

France: The Next Battle - Macron's anti-union reforms have passed the first stage, so what's next for the French left?

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Macron's gamble appears to be paying off. By front loading his five-year term with sweeping labor law reforms, the newly elected president bet that the union movement and its allies would be too weak and divided to seriously contest their passage. So far, the decision has proven wise.

On Friday September 22nd, in the aftermath nationwide protests, Macron signed into effect broadly unpopular executive orders that would weaken job security protections and curtail union rights [[1](#)]. For the changes to become permanent, Parliament must adopt them in the coming months. The hurdles are virtually non-existent. The government boasts an *En Marche* super-majority in the National Assembly and the right-wing *Les Républicains* control the Senate.

Still, if the path looks clear now, history suggests impasse is not impossible. Previous governments have withdrawn unpopular labor reforms in the face of mass protests and strikes — famously in 1995 over retirement cuts; more recently in 2006 over a proposed youth employment contract. And while today's contestation is both limited and fragmented, it contains the recognizable seeds of a larger movement. Whether such an upsurge occurs is an open question that will be answered in the coming weeks.

A Slow March

So far, labor's opposition to the reforms has been led by General Confederation of Labor (CGT), the country's largest labor confederation, and Solidaires, a much smaller group of left-wing unions. The organizations have led two days of nationwide protest with moderate success: On September 12, these mobilizations drew 223,000 people across France, according to police, and 500,000 according to organizers. On September 21, they drew fewer people, between 132,000 and "several hundred thousand" according to estimates.

Though impressive for the beginning of a presidency, the figures remain lower than comparable national protests last year against the El-Khomri Law, a similar set of labor reforms proposed by former President François Hollande. The first wave of protests in March 2016 drew either 224,000 or 450,000, depending on who you believe; the second, three weeks later, drew 390,000 or 1.2 million. Either way, the movement came up short. Not even ten rounds of protest could block the law's passage.

Turnout this time has been hampered by division within labor's ranks. The French Democratic Confederation of Labor (CFDT) and Workers' Strength (FO), the country's second- and third-largest labor confederations, respectively, have criticized the reform package but have not yet endorsed national protests. The latter's reluctance to throw its full weight behind the movement is especially baffling since it endorsed last year's version against comparatively more modest reforms. Fortunately, this has not stopped FO federations, local unions and rank-and-file activists from joining protests. The same cannot be said of the CFDT. Subscribing to a labor organization that openly dissuades conflict, its activists have taken to the streets in much smaller numbers.

In addition to the disappointing protest turnouts, work stoppages have been limited. Transportation unions have a particular capacity to disrupt the economy through a combination of strikes, slowdowns, and blockades, but have not been able to effectively do so yet. Last week, truckers affiliated with the CGT and FO transportation federations led actions targeting key highways and fuel storage facilities. Results were mixed. Protests slowed traffic at certain chokepoints but did not significantly diminish fuel supply.

Meanwhile, the political left has responded — but not in perfect harmony with labor. Jean-Luc Mélenchon's France Insoumise — quickly emerging as the clearest force of opposition to the government, according to polls — endorsed the two union-backed protest dates. But to the dismay of many trade unionists, the party also unilaterally called for its own day of protest, on September 23, in Paris. Ultimately, Mélenchon's march against the government's "social coup d'état" drew somewhere between 50 and 150,000 to the streets.

Forces on the extra-parliamentary left have also mobilized, including the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA), Workers' Struggle (LO), and anarchist groups, but their numbers are limited. The center-left Socialist Party (PS), though nominally critical of the reforms, has decided not to endorse street protest. Benoît Hamon, a former Socialist minister, parliamentarian, and presidential candidate who quit the party shortly after his failed bid for the Elysée, has turned up to protests under the banner of his newly launched July 1 Movement (M17). This was a significant gesture, but the group's influence remains marginal.

Perhaps the most striking fact about this fall's nascent movement is the relative lack of student participation. Many university students had not yet returned from summer break in time for the first wave of protests. But that doesn't explain the second round's reduced turnout. The response stands in stark contrast to last spring's El-Khomri reforms, when students jump-started the protest movement, turning up to the front of marches in droves and putting pressure on trade unions to call for more days of action.

The Next Steps

France's protest calendar remains jam-packed. On October 10, civil servants plan to protest against a freeze in cost-of-living adjustments, the removal of a paid sick day, and the prospect of 120,000 job cuts. Unlike in the private sector, public sector unions are united in their protest and count the support of the CFDT. The mobilization may draw private sector workers too: Truckers have threatened to strike again on October 10, and Solidaires has already called on all of its members to join strikes and protests that day.

France Insoumise has also signaled its willingness to mobilize again. In a speech following the march on Saturday, Jean-Luc Mélenchon said his party was ready to "get behind" the labor movement in future protests against the reforms before an eventual vote in Parliament. The former presidential candidate floated the idea of "one million" on the Champs Élysées — an ambitious, if

unlikely, goal.

Any successful movement will require higher levels of participation from students and rank-and-file workers. One-day protests led by labor's base are one thing; disruptive strikes that incorporate broader swaths of the workforce are another. Meanwhile, university and high school students have the ability to further disrupt business-as-usual and drive public opinion toward the movement. Recent cuts in housing benefits could serve as a spark. Starting in October, 800,000 students will lose five euros a month in aid.

The government knows full well it is treading on thin ice. Earlier this month, cameras caught En Marche deputy Brigitte Bourguignon chatting with Prime Minister Edouard Philippe. "The only concern is the student movement, it better not start up."

"Yes, yes," the prime minister replied. "We all know things can coagulate sometimes, of course."

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P.S.

* Jacobin. 10.01.2017:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/10/the-next-battle>

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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.thenation.com/article/the-false-promise-of-macrons-labor-reforms/>