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# France: Mass protests begin against Macron's attacks on workers' rights

Saturday 16 September 2017, by [LATHAM Lisbeth](#) (Date first published: 15 September 2017).

France's militant unions held the first major day of protest on September 12 against the ordinances introduced by the government to undermine the country's labour laws.

Their protests were seen as the start of the campaign to defend workers' rights. It served as a major test for the capacity of the movement to mobilise working people while France's unions are divided as to how to respond to the attacks.

The protests included more than 4000 strikes and protests in 200 cities and towns across France. The General Confederation of Workers (CGT) estimated that 500,000 people took part. The largest protests were in Paris and Marseille, where 60,000 marched.

Amid debate over the size and success of the protests, the CGT said in a statement the day was a "veritable success".

There were a number of factors that made it harder to mobilise workers on September 12 compared with the demonstrations against anti-worker laws last year. The text of the proposed law was published only two weeks before the protest and the divisions in the labour movement are worse than last year.

More conservative federations refused to take part, with only the CGT, United Union Federation (FSU) and the trade union Solidaires supporting the mobilisations.

The September 12 protests were also supported by France's main university and high school student unions.

However the Workers' Force (FO) confederation, which supported last year's protests, refused to call on its members to mobilise. Instead, it has sought to take part in consultations with the government along with the more right-wing Democratic Confederation of French Workers (CFDT) and the French Confederation of Christian Workers (CFTC). The CFDT and CFTC have previously been open to supporting some "liberalisation" of French labour laws.

All three groups have raised concerns about sections of the text. CFDT deputy secretary general Veronique Descacq justified the union's refusal to mobilise by arguing that changes in the proposed text could be best made through "outreach work with the employees and conveying the unions' negative opinions in the consultation bodies".

There are signs, however, that the movement will be able to broaden out beyond France's militant unions. Sections of the FO and CFDT did call on their members to join the protests.

For instance, secretary-general of the CFDT Metallurgy in Rhone Khaled Boughanmi told Liberation of his support for the protests: "I was elected to reject social decline."

An important component in the campaign to broaden the movement has been the Social Front, which brings together a range of unions and social movements. It was established in April and initiated the first mobilisations against Emmanuel Macron after his victory in the presidential election.

The Social Front has been central in building smaller mobilisations against Macron and in linking militant forces within the different union confederations.

The Social Front has sought to tap into the widespread antipathy to mainstream politics reflected in the record low participation in the presidential and parliamentary elections, and the ongoing slide in Macron's popularity.

Macron has seen his popularity fall in his first 100 days in office, something which previously occurred only with president Jacques Chirac. City AM reported on August 27 that Macron's approval rating had fallen to 40% while his disapproval rating had risen to 57%.

Despite this, Macron is persevering with his planned assault on workers' rights, which he demagogically claims will lower unemployment.

The key changes are:

- Cutting the number of workplace representatives in small- and medium-sized enterprises by amalgamating existing representative bodies;
- Cutting and capping the amount of compensation that workers who have been unfairly dismissed can receive;
- Increasing the range of conditions that can be negotiated at the enterprise level, rather than in national or industry-wide agreements. Such conditions can undercut the higher level conditions. Due to changes in the laws last year, a vote on these matters can be initiated with the support of unions representing just 30% of the workforce, even if unions representing more than 50% of workers oppose the agreement (previously these unions would have been able to veto a vote);
- Increase the use of fixed-term contracts in preference to permanent employment;
- Enable companies to initiate changes to workers' contracts (even if the company is profitable) and dismiss workers who reject a change (previously such changes required workers' agreement);
- When assessing whether redundancies should go ahead in multinational companies with sites located in France, only the performance of the parts of the company in France will be considered.

There is widespread anger against these attacks, with polls showing most people support the movement against the changes. But successive governments have been able to push through a series of attacks on working people and their unions by staring down protests and relying on the movement collapsing once laws are passed.

This time, Macron is also relying on using France's undemocratic constitution to use his executive power to put temporary ordinances in place, seeking to pass the legislation through parliament later. The text of the labour ordinances was published on August 31.

The Council of State is expected to approve the labour ordinances on September 22 and the ordinances will take effect from that time. It is unclear when bills converting the ordinances to laws will be introduced to parliament.

To defeat this push, the movement will have to build an escalating campaign — creating the fear in the government's mind that they might lose control. The next step will be the strikes and protests called by the CGT for September 21 and protests called by Jean-Luc Melenchon's left-wing group France Unbowed (FI) at the Bastille on September 23.

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**P.S.**

\* Green Left. Friday, September 15, 2017 :

<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/france-mass-protests-begin-against-macron-attacks>