

French workers' movement debates general strike to beat Macron

written by John Mullen
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Protesters in Paris 11 Feb, demanding no raise to retirement age Photo: John Mullen

Demonstrations in a record number of towns – over 260 – took place last Saturday, 11 February. This was the fourth day of action to defend pensions in France, as the Pensions Bill begins its month of debate in the National Assembly. The dynamism of the movement is inspiring, but even many strikers think that the government will never back down. So, can Macron be beaten, and if so, how?

Movements of mass revolt are complex, and it's always extremely difficult to know which movements will accelerate and send the neoliberal government running for cover and which ones will tire and fade, helped along by trade union leaders' determined "moderation" and a few minor concessions.

The present movement to stop Macron's plan to move the standard retirement age from 62 to 64 certainly has much to inspire anticapitalists across the globe. "The biggest movement for over thirty years," according to one union leader – that is, since a month-long strike wave in 1995, in which the Paris metro and the French railway network were shut down for weeks on end until Prime Minister Juppé abandoned his attack on retirement rights.

At least two million people were on the streets last Saturday following the mass one-day strike of Tuesday, 7 February. Over 260 towns held protests, down to places like Avesnes sur Hepe, which has only 4,000 inhabitants. On a previous day of action, on 31 January, the town of Guéret in the center of France had a particularly impressive turnout: 4,300 people demonstrated out of a population of only 13,700! And Guéret is not an isolated case.

Some workplaces, in particular oil refineries, electricity services, and docks, have been going further than the official national union strategy of a weekly day of action. The docks of Le Havre (the second largest port in France) and Lorient were blockaded by strikers during this last week, while electricity workers in a number of regions refused to cut off electricity to families who couldn't pay and put hospitals and other such services on cheap rate electricity. "It's not legal, but it's moral," said

a local leader.

On Saturday, Air Traffic Controllers at Paris Orly airport called a wildcat strike to join the movement, and half the day's flights were canceled. Some factories in private industry, such as Mecachrome in Toulouse, are striking for two hours every day. In the Louvre museum, workers posed with a banner in front of Delacroix's well-known work "Liberty leading the people," while at the annual classical music prizegiving "Victoires de la musique" one of the musicians gave a much-applauded speech about the importance of defeating Macron's attack.

Young people are getting more involved in the rebellion, too. This week there were occupations or blockades in universities in Paris, Toulouse, Montpellier, Lille, Clermont, Grenoble, and Mulhouse.

General strike?

Under great pressure from the rank and file, some union leaders are more radical than usual, but they are sticking with the extremely risky strategy of building up the strike movement very slowly, one day a week at present. Union leaders are promising wider and longer strike action in a month's time.

But there is a real danger that workers will be demoralized by regularly losing a day's wages without seeing a dynamic, urgent, and fast-moving movement which can obviously win. The national joint union statement Saturday morning declared they intended "to shut France down on the 7th of March" if the government did not retreat.

The careful wording was intended to keep the less combative CFDT on board. CFDT leaders immediately went on to say that, in their view, this was not a call for a general strike. The more radical CGT leaders said that each workplace will decide how long strike action would go on. Many in the movement think that the "General

Strike now!" strategy would have more chance of victory.

The union leaders' official excuse is that the movement is popular, and they do not want to risk its popularity by striking during school holidays, which have just begun and are staggered by region over the next month. This argument is always shaky – public opinion does not really do much to defend workers' conditions; otherwise, nurses, who are very popular indeed, would be the best-paid and best-treated of employees!

In the present case, it is particularly ridiculous. Over 85 percent of those who have not yet retired support the movement, and this number has risen over the last three weeks! Sixty-six percent of the entire population believes that "if the country is blockaded by the strikes the government is mainly responsible". And only 21 percent of the population think that the present movement "will quickly run out of steam".

In the French workers' movement, there is something called the "renewable strike" which means that strikers meet every day or two and decide whether to continue striking for another 24 or 48 hours. The advantage of this method is that rank-and-file workers are involved in the discussions, and national trade union leaders no longer control the revolt so much. The disadvantage is that it can lead to workplaces deciding on their own, with no one putting forward a determined national strategy. How workers are won to renewable strikes and the links made between the different sectors will be key to victory.

Political parties

Political parties of left and right are being tested by the revolt. Left-wing groupings such as the France Insoumise and the New Anticapitalist Party have been organizing mass meetings around the country, and on television and in parliament, France Insoumise MPs (there are 74 of them) have been loudly defending the movement.

Although the main long-term strategy of the FI is to win radical change through parliament, they have made it clear that the strike movement is key. Interviewed by BFMTV on Saturday, FI leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon declared, “Mr Macron treats people like cattle... but people entering into the struggle are entering into dignity.” In parliament, Rachel Keke, a Black FI MP who worked for many years as a cleaner before becoming MP, tore strips off Macron; “You have no right to bring to their knees those people who keep France on its feet!” she declared.

On Sunday, 12 February, France Insoumise is organizing a seven-hour-long online event in order to raise money for union strike funds. Nevertheless, the FI leadership maintains, sadly, the old idea that it is for union leaders, not political leaders, to put forward a strategy for winning.

Prime Minister Elizabeth Borne has made tiny concessions in order to get the votes in parliament of the traditional right-wing Republican party. The 5% of retirees who started work young will be able to stop at 63, not 64, she promises. The Republicans are worried though – huge demos, even in their traditional strongholds, prey on their minds.

As is generally the case, a rise in class struggle is very bad news for the fascists. Some 84% of those who voted for the far-right Rassemblement national in recent elections support the movement, but the RN and its 87 MPs dare not show themselves openly on the demonstrations for fear of being thrown off, although they have been flyposting “No to Macron’s Pensions Reform – join the RN!” posters along the demonstration routes.

Marine le Pen, their leader, does not call for people to go on the streets, and in parliament, the RN is reduced to appealing to their hardcore extremists, claiming that stopping immigration would save money to pay for pensions and that the solution is for white French people to have larger families, encouraged by the state. They are being forced to show how far they stand from working-class interests.

Further days of mobilization have been called for the 16th of February and for the 7 March, and some sectors, such as the Paris metro, have already announced renewable strikes from the 7 March on. Macron can be beaten if the movement does not listen too much to the professional negotiators at the top of the trade union confederations.

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