

France Won't Accept Emmanuel Macron's Attack on Pensions

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Emmanuel Macron plans to raise France's retirement age — but this Tuesday, well over a million people mobilized against him. One of the biggest social movements in years, it has a chance to deal a decisive blow to attacks on welfare.

According to police figures, Tuesday's nationwide protests marked the largest single-day union-backed demonstration in France in 30 years. Some 1.272 million turned out to the streets. That's more than the already-impressive January 19 turnout, it's more than any of the single-day peaks of the 2010 and 2003 movements over retirement reforms — it even topped the height of the legendary 1995 protests.

And there's more to come. The united union coalition has called for two further days of strikes and protest: Tuesday, February 7, and Saturday, February 11. "Until then," the coalition has also called on the public to "multiply actions, initiatives, meetings, and general assemblies across the country, in workplaces [and] at places of study, including through strikes."

The Next Phase

After two successful national mobilizations, the movement seems to be entering a new phase. Public opinion is clearly on its side — and yet, the government isn't budging on the proposed hike in the retirement eligibility age from 62 to 64. Clearly, it's going to take more for organized labor to win this battle.

In addition to maintaining the pressure through large nationwide protests, unions are hoping powerful and disruptive strikes can tip the balance in their favor. The goal is to push the government to reconsider its proposal — or, alternatively, to generate enough fissures in Emmanuel Macron's coalition that the reform becomes politically untenable.

Do unions have enough muscle to win? To put it differently, via a slightly adjusted version of a question I've asked over and over again during moments of street protest: Can the unions mobilize beyond their core base of members and sympathizers in a sustainable way?

Beyond the Base

If you're coming from the perspective of the US labor movement, one of the most striking things about the French movement is the lack of an "organizing culture." That may sound hard to believe: French unions can be so militant in their rhetoric and tactics. They know how to protest. They regularly put out calls to strike. How can you say they're not organizing?

There are pockets of exceptions, but by and large, French unions don't deploy the kind of internal organizing tactics that are common in some of the most effective, member-driven unions in the US: one-on-one conversations when recruiting new members at workplaces; careful gauging of member

support for various initiatives; building up support for strikes through smaller tests of collective power, etc. For lack of a better word, everything is a lot messier in France. Unions put out their calls to strike, they hope it resonates, and they cross their fingers.

Perhaps it's worth a separate newsletter to explain why French unions don't prioritize organizing like some of their counterparts in the US or UK. But in short, it has a lot to do with the fact that the system is more favorable to labor: Multi-tiered collective bargaining covers nearly the entire economy. French unions don't necessarily need to recruit new members to maintain negotiating rights, which are determined through elections open to members and non-members alike. Labor law violations for employers come with actual financial penalties and the right to strike is enshrined in the Constitution. (At the same time, these advantages can generate a sense of complacency, and if you consider the possibility that one day, these protections might disappear....)

Anyways, all this to say, when French unions put out strike calls, it's hard to predict how they'll be received. Typically, we know only that they're more likely to be followed in the handful of sectors where they have a presence — and more precisely, that means the public sector. According to the most recent government figures, union membership overall sits at 10.1 percent, and 18.4 percent in the public sector.

Clearly, the strike calls over pension reform have resonated beyond organized labor's traditional bastions of support in the public sector: namely, schools, health services, and transit networks (the national SNCF rail company and the Paris metro network). Workers in all these sectors have walked off the jobs, but so have others in the private sector. The CGT has shared a list of strikes on January 31 that illustrates this point: 5,000 strikers at Airbus; a walkout from 90 percent of the staff at a FNAC department store outside of Toulouse; a strike from 80 percent of the workers at a LU Mondelez factory in Normandy, etc.

Among the more militant wings of the French labor movement, there's often a desire to organize "general assemblies" at particular companies and workplaces: open assemblies where rank-and-file workers express their grievances and decide collective actions on their own. Unions can support the initiatives of this body to varying degrees, but the goal is for the general assembly to become the vehicle through which workers organize the movement for themselves. This is something to keep an eye over the next week. What's happening in the general assemblies that are organized? And are they popping up at any unexpected places?

In addition to those two national-level protest dates set by the united labor confederations, a group of internal CGT federations have called for further action on February 8: the energy federation (nuclear reactors, electric utilities), the chemical federation (refineries), and the dockworkers' federation. Two of the leading railworker unions (the CGT and SUD-Rail) have also called for additional strikes on February 8. More strike calls could follow suit.

All in all, unions have won the opening skirmish. They've surpassed expectations, largely thanks to the sheer level of opposition to Macron's reform proposal. But the next few days will be critical as they try to keep up the pressure. And just maybe we'll see strikes that go beyond the issue of pension reform...

Cole Stangler

P.S.

• Jacobin. 02.02.2023:

<https://jacobin.com/2023/02/france-emmanuel-macron-pension-reform-protest-strike-welfare>