

Assault on pensions: France Is Striking to Stop Emmanuel Macron

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December 5 is strike day in France, as trade unions mobilize against Emmanuel Macron's assault on pensions. But as the gilets jaunes protests have shown, only a movement rallying wider layers of working people will be able to push back Macron's neoliberal agenda.

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Emmanuel Macron can think of little else. The last thing he wants is for his planned pensions reform — opposed by the large majority of the population — to provoke a general shutdown. So, with a broad coalition of trade unions planning to strike against this latest measure, for weeks the government has been working behind the scenes to try to stop the mobilization from going ahead.

The Macron government's battle plan targeted the sectors it deemed most "at risk" — the types of workers most able to paralyze the country, given their geographical location or their level of union membership. That particularly meant those working for the SNCF (the national rail company) and indeed the RATP (Paris's bus and metro service), which are often in the forefront of social movements in France.

For Bertrand Hammache, a CGT union official at the RATP, "The government is truly afraid of the scale of the mobilization. It has begun bilateral meetings with each union to try and reassure us over what the reform means — and give us a reason to give up on the strike. But that's out of the question."

Pensions Cut

Indeed, the negotiations behind the scenes came to nothing, and a mobilization against Macron's pension change was called for December 5. Compared to previous strikes during Macron's presidency, the coalition backing this strike is particularly broad. Indeed, we'd not seen anything like this before. The workers taking strike action include not only railworkers (RATP, SNCF) but also airline staff (Air France), energy (EDF), as well as those in public services (post, education, and more), road transport, oil refineries, hospitals, the justice system, and universities.

This broad front has developed in opposition to a common enemy: Macron's planned pension reform, a historic rupture unseen since before 1945. True, over the last twenty-five years, successive

governments had altered the “parameters” of pensions, whether making people pay in more years of contributions or pushing back the age at which they stopped work.

But this government is going a lot further. Its reform seeks to transform the very nature of the system by introducing a so-called “points-based” regime. Here, each worker would accumulate points throughout their working life, which would then be translated into a monthly salary at the point they retired. But whereas today, pension levels are set on the basis of a worker’s twenty-five best years (for the private sector) or the last six months of their career (for state employees), their salary would now instead be calculated on the basis of their entire active period.

You don’t have to be a rocket scientist to work out that most wage earners would lose out from this — starting with those whose working lives were hit by periods of unemployment. Indeed, around France, working people have been getting out their calculators to work out how much they’re set to lose. With the government not providing any reliable simulations, workers instead are trying to understand their situation for themselves.

Teachers, for example, are dreading an unprecedented fall in their pensions. For Frédéric Allègre, an official for the FSU teaching union, “The government insists that bonuses will count for pension calculations. But many teaching staff barely get one. The result is that a high-school teacher would lose between €500 and €700 a month from their pension!”

Spectacular Mobilization

Such anxieties go a long way to explain the spectacular support for the mobilization starting on December 5. When one pollster asked, “Do you want the government to fulfill the pensions reform without giving in to strikes and mobilizations?”, some 54 percent of those surveyed answered no. Even more important, some 64 percent of French people considered the mobilizations justified — a level of support reaching 71 percent among the active population and 79 percent among blue-collar workers.

The unions are happy with such figures. Yet they also fear a kind of “strike by proxy.” This term refers to cases where the majority of working people “delegates” its own power to go on strike to some minority based in strategic sectors (public transport, civil service, energy, etc.) whose mobilization would alone suffice to shut down economic activity, at least in part.

This is what happened in France in winter 1995: the country was moving in slow motion for some three weeks, paralyzed by the strikes against center-right prime minister Alain Juppé’s reform of social security. Private-sector workers backed the public-sector strikers — but they themselves didn’t go out on strike.

The surveys mentioned above could suggest such a scenario. But, as one former top union official puts it, “It’d be a mistake to count on that. We can’t send the railworkers into battle while we sit on the sofa. Beating Macron requires everyone getting stuck in, whether public- or private-sector.”

This is, indeed, one of the questions of the battle now beginning. No one can fail to see the clouds of social grievance that have gathered over France. Brought to power by an electoral bloc mostly consisting of top managers, company bosses, and well-off pensioners, since his election, Emmanuel Macron has pursued a neoliberal agenda that has deepened the divides in French society. Among the population, the president is perceived as the ardent defender of the richest and the city centers, against the popular classes and peripheral areas.

But what still needs doing is to convert this latent anger into a mass movement — and make it a lasting presence. “Even a successful day of mobilization will not be enough to push back the government,” our former union official continues. “The movement has to keep going over time, with the strikes affecting the economy. In 1995 the government only retreated because France was reduced to a snail’s pace.”

Potential Allies

In this regard, trade unionists are also looking hopefully to the gilets jaunes — some of whom have thrown their own weight behind the mobilization against Macron’s pension plans.

This call went out in early November, as some 600 gilets jaunes met in a disused museum in Montpellier for their Assembly of local assemblies. Representing 200 delegations from roundabout protests around France, they published a communiqué unambiguously calling on the gilets jaunes “to be at the heart of the movement, with their own demands and aspirations, in their own workplaces or on their roundabouts, with their yellow jackets fully visible.”

Yet the real echo of such an appeal obviously remains to be seen: the positions of the Montpellier “Assembly of Assemblies,” often inspired by the far left of the movement, do not necessarily reflect the views of most gilets jaunes.

But even a possible convergence between the traditional strike movement and the gilets jaunes will only have real oomph if these latter rediscover their former strength. Since peaking on January 19 (when there were around 110,000 gilets jaunes in the streets), the number of demonstrators each Saturday has continually fallen, with a few exceptions. It is not difficult to explain this, given not only the exhaustion of militants worn down by the movement’s exceptional duration but also factors like the fierce police repression it has faced.

Reenergized Action

For their part, the unions know how decisive it is to have a “critical mass.” Since Macron took office, they have not successfully defeated any government policy. This impotence is not new — indeed, we would have to go back to 2006 and the protests against CPE (“First Job Contract” — a planned ultra-precarious employment contract for those under twenty-six, abandoned after a massive social movement) to find a social movement winning a notable victory.

Since then, the unions have organized multiple days of action against various governments — indeed, some of them had a real following. But none of them won. It is symptomatic that the only social movement that has secured a few advances since Macron reached office is the gilets jaunes, that is, a movement around the edges of the traditional union organizations — and sometimes even against them.

This last consideration can, paradoxically, be seen as reason for hope for the unions, as historian Stéphane Sirot explains: “Among its other virtues, the ‘gilets jaunes’ movement has helped reenergize social action in the world of work — showing that it is possible to oppose an established government and force concessions from it. It had been a long time since that had happened. Will the unions be able to capitalize on this energy and remobilize their own troops?”

At the same time, France’s left-wing parties also see an opportunity in this mobilization. Indeed, since the electoral beatings they took in 2017, the parties of the Left have seen their political weight

melt like a snowball in the sunshine. In the National Assembly, the Left in the broadest sense (Socialists, Communists, France Insoumise) only has sixty-odd MPs — 10 percent of the total!

The pension reform could allow them to recover — so long, that is, that they can put forward the kind of political perspectives that can get a hearing. “The left-wing parties are all opposed to the reform,” stresses political scientist Frédéric Sawicki. “But to restore ties with their voters, they will have to be up to the task of proposing a counter-project of their own, worthy of the name — and that’s not the case today.” The Communist Party is set to hold a rally on this question on December 11, together with the other parties of the Left.

One thing is for sure: both parties and unions are going to try to benefit from the current anxieties of a government rejected by public opinion and immersed in disastrous messaging. As political science professor Laurent Jeanpierre puts it, “Emmanuel Macron knows that at the end of his term, the bourgeois bloc is going to judge him on the basis of his capacity to ‘reform’ the country. This pension reform is the first time that the pro-Macron majority has been so divided. MPs for [Macron’s] En Marche party are sending worried messages back to the Élysée saying how alarmed they are about the unpopularity of the reform . . . And asking themselves how they will be reelected next time!”

The December 5 strike is, for now, a first day of action. But given what’s at stake in the battle for pensions, it looks like this struggle could be here to stay.

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P.S.

- Jacobin, 12.05.2019:
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/12/france-strike-pension-plan-emmanuel-macron>
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