

# French Senate Votes to Raise Retirement Age as Unions Prepare for a Day of Strikes

Friday 15 October 2010, by [LATHAM Chris](#) (Date first published: 12 October 2010).

France's Senate passed, on October 8, the first part of the Pension Bill aimed at dramatically reducing workers retirement and pension rights. The vote came days before the fourth major mobilisation by unions, in just over a month, aimed at defeating the Bill and securing the French pension system. The Senate's vote signals a decisive test both for the movement and France's right wing government.

The government won the first Senate vote on the Pension Bill 186 to 153, increasing the minimum retirement age from 60 to 62. The Senate has yet to vote on the proposal to increase the age at which workers can access the full pension from 65 to 67, however amendments that will allow parents of children with disabilities, and parents of more than three children, to continue to retire at 65 have been passed. The bill had not been expected to fully pass by the until at least October 15, however as there have been some 1000 amendments made to the bill, it is expected to be held up in the Senate until later in October.

The passage of part of the Pension Bill through the Senate poses a significant test for the movement. It is possible that the vote spur the mobilisations due to anger over the government's continued refusal to heed public anger at attacks on pensions. However it demoralise the movement resulting in the movement dwindling. The vote could also see workers look to the June 2012 elections and the Socialist Party's promise to overturn the Bill if it wins Government. However initial indications are that the movement will escalate in the immediate wake of the vote in the Senate. The Confédération générale du travail (General Confederation of Workers - CGT) reported on October 11, that a poll conducted over October 8 to 10 indicated that 66% of French people supported an intensification of the movement. Eighty-four percent of "left" voters supported an intensification compared to 33% of right supporters. [\[1\]](#)

The Inter-Union Coalition of seven of France's Union Confederations has called national strikes and mobilisations for October 12 and 16. The Inter-Union Coalition will meet again on October 14 to prepare further steps in the movement. In the statement announcing the October 16 mobilisation, the Inter-Union Coalition described the Government's action in pushing through the legislation as an attempt to diffuse the mobilisations. [\[2\]](#) The statement called for the mobilisations to be broadened and expanded and for united meetings of workers in their workplaces to allow them to define the rhythm and forms of action to follow.

At the centre of the fight-back have been the workers at the Fos-Lavera Port near Marseille who have been on strike since September 27. According to the CGT the strike is focused on both defending the existing pension system and opposition to the transfer of port activities to private operators under the 2008 port reform laws. Fos-Lavera is the third largest oil port in Europe and accounts for 7% of the continent's oil movements. As a consequence the refineries that are supplied by Fos-Lavera are operating at reduced capacity and are expected to shutdown in the next few days unless the strike ends. The CGT has called rolling strikes at all French ports starting October 12.

Other sectors are also looking to take rolling industrial action. Workers at the Donges refinery, France's second largest oil refinery, voted on October 11 for a renewable strike starting October 12. The strike will be reviewed every two days. Once the strike is called off the plant will take two further days to become operational again.

On October 6, unions in both the state rail company SFNC and the Paris underground announced open-ended strikes beginning October 12. These will be rolling 24-hour stoppages, with the next strike being renotified prior to the expiry of the existing strike.

While the movement is expanding not all the members of the Inter-Union Coalition are consistent in supporting the extension. Reuters, on October 8, reported that Jacques Voisin, President of the Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens (French Confederation of Christian Workers - CFTC) which is part of the Inter-Union coalition, has publicly distance the CFDT from calls for rolling strikes. This reflects that at least some of the union leaderships have been forced to make public statements of supporting more militant action based both on concerns of their members, but also the pressure of radical unions such as the Solidaires confederation, which as been advocating the preparation for an escalating general strike since the Government announced the current round of attacks on pensions.

Solidaires in a statement issued on October 11 [3], noted that the current movement which has sustained mobilisations of more than 3 million people for a month is currently larger in size than the movement that defeated the 1995 attack on pensions. What is lacking at the moment is the intensity of action of the 1995 movement, which saw ongoing strike action for three weeks in November and December of that year. Whether the current movement is able to generate a similar level mobilisation to defeat the right's attacks are yet to be seen but the signs are positive.

**Chris Latham**

*\* From Revitalising Labour, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 12, 2010:*

<http://revitalisinglabour.blogspot.com/2010/10/french-senate-votes-to-raise-retirement.html>

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## **French Protests Continue Against Attacks on Pensions**

Millions of people joined protests across France on October 2 as part of the ongoing campaign to defeat attacks on France's pension system. The day which had been called by a Inter-Union Coalition of seven of France's Union Confederations, was the third national protests against the pension bill, currently before the France's Senate, since September 7.

With the Senate vote approaching, and the French government determined shift reduce pension rights to increase the burden of economic reform being paid by working people, the size of the protests were an important test for the strength of the movement. As such the numbers mobilised have been hotly contested, just as with each of the previous days of mobilisation. France's Interior Ministry claimed that the protests were substantially down on previous mobilisations, roughly 883, 000 compared with 997, 000 on September 23. The unions' claimed the numbers were similar 2.9 million on October 2 compared with 3 million on September 23. While the government attempt to play down the size the protests, Capital is worried, this concern was reflected in the article published on October 4 at The Australian's website, which raised concerns that the October 2

mobilisations had seen significant numbers of students mobilised and the possibility of a repeat of the large scale student lead mobilisations that defeated the First Employment Contract law in 2006.

Adding to the impact of the October 2 mobilisation was the ongoing strike action by port workers. On September 27, workers at Fos-Lavera port near Marseille, which is the world's third largest oil port, began wildcat strike action blockading the port and reducing the supply of oil to the 8 refineries supplied by the port. The action at Fos-Lavera was aimed at opposing both the attack on pensions and changes at the port. By October 1 the strike had spread to the majority of France's commercial ports raising the spectre of escalating strike action similar to that which defeated attempts to reduce pension rights in 1995.

On October 4, the day before the debate in the Senate was due to begin, the Inter-Union Coalition issued a statement [4] that identified the October 12 strikes as crucial and called on their organisations to broaden and expand their united mobilisations. The Inter-Union also announced that it would be meeting on October 8 to plan the next course of action.

### **Chris Latham**

\* *From Revitalising Labour, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 5, 2010:*

<http://revitalisinglabour.blogspot.com/2010/10/french-protests-continue-against.html>

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### **Footnotes**

[1] <http://www.cgt.fr/spip.php?article37810>

[2] <http://www.cgt.fr/spip.php?article37807>

[3] <http://www.solidaires.org/article32973.html>

[4] <http://www.cgt.fr/spip.php?article37788>