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French police assault workers marching against inflation and in support of refinery strike



A protester runs for cover as police fire tear gas during a demonstration, in Nantes, western France, Tuesday, Oct. 18, 2022. Industries across France went on strike Tuesday to push for pay hikes that keep up with rising inflation, ramping up the clash between workers and the government after weeks of walkouts that hobbled oil refineries and sparked gasoline shortages around the country. [AP Photo/Jeremias Gonzalez]

Over 300,000 workers and youth marched yesterday in France in a day of action to protest inflation and the Macron government's attempts to crush a nationwide refinery strike. Strikes were called in refineries, nuclear plants and energy, as well as education and transport. Several thousands marched in Bordeaux, Le Havre, Lille, Marseille, Lyon, Toulouse and Rennes, while union officials counted 70,000 attendees at the march in Paris.

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With approximately 25 percent of French gas stations low on at least one type of fuel due to the continuing refinery strike, protests in solidarity with the refinery workers spread to high schools. Over 100 were blockaded by students, including dozens in Paris and Mulhouse.

Continuing the violent repression unleashed on the 2018-2019 “yellow vest” protests against social inequality, French riot police repeatedly assaulted peaceful protesters in Paris. They assaulted members of the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union’s security detachment, wounding six, including one with an open head wound.

Syrian journalist Zakaria Abdelkafi bled profusely after a rubber bullet fired by French police hit his eyebrow, though his eye was reportedly not injured.

This savage police violence, intended to terrorize and discourage legal, constitutionally protected social protests, makes clear there is nothing to negotiate with Macron. His government, and the union bureaucrats who support his policies, are hostile to the workers and support policies of inflation, austerity and imperialist war that are impoverishing the working class. The way forward is to build a movement in the working class against austerity and war, in France and internationally, in an insurrection against the union bureaucracies.

Developing such a movement requires building rank-and-file committees, independent of the national union bureaucracies, that fight to unite workers’ struggles across international lines. It also requires a deep-going political break with petty-bourgeois parliamentarians like Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who seek to divide workers in France from their class brothers and sisters internationally with nationalist and populist rhetoric.

Yesterday, Mélenchon told BFM-TV there are “two realities that are marching together, on two fronts if you will: salaried workers organized in their trade unions, and what we call the people,” which he said was the workers and everyone else in France. The movement against Macron, he added, is “a sort of arm-wrestling with the government, a gradual May 1968 general strike.”

In reality, what is being prepared is not a gradual but an explosive international movement, driven by deep-rooted opposition in the working class to the mortal crisis of capitalism. All of the problems they face—inflation, the danger that the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine could escalate into World War III, and the COVID-19 pandemic—are by nature international. In this movement, the most important allies of workers in France are their class brothers and sisters in other countries.

WSWS reporters at the march in Paris distributed a leaflet calling to mobilize workers in defense of the refinery strike and interviewed workers on the march.

They spoke to Cédric Liétchi, a member of the CGT-Energy union's municipal federation in Paris, who denounced Macron's attempt to crush the refinery strike: "Their attempt to force refinery workers back to work is an attack on the right to strike. The refinery workers are showing the way forward. ... All industries have to join together, block production and bring down this government to win a great social victory that can open up enormous perspectives for the working class."

Calling for "an increase in wages for everyone," Cédric said, "With the surging, historic inflation we have in France, we have a lot of electricity and gas workers whose salaries have collapsed compared to the cost of living. Starting wages paid to us are at €200 below the minimum wage, so we have to arrange things so that new hires are actually paid just above it. What we are demanding is that the fruits of our labor, which is enormous, energy corporations have made record profits across the industry this year, be redistributed to the only producers of wealth: the workers."

Denouncing speculators who are bidding energy prices up to €1,000 per megawatt-hour whereas production costs are only €50, Cédric said: "There are more than 13 million French people who live with precarious access to energy, who cannot afford to heat their homes. So we have a message that we want to send: Get energy out of the capitalist market."

Asked about the NATO war with Russia in Ukraine, Cédric warned that it could lead to devastating energy shutoffs in France and across Europe. "It is indeed a war between NATO and Russia, with NATO imperialism using Ukraine as an advanced base. ... The scenarios for electricity cuts, we have got them already. At our company, we already have files with scenarios of what we should say to consumers when they call when their electricity is cut off. What we are planning for is two-hour blackouts on the medium-voltage network."

WSWS reporters also spoke to Laetitia and Christophe, who work in health care and spoke of their outrage at the official handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. "Public sector workers are resigning outright. Public hospitals are being destroyed," Laetitia said.

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, she said, "We wore garbage bags to work with patients. ... We had no means of protection, not even masks." Now, she added, "I work in a lab doing tests, we have no adequate equipment to do that work. We don't have the personnel we need to deal with the crisis. ... There are no safety precautions, we

work with PCR tests, it gets onto our keyboards, everywhere, we have to muddle through.”

“COVID is all about money,” Laetitia said.

Asked about former Health Minister Agnès Buzyn’s admission that she had followed the pandemic starting in December 2019 but had not spoken out about it after informing Macron, Christophe said, “Those people have blood on their hands.”

Christophe, who works in the nursery for hospital workers’ children, added: “I had a coworker who had COVID and a 42°C fever. She was told, sorry, you have to come in to work. And she had to get up, with her 42°C fever to go take care of children who were uninfected!”

WSWS reporters also spoke to Philippe, a retired CGT official at Roissy-Charles de Gaulle Airport who is a member of the middle class *Lutte ouvrière* (LO, Workers Struggle) party. Asked about LO’s role in the 2013 shutdown of the PSA (now Stellantis) auto plant at Aulnay, and why workers at the plant ignored calls for a strike by CGT and LO official Jean-Pierre Mercier, Philippe said workers have long, bitter experiences of being betrayed by union officials.

Philippe explained: “At the national level, the union officials are so totally integrated into the state apparatus that they have limits. They do not want to upset the capitalist order, they do not want revolution, they do not want workers to expropriate the bosses. ... All of the national union leaders, they have become cogs of the state machine.”

It is impossible to mobilize the working class within the organizational grip of the national union bureaucracies and of their middle class political allies such as Mélenchon and LO. The way forward is a revolt of the workers against these bureaucracies and the construction of the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), bringing the full power of the working class internationally to bear against inflation, war, repression and austerity.

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