

French workers defy Macron: We've had enough! Now we must win!

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One and a half million on more than 200 demonstrations across France. Nine out of ten trains cancelled: the Paris metro paralysed: two thirds of teachers on strike, together with air traffic controllers, health workers, electricity workers (EDF), firefighters, and students ? On December 5, France was at a standstill. This could swiftly become the largest strike wave and social movement since 1995. Strikers expressed their determination to continue until Christmas if need be!

The movement was launched against yet another reform of the pension system, the fifth in 20 years. This time the government is attacking both the railway and Paris metro workers, who benefit from special pension conditions, indeed the whole public sector and especially the teachers, who will lose €500-600 per month from their pensions and, beyond them, a broad spectrum of workers on 42 different pension schemes.

The government is indeed preparing a 'systemic' reform, ludicrously presented as a just reform, in which each euro on the pay cheque will allegedly produce the same effect on the pension through a 'points system'. This outright lie hides the fact that many workers have long periods of precarious work or unemployment, that women especially have shorter periods in employment, so that in the end the government reform will achieve widespread working poverty rather than justice. Moreover, on top of this systemic reform, a 'parametric reform', meaning working longer before retirement, is also being prepared.

No wonder that since September workers have been preparing a massive strike for December 5. The mood now is quite different from previous movements. Already in 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, AG, explained:

'We pushed them (the management) to retreat. They abandoned their project in this centre. How long a time is it 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 (the TU 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. And, moreover, there is a special social climate. For one year there are the yellow vests (gilets jaunes). There is a strike in the hospitals. There has been a strike on the Paris metro. It is like a pressure cooker. On December 5 this will burst in their faces.'

Indeed, the whole movement was launched under very strong pressure from the rank and file. Many unions were reluctant at first to organise for the strike, including the CGT, but they had to go along with it because of the rank and file and the incredible anger surging up from below. This was already revealed by

the health workers' strikes since the Spring, where the strike has been led by a "rank and file coordination" (Collectif Inter-Urgence) rather than by the trade union.

For the first time in several years, the union leaders' preferred tactic of one-day strikes, or days of action, 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. This year they learned the lesson and have been preparing for a prolonged strike lasting several weeks. Workers have been putting money by in preparation for the strike. For many the amount of money they are going to lose with the reform is so high that the decision to join the strike appeared obvious.

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, however, the workers have been preparing and discussing in AGs, and the most politicised meet in ?inter-professional AGs? which include different sectors and unions planning strikes.

Even Lutte Ouvrière, one of the largest Trotskyist groups who, in the 1995 strike, did not advance any criticism of the TU bureaucracy, is reacting to this new mood:

?Many of us do not trust the trade unions and their bureaucratic schemes whereby they repeatedly sacrificed the interests of the workers. Indeed! We need to fight with the conviction that we can organise to control and lead our movement in a democratic manner. With the conviction that we can decide and act without waiting for the instructions of the TU.?

Of course, most of the strikers are really fighting not only against the pension reform but against the whole neo-liberal reform policy of Emanuel Macron?s presidency, now in its mid-term, and his government is today already weakened. Somehow, the yellow vests movement, despite its political confusion, its lack of organisation and its terrible contradictions, has shown one important lesson: a prolonged fight 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. This spirit of self-reliance is pervasive in the working class today.

However, the stakes for Macron are very high. A victory would mean he could go on to push his neoliberal reforms on many other fronts and complete a savage programme of attacks against the working class in general, like the recent reform, which severely reduced unemployment benefits, and the public sector in particular. A defeat for the government would open a totally new phase in the class struggle. Or, in the rather explicit words of a minister: ?The pension reform is the big test. If we retreat, the five-year term will be over and we won't be able to do anything else.?

To avoid this, the government has been trying several tactics. In October, it tried to divert the anger by playing the racist card, with a debate in parliament on religious dress, yet another debate on the hijab. Moreover, the government has hidden the contents of the reform, pretending to be consulting, and waiting for the worst of the social anger to blow over. Indeed, it plans an important announcement on Wednesday, December 11.

It is possible that this will make some minor, or fake, concessions, for example, that the reform will only apply to those born after, say, 1970. The government is sure to continue secret negotiations with the union leaders, where it can count on the support of the major union, the Democratic French Confederation of Labour, CFDT. Though this is numerically the largest federation, it comes below the CGT in workplace elections.

The CFDT has sabotaged movements against previous pension reforms and supported Macron in the presidential elections. Indeed, for several decades, it has made betrayal of the workers its trademark. On December 5, its secretary general, Laurent Berger, regretted that "the prevailing logic is still to put a little bit of pressure on yourself before starting to discuss".

Another card is, of course, public opinion. The media describe the railway workers as "privileged", out to defend their generous benefits and "holding the country to ransom". According, to opinion polls, unreliable as they are, 60 percent support the reform of the special pension schemes, but the same figure also support the strike!

Finally, it can rely on state repression. Hardened by one year of clashes with the yellow vests, the various police corps have piled up a stock of ammunition of all kinds, some of which, like tear gas, is actually used in violation of the international agreements on chemical weapons.

Already the Paris demo was heavily ?escorted? by thousands of paramilitary special units and most of the marchers could not reach the designated end-point because of violent clashes in between. However, a sign of the depth of the social contradictions is that many police units were also on strike that day ?

Playing for high stakes, the present movement has both enormous strengths and enormous weaknesses. The strengths are especially the fact that the workers' vanguard, the railway workers, are at the heart of the battle and determined to hold the frontline and the fact that the anger is immense with the potential to draw in many other sectors, including the private sector. The initiative at the moment is in the hands of the workers and their AGs.

Everywhere, reports testify to the size and determination of the AGs across the country. Some of them draw in not only railway workers but also teachers and other workers, interprofessional AGs, often suggested by militants of the far left, the New Anti-capitalist Party, NPA, and Workers' Struggle, LO. Weaknesses are however also evident, especially in terms of organisation and the strikes' objectives.

Firstly, there has been no attempt as yet to coordinate these AGs nationally. While lycée (high school) and university students are used to building nation-wide co-ordinations, since the 1980s almost no examples of these have been seen in the workers' struggles. This leaves the union bureaucracy with a monopoly of representation during negotiations and thus an enormous advantage when it comes to calling the strikes off and then claiming some minor concessions.

Clearly, a nation-wide democratic coordination of strikers is necessary, otherwise the initiative will remain in the hands of the government and the union leaders. The decision to maintain the strike is voted on by every AG in each workplace independently, usually for the next day or a few days. If there is no decisive test of strength, less traditionally militant sectors, and their AGs, may lose heart, allowing the bureaucrats to demobilise the strike piecemeal.

Another weakness is the fact that the railway workers and Paris metro workers are at the moment the only sector on an indefinite strike. If the teachers nationally joined an unlimited stoppage, this would enormously reinforce the movement, but whether they will is not yet clear. The same could be said of the students, who could enormously reinforce the social impact of the strike. Some universities are closed to prevent occupations, other are already mobilised.

In Marseille, the number of strikers in the oil refinery sector was the highest since the 1970s but this seems to be at the moment an isolated case. Extending further indefinite strikes to the private sector would require both an effective organisation, to mount picket lines, discuss and convince the workers, and an

objective that must go beyond the simple withdrawal of the pension reform. Demands against the dismantling of the public services, for increased grants for the students, for higher wages and against temporary and insecure employment (precarité) should be democratically discussed and democratically and nationally included in a unified platform of demands.

The leader of the CGT, Philippe Martinez, has repeatedly emphasised that, through the AGs, the strikers will "decide for themselves" whether to join or continue an indefinite mobilisation. This, however, abdicates the question of leadership and a strategy to win. The CGT should be clear that unless other workers take all-out indefinite action alongside the SNCF and RATP, the latter could be isolated and their capacity to resist be exhausted. Then some rotten deal could emerge, as happened last year. Philippe Martinez may have called for a "generalisation of strikes" but he has rejected the slogan of a "general strike".

The open agitation for a general strike is the way to broaden the strike but also to give to it a more clearly political profile, that is, against the whole raft of government attacks. Precisely with respect to these tasks, the yellow vests movement is a negative example that should not be followed. They were violently against any form of delegate bodies or representatives, any kind of politics or party and indeed any national organisation. Therefore, the movement failed. Unfortunately, far left groups like NPA and LO avoided making any criticism.

The far left now have a big responsibility. Important figures of the workers' movement have recently emerged from their ranks and they have a strong and historic implantation in SNCF. Today, they are playing an important role in the organisation of the AGs. However, both are numerically and politically weak. Moreover, NPA is especially weak in terms of national organisation and it is not clear that it can play a leading role at a national level, because of its political weaknesses and its deep internal differences.

Many other reformist forces, like the PS, PCF, or Mélenchon's France Insoumise, support the strike but leave it in the hands of the union leaders, simply hoping to capitalise on it for the next round of local elections, due in March 2020. Mélenchon, in line with his neo-populism, tweeted that "Even Madame Le Pen says we need to demonstrate, that's a big step forward." Certainly, the last thing the movement needs is the support of Le Pen and the Rassemblement Nationale, RN, formerly the FN. The presence of racists and outright fascists amongst the yellow vests contributed to the disintegration and failure of that movement.

In summary, the French 2019 movement is historic in strength and breadth. It has the potential to block and derail the high-speed train of Macron's neoliberal reforms. Given the peculiar international conjunction of such movements around the world, Chile, Iraq, Hong Kong, it can have a strong international resonance and can certainly focus and inspire other workers' movements in Europe. Today, it is still growing and has not yet expressed its full potential. Revolutionaries should strongly support it and help to reinforce its organisational and political content so that it can achieve its goal of defeating the government.

We need

? Interprofessional AGs and co-ordinations in every town and city to spread indefinite strike action to all types of public sector employees and to bring in the private sector with their own demands.

? A national coordination of delegates from the AGs with control over all negotiations with Macron and the government.

? An all-out and indefinite general strike to defeat Macron's entire programme and drive him from power.

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