing the pension budget, as well as key responsibilities given to unions and business groups in piloting the program, will be inscribed in the bill. This is also why the bill will specify that the future universal system will have an equilibrium age.” It proposes that the unions and business groups hold a conference on balancing the pensions budget to “submit conclusions by the end of April 2020.”

Until the business federations and unions submit their proposals, Philippe adds, “I am willing to withdraw from the bill the short-term measure I proposed to ... go to an equilibrium retirement age of 64 in 2027.”

Once the unions submit proposals, however, the government will demand draconian powers to slash pensions, Philippe states: “The government will modify the bill to demand from parliament a large enabling act allowing it to impose by decree any measure that can guarantee the equilibrium of the pension system by 2027.” That is to say, the government may reintroduce by decree the increase in the retirement age that it is claiming to abandon. It may impose even more severe cuts.

Though even right-wing politicians like neofascist Marine Le Pen and Gaullist senator Roger Karoutchi both mocked Philippe’s letter, stating they did not know what a “provisional” withdrawal of a pension cut meant, the union bureaucracy nevertheless welcomed the letter. The French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT) said it

“hailed the withdrawal of the equilibrium age from the reform, which shows the government’s will to compromise.”

The National Union of Autonomous Unions (UNSA) similarly backed Macron, calling Philippe’s letter “a good thing allowing us to discuss calmly the question of equilibrium.”

Philippe Martinez, the head of the Stalinist-led General Confederation of Labor (CGT), conceded that “the issue of an equilibrium age is a mirage” that “does not change our opposition to the cuts.” He has stressed that he will continue attending talks on pension cuts with the state and business groups, however, boasting that the CGT has attended “all” the talks with Macron on pension cuts—which started in 2017.

A class gulf separates the union tops from millions of workers who have taken strike action and marched in protest against the reform. The rank and file mounted the strikes, and they are determined not only to halt the reform, but to end policies of war and military aggression advanced by Macron and international financial markets.

Sylvie, a “yellow vest” protester, told WSWS journalists in Paris: “We do not care whether they withdraw the equilibrium age. We are against the cuts, period... We know we don’t entirely trust the trade unions, but the rank and file on the other hand are determined.”

Mikaël, a construction worker and “yellow vest” protester, said: “I really think there is complicity between those who run the unions and Macron. It is the rank-and-file workers who are joining the protests, they will not give up. But I think the union leaders do no good.” He added, “I am launching a great appeal to all the construction workers, come join us. Really, we have to come all together to put an end to this.”

There was also growing opposition to war and the financial aristocracy, as heating engineer Laurent told the WSWS: “They are destroying everything. We want a future for our children ... they want to take us back to the 19th century.”

Laurent said he is enthusiastic about growing strikes and protests internationally, in India and Lebanon: “We are realizing the population is manipulated and suppressed everywhere. It is always the same people who decide everything and who do the damage everywhere. When you talk to a Malian, you end up talking about [French oil firm] Total and [financial empire] Bolloré, and you realize we have the same enemies. The same parasites are trying to destroy every country. And if tomorrow they start a war, it will be to justify crushing all

the peoples and intensify this policy.”

Laurent added that the recent US drone murder of Iranian General Qassem Suleimani “is terrorism. It is impermissible to assassinate people, regardless of whether one agrees with their politics. Today it is like that everywhere, criminal actions are possible. It is like the murders of Saddam Hussein or Gaddafi,” the rulers of Iraq and Libya murdered by imperialist-backed forces after NATO wars in their countries. “They were killed for oil and money,” Laurent said.

Several protesters pointed to the growing danger of war and repression amid the Iran crisis and as Macron moves to impose its cuts. Sophie, a French teacher, said police violence “is becoming intolerable and, even worse, a constant occurrence. And don’t get me started on the media, on intellectuals who should speak out against it. They are all remarkably silent on this issue. Police violence is scandalous, and the worst is that they can act with impunity. What happened at the last protests Thursday was terrible, they fired rubber bullets at point-blank range.”

She warned that attacks on Iran and the Middle East would be used to justify nationalism and repression in Europe: “Many of us now think that first of all that it is a strategy to strangle class struggles in that region. We saw that, it helped stop the protests in Lebanon. ... It’s known that war is a tried-and-true method of strangling the anger of the people.”

This underscores that the critical question is taking the struggle out of the hands of the unions and building independent organizations to organize a political struggle against war and austerity and to bring down the Macron government.

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