

# France: Government tries to split workers' united front

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ON FRIDAY 10 January, workers across France walked out for the 37th day of strikes and demonstrations against the Macron government's attempt to raise the retirement age and introduce massive cuts to public sector pensions.

The frontal attack on the public sector pension provision aims to introduce a single points-based system that would sweep away the country's 42 sectoral pension schemes and introduce a 'pivot age' that would mean working until 64 to gain a full pension, two years beyond the current official retirement age of 62.

The pension reform is a decisive test for both sides; victory for Macron will pave the way for the neoliberal shock therapy that forms the core of his domestic agenda.

On the other hand, defeat for the man who staked his presidency on facing down the unions would represent a major setback for the French capitalists' project to deregulate the workforce and introduce the kind of low wage, insecure economic model that has blighted Britain for three decades.

A movement from below

Last September the Paris metro was paralysed by a massive one-day strike. In October, without warning, several train maintenance centres went on strike for several weeks. One railway worker speaking in a general assembly, explained:

'We pushed them (the management) to retreat. They abandoned their project in this centre. It is a long time since we were able to make them retreat. Why did we win this time? I think it is because this time it all started from the rank and file. We said 'enough obeying them [the union leaders], waiting for them to tell us to mobilise. We downed the tools and then the workforce assembled and discussed the situation. Through this discussion we came to an agreement and then we acted all together. This is what they fear, that we organise?.'

Rank and file pressure has been central to forcing the reluctant union leaderships into action after overseeing recurring defeats at Macron's hands. The strikes by A&E workers in Spring 2018, led by a rank and file coordination (Collective Inter-Urgence), rather than by the national unions, illustrates the increasing capacity and willingness of the rank and file to take effective action without their leaders where necessary.

For the first time in years, the union leaders' tactic of one-day strikes, or days of action 'with no tomorrow', is being openly criticised. Last year, the railway workers went on a prolonged strike with a particularly self-defeating tactic: two days of strike every week for over two months. As a result, they were defeated. Now they have learned the lesson and have been striking all out for weeks.

Another feature of this movement is the number of general assemblies, AGs, taking place in the workplaces, even before the strike. Normally, AGs are called only after the beginning of a strike. For weeks, the workers have been preparing and discussing in AGs, and the most politically conscious in ?inter-professional AGs? which include different sectors and unions planning strikes

Many strikers are aware they are fighting not only against the pension reform but also against the whole neo-liberal reform policy of Emanuel Macron?s presidency, now in the mid-term, and his government is today already weakened. The gilets jaunes movement, despite its dangerous political contradictions, encouraged the belief that prolonged militant resistance can destabilise the government and open the way to victories. This is true ? provided the movement organises from below and keeps a tight control of its conduct and outcome.

### Divide and rule

Despite the determined resistance of militant sectors, it is clear that the duration of the strike and the failure to raise wider demands that can draw private sector workers into the resistance, is taking its toll, with declining numbers participating in the strikes.

Macron?s prime minister Édouard Philippe has seized his opportunity to capitalise on the movement?s fragile unity by proposing a cynical ?compromise? that would exempt those retiring before 2027 from the higher retirement age. By dividing older workers from younger, Philippe is counting on dividing the moderate unions from the militants, and securing a victory for the government using exactly the same methods that his predecessors used to divide the public and private sectors in previous pension reforms.

Phillippe would not have acted without being sure of a positive response from the CFDT union, and he was not disappointed. The union, which only reluctantly supported action under pressure of its rank and file, made the so-called ?pivot age? its red line, and thus this ploy has given it the excuse it has been looking for to leave the CGT and other unions in the lurch ? again.

The CGT responded to the government?s proposal by calling on workers to escalate the dispute, and strike on January 14, 15, and 16. There is no alternative to fighting back ? but once again the leaders of France?s ?left? unions are abandoning the responsibility to lead from the front, refusing to do what is necessary to strike a decisive blow: i.e. generalize the strike beyond the public sector rail and education bastions.

As with the protests against the ?Loi Travail? in 2017, there is a danger that the CFDT is willing to open a breach in the united front of the workers. Even then, the government was forced to impose the law by presidential decree bypassing parliament ? a dictatorial measure Philippe is threatening to resort to once again.

### A strategy to win

The only way to maintain the united front and seize back the initiative from the government is to broaden it, bring the teachers and health workers into indefinite action alongside the rail workers, and assert rank and file control over the strategy at a national level. This means coordinating the workplace general assemblies at a regional and national level, and, crucially, extending the strikes to the private sector.

Extending strikes to the private sector, which would be a decisive blow against Macron, will need effective organisation to mount pickets lines and convince non-striking workers to join. But here, objectives that go beyond the withdrawal of the pension reform are needed.

A first measure to maintain the unity of the movement is to demand the levelling up of sectoral pensions, and progressively reducing the retirement age. Beyond this, the movement should take up the demands against the dismantling of the public services, for increased grants for the students, but also for higher wages and against temporary and insecure employment, precarité. These should be democratically discussed in the AGs and democratically and nationally included in a unified platform of demands.

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