

In France, Garbage Workers Are Resisting Austerity

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Garbage collectors occupied Paris's city hall last Tuesday in protest against austerity measures that will make them work more days with no extra pay. Essential workers shouldn't be the ones to pay for local government's COVID debts.

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Tuesday, May 25, looked like an uneventful day in a slowly reopening Paris. The third lockdown had only just come to an end, with customers flocking back to “nonessential” businesses like clothing stores, cafés, and restaurants. On Rue de Rivoli, a central artery running from east to west through the capital, the doors of the fashionable department store opposite city hall were newly unpadlocked. Yet the bikers on the street's recently expanded car-free lanes had a different reason to rubberneck — the sight of squadrons of riot police grouped around city hall.

By lunchtime, shield-holding gendarmes were kettling some 250 municipal workers. The crowd of garbage collectors, sewage system employees, and other rank-and-file public servants had assembled to protest the dismantling of contract norms for public functionaries. The protesters' main target are changes that will see municipal workers lose at least eight days of paid leave, in order to allay the need for fresh hires. With key services increasingly farmed out to private businesses, such moves seek to bring labor standards down to the levels offered by contractors.

Earlier that same morning, hundreds of these protesters' coworkers had [stormed](#) the sumptuous Renaissance-revival palace across the street, the main seat of municipal government in Paris. Garbage bins lingered on the sidewalk in districts where garbage collection is still handled by public employees — though roughly half have already seen this service contracted out to private firms like Veolia.

From the windows of the occupied city hall, workers proclaimed their demands via megaphone. Back down on the street, the riot police tightened their shield-wall around the workers, forcing those who had come to the unauthorized protest to offer up their papers and pay a €135 fine. But the riot police closed in too tight, and against the pressure, dozens of the workers breached a hole in the shield-wall and made a dash for safety. Tear gas from the grenades lobbed at the escaping workers wafted up the fancy Rue de Rivoli — an interruption to President Emmanuel Macron's call for the no-longer-locked-down French to “enjoy the terraces!”

More Work, Same Pay

A garbage collector since 2008, Jerome was one of the workers who managed to cut loose from the

police-shield cordon. “Thanks to the latest reform that they’re trying to make us swallow,” he said, “they’re going to take away eight days of paid vacation, without an increase in wages. We’re going to work more for the same salary!”

“We’re experiencing a general degradation of the status of public workers,” he said. “They’re asking us to do more and more odd jobs, but the wages aren’t following. Since the onset of the COVID crisis, and especially at the beginning, we’ve been on the front lines. We took away people’s trash, we cleaned the streets. We didn’t have enough masks, and barely any gloves.”

Through the first lockdown last spring, the government called on municipalities to grant €35 in daily bonuses for key municipal workers such as garbage collectors. Barring token gestures such as these, however — and with the early urgency of the health crisis having long since given way to the government’s more measured stance of “living with the virus” — the political winds are turning again toward austerity.

The law “transforming public service” was passed by parliament in 2019 and is now set to enter into effect in Paris, at the behest of Socialist Party mayor Anne Hidalgo, who is currently testing out the possibility of a presidential run in 2022. The law facilitates the contracting out of public work to private contractors, and the recourse to short-term task-based contracts. In the name of equity, the relatively more secure and generous contracts for workers benefiting from civil-servant status will be made to harmonize with employees of private business who do work for the city. This is the loophole by which municipal employees like Jerome will lose eight days of paid vacation — in extremely tough lines of work like garbage collection and sewage management, where workers suffer from lower life expectancies.

Unrest over Paris’s application of the 2019 law has been building for months. In November, garbage collectors occupied the roof of the sanitation department’s headquarters, though a protracted strike was averted by management’s promise of negotiation.

For Jerome, however, the “spark that set off the powder keg” of the latest mobilization took place on May 17, with [the circulation on Facebook](#) of an audio clip purported to be a recording of a planning session with high-ranking municipal officials. In the twelve-minute clip, Benjamin Raigneau — head of human resources at the SNCF rail authority during its 2018 overhaul, and now chief of Paris’s sanitation department — chuckles as he strategizes with other management figures about how best to outmaneuver potential worker resistance to contract changes.

“I don’t really understand how people are going to accept this in June when it goes into place,” says one of the sanitation department managers in the recording. “They’re not going to understand a thing,” Raigneau maintains. “Sure, the pot is going to boil a bit, but the real thing is not when the unions understand, it’s when people understand.”

“That’s true — today it’s only virtual, and this all doesn’t really mean much. The day when it’s going to dawn on people will be when we give them their schedules,” another manager replies. “It was the whole strategy from [human resources], I mean, fixing a constraint that I think few people will understand in the spring, and then come the fall, department by department, we’ll apply the constraints as decided in spring.”

The municipal workers’ mobilization specifically owes to the application of a law that dates from well before the pandemic. But it’s not hard to spot the signs of the potentially more ruthless austerity battles to come. Economy minister Bruno Le Maire has made clear that there’s no chance of new tax increases to pay for the €215 billion of “COVID debt” accrued thanks to business bailouts and work furlough programs in place since last March — though some projected revenue from existing

taxation could be earmarked for this purpose. Despite being the cause for a massive wave of strike from December 2019, reforms to the retirement system, however, are back on the table. On March 18, [a commission](#) tasked by the government to chart a path toward fiscal solvency called for “multiyear spending norms for all administrations and future benchmark spending levels.”

Top Cop

Some state services are already being cordoned off from the coming austerity battles. When the law “transforming public services” was being debated by parliament over spring 2019, Gérald Darmanin was a junior minister in charge of budgeting and public accounting. Before being reined in by other members of a government still reeling from the Yellow Vests crisis, Darmanin [made a point of reaffirming](#) the goal of slashing 120,000 posts.

Since last summer, however, when he became interior minister — effectively France’s “top cop” — Darmanin has changed his tune. Spearheading the government’s right-wing turn on security, he has positioned himself as a tribune of France’s embattled police forces, calling for new resources, a hiring spree, and legal protections — for police officers — from overzealous citizens and journalists. On May 19, thousands of police officers took to the streets outside of the National Assembly, with Darmanin present alongside political figures from across the public spectrum. Even elements of the left-wing opposition have given in to the government’s security turn, with the Communist Party’s presidential candidate, Fabien Roussel, [promising to hire](#) as many as thirty thousand new police officers.

As far as the government is concerned, the bread-and-butter services that make society function — from youth programs and education to trash collection — don’t deserve such largesse. The workers that make this all possible — what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu liked to call the “left hand of the state” — are again targeted by top-ranking civil servants’ “optimization” plans, as France’s lurch back to normality brings back to the surface the assumptions that have been on hiatus through the public health crisis.

Georgette is a sixty-five-year-old retiree whose husband works for Onet, a private contractor that provides cleaning and sanitation services for the Paris-area transportation network. Wearing her old Yellow Vest at a municipal workers’ march on May 27 called by an array of unions, she warned that this isn’t the end: as she put it, “The fourth wave [of COVID] is going to be all about layoffs.”

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P.S.

- Jacobin. 06.02.2021:
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/06/paris-garbage-workers-strike-macron-sanitation>
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