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French public sector workers strike against austerity and attacks on conditions

Yesterday, a public sector strike hit France, and thousands of workers marched against President Emmanuel Macron's planned reform, job cuts and wage freezes.

Around 5.4 million people work in the public sector in France. As rail workers launch strike action against Macron's reform of the French National Railways (SNCF), anger is growing among public sector workers, as Macron plans to eliminate the statute governing their employment, established in 1946 after the Liberation from the Nazi occupation. They also marched to defend wages and protest the planned suppression of 120,000 jobs by 2022.

Macron's destruction of the 1946 statute would mean the end of lifetime employment, cuts to sick days, and the stepped-up use by the French state of temp workers as contractors, who already make up 20 percent of the workforce.

Yesterday, 130 protests took place across France. In Paris, 50,000 people protested, according to the trade unions (16,400 according to the police-linked Occurrence agency). In Marseille, 45,000 postmen, teachers and retirees protested (4,500 according to Occurrence). As rail workers joined the striking public sector workers, 4,300 workers protested in Nantes, 2,500 in Grenoble, 2,700 in Caen, 2,000 in Limoges, 2,200 in Périgueux, 2,800 in Rennes, and 1,600 in Perpignan and Saint-Etienne, according to police figures.

In many cities, university and high school students protesting Macron's Parcoursup reform of access to higher education joined the marchers in solidarity with the public sector workers.

The strike hit daycare centres and schools, unemployment agencies, airports, energy and health care. Municipal day care centres were hit by partial or even total closures. According to the education ministry, 15.5 and 10 percent of teachers in primary schools and in high schools were on strike, respectively.

Rail traffic was hit by a strike call from the Solidarity-Union-Democracy (SUD) union, as rail workers prepared to go on strike for two more days starting today. Planes were also grounded due to an air traffic controllers strike over staffing cuts despite rising air traffic levels and demands on wages and working conditions. Some truckers also protested and took strike action.

Electric and natural gas workers also joined the strike, as their statute is also threatened by Macron's reform. Hospital and social service personnel broadly took strike action and protested to demand better working conditions and higher staffing levels. The Jobs Pole unemployment office and the Météo France weather service also struck against job cuts.

The strike underscores the deep opposition in France and across Europe to the militarist and austerity policies of Macron and the European Union. It takes place 50 years after the May-June 1968 general strike, which paralysed France as 10 million workers took strike action.

Yesterday's strike shows that a similar level of working class opposition exists today. But despite broad anger among workers against Macron, workers in the public and private sectors cannot carry out a serious struggle in the context of a demonstration called by the union bureaucracies and their political allies, like Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France (LFI) movement and the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA). These organisations are hostile to a struggle of the working class to bring down the Macron government and are doing everything they can to allow him to impose austerity.

The trade unions have not called continuing strike action in the public sector, effectively isolating the ongoing rail strike. The French Democratic Labour Confederation has already agreed to contracts violating national minimum wage law in the chemical industry.

The forces around Mélenchon and the NPA are claiming, in the NPA's words, that they are building a "point of support" for a general strike. This is a political lie. As in 1968, the only way forward is to rebel against the framework imposed by the trade unions who are negotiating austerity with Macron, using the Socialist Party's reactionary labour law. The

unions and their political allies are trying to channel this rising oppositional sentiment behind a sterile perspective of negotiating some type of austerity agreement with Macron. WSWS reporters interviewed demonstrators in the march in Paris, who denounced austerity and imperialist policies in the Middle East.

A graduate student criticised Parcoursup, saying, “I am here simply because they are doing whatever they feel like to the universities, in terms of financing that hits us directly, me or my colleagues. I find it disgusting to prevent students from coming to university, because I know many people, including people who are already doing their doctorates, who were only able to go to university because it was open to all.”

He added, “Capitalism wants to give money to the rich and for everyone else to get less money. And they also want a less educated population, which would revolt less and be less aware of what is being done to it.”

He also denounced the imperialist wars in the Middle East and last week’s massacre of Palestinians by the Israeli soldiers in Gaza. “The United States were moving their embassy in Israel (to Jerusalem), that is a gift that Trump is making to himself. ... And the fact is that no government condemns it because it is in all of their interests, in fact, including Macron.”

A high school student told the WSWS he is “against selective admissions to universities. It’s first of all to struggle against that and what he is doing at the level of the hospitals and of all our social rights, particularly in the public services.”

A rail worker who has been striking since April 3 told the WSWS: “It is important for us to participate in this strike. Because the rail service and the trains are part of the public sector and we could not miss this protest.”

He added that if the SNCF and the rail service falls totally under the purview of the market, “Nothing guarantees that I will still have the working conditions I have today. I am part of the reserve workforce, they can modify my working schedule 24 hours in advance, I work split shifts and I earn 1,700 euros a month at the very most. But tomorrow not even that would be guaranteed, even though I have worked 12 years for the SNCF.”

If the SNCF becomes a private company, he added, “Tomorrow things will be even worse. And we have already seen elsewhere that privatisation in fact leads to a spike in accidents due to a loss of the type of training that we receive in the SNCF.”