

Assault on pensions: Emmanuel Macron Wants to End France's Welfare State

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France was paralyzed by strikes on Friday, as workers from train drivers to teachers revolted against Emmanuel Macron's attack on pensions. While the liberal president fancies himself as a French "Thatcher," his bid to tear up France's welfare state now faces its most powerful opposition yet.

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There's no doubting the importance of Friday's strikes in France. The actions on December 5 provided a powerful rebuke to Emmanuel Macron's assault on pensions — and showed that millions of people are prepared to resist the planned dismantling of France's welfare state. Reflected in local mobilizations in hundreds of towns and cities across France, this was not just a "day of action," but the first day of what even now looks like a protracted strike movement.

Already on Friday, the turnout was impressive. Economic activity in Paris and its environs came to a standstill, with nearly all metro stations shut. Nationwide, over 90 percent of train services were cancelled, while public-sector employees as diverse as posties, energy workers, and magistrates also joined the strike in significant numbers. Even more surprising was the mass involvement of schoolteachers, facing not only heavy pension cuts but also a buildup of "reforms" piling pressure on the sector.

Private-sector workers participated in lower but still significant numbers: by Thursday, the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) union had received strike calls from [at least two thousand workplaces](#) in the private sector across the country. As expected, oil refinery workers joined the strike in massive numbers, and there was also significant participation in France's domestic airlines. The Renault car plants announced that an average of 5 percent of its workforce had taken part in the strike — a modest figure, by historic standards, but still the highest of the last decade, at the company level.

The size of street demonstrations was another key test for the mobilization. And again, these numbers demonstrated a real dynamism. While official sources claim that 70,000 people took part in protests in Paris and 806,000 across the country, trade unions estimated 250,000 for the capital and 1.5 million for France as a whole; various figures from local media easily add up to one million nationwide.

Indeed, the movement was far from limited to Paris. Toulouse had the biggest street turnout relative to population (a hundred thousand, according to the organizers). Meanwhile, the old port city of [Le Havre](#) had the most visible participation of private-sector workers (dockers and those employed in engineering, fuel refineries, and call centers), as was already the case in the 2016 movement against the Loi Travail (labor law reform). The greatest success lies however in the impressive numbers taking to the streets in hundreds of small- and medium-size towns — an unmistakable sign of the depth of the mobilization across French society.

The demonstrations thus allowed an effective convergence between various different sectors. Public transport workers and teachers were joined by university and high school students, the *gilets jaunes*, and workers from other sectors. But these different groups are also united by the understanding that defeating Macron will take more than just a single day of action. This is, indeed, a realization among the wider population — indeed, all opinion polls show [clear majority support](#) for the strike movement.

During last year's *gilets jaunes* protests, many people had said that strikes and street demonstrations were no longer powerful means of collective action. A single day of action on Friday, with workers bringing the economy to a standstill, was enough to banish such talk. And faced with Macron's bid to rip up France's welfare state, the signs are already appearing that this movement is here to stay.

Tradition of Protest

The support for this strike didn't come from nowhere — and nor did Emmanuel Macron's desire for a Thatcher-style confrontation with the welfare state, still today an example of "French exceptionalism."

Indeed, France's reputation for protest — often disparaged as a "French disease" — is well-deserved. In particular, French workers' record in fighting neoliberalism is quite unique among advanced capitalist societies. From the mid-1980s onward, mass movements have regularly erupted in opposition to neoliberal reforms. Yet more remarkable is the fact that — contrary to the situation that prevailed in Europe after the British miners' strike of 1984-85 — not all of these movements ended in defeats.

In 1986, a resurgent student movement halted an attempt to introduce tuition fees in universities. Access to higher education still today remains essentially free, despite the recent trend to charge some masters' students and the introduction of fees for students from outside the European Union.

In 1995, a wave of strikes by public sector workers succeeded in stopping a "reform" of their pension funds by Alain Juppé's center-right government. Two years after, the Right was defeated in the snap elections called by President Jacques Chirac, and a "plural left" government instead took over.

More recently, in 2006, a mobilization of the youth, supported by massive trade-union demonstrations, forced the government to withdraw a plan introducing a precarious labor contract (le contrat première embauche, CPE) for those under twenty-six years old. Finally, the *gilets jaunes* ("yellow vests") movement that began in November 2018 — [and which is still continuing](#) — forced Emmanuel Macron to drop two planned tax rises (on gas and on pensions) and to make other announcements designed to appease the protesters.

Ending the French Exception

This doesn't mean that French neoliberalism was stopped in its tracks — indeed, other major mobilizations have failed to bring success, most significantly past battles against pension reforms in 2003 and 2010. But the protracted resistance to neoliberalism really has had a lasting impact — explaining why France's welfare state has proven much more resilient than those of nearly all other Western countries. To the despair of its domestic elite and of high-ranking bureaucrats in the European Union and OECD, France tops the table for government spending as a share of GDP; at nearly 55 percent, its spending level [ranks ahead](#) of all Scandinavian countries and stands about 10 percent higher than Germany and the OECD average.

Macron's presidency, overwhelmingly supported by the French capitalist class and its European counterparts, was from the outset meant to bring that "French exception" to an end. The first year and a half following his election looked as if he would succeed. A wave of tough neoliberal reforms swept across nearly all areas of economic and social activities: the school system has been subjected to a "choice" agenda, while rail and public transport have been opened up to "competition" and sold off to the private sector.

Labor legislation was further adapted to the norms of a "flexible" labor market, social housing was obliged to sell part of its stock, the public sector as a whole put on a severe diet, and the health system was subjected to an unseen level of shortage and stress. There were similarly harsh attacks on the various scattered movements protesting against this hardening of the neoliberal regime, which met with a level of repression unprecedented since 1968. The *gilets jaunes* were subjected to particularly [extreme police and judicial brutality](#) — hundreds were seriously injured, more than three thousand were convicted, and over ten thousand were arrested during the actions.

Crucial Test

By this fall, Macron could thus boast that he had overcome such resistance, vaunting his success in steamrolling through his agenda without obstacles. Yet the pension reform was bound to be the crucial test of his authority.

This "structural reform" has been in the pipeline for a year — and it's designed as a decisive move to dismantle the French "social model." In this vein, it seeks to replace this model with a neoliberal regime based on a minimal level of state benefits, supplemented by private pension funds and the extra income that the reserve army of the elderly is expected to bring from continued wage-earning activities.

Macron and his government present the new system as "fairer" since it is allegedly "universal" in character — that is, a single system for all wage earners and even for many of the self-employed. Those refusing it can therefore only be motivated by the will to hold their "corporatist privileges," like the railway and public transport workers who can retire earlier than the rest as compensation for their working conditions and schedules.

But it didn't take long for the public to understand that this reform meant not a "leveling up" of pensions rights but a "leveling down" — indeed, one that will hike the average retirement age even higher. Despite the intense efforts of government spin doctors and a flattering media, by late November polls [reported](#) that about two-thirds of the public rejected the proposed reform and supported the strikes opposing it.

Macron's Decisive Battle

From that moment, it was clear that the government was quite deliberately heading toward a major social confrontation. Indeed, Macron is looking for a decisive moment equivalent to what the miners' strike represented for Thatcherism in the United Kingdom.

But the balance of forces he faces has turned out to be much more hazardous. Rather than targeting an individual sector, this reform offers us the very thing that was missing from previous recent protest movements: namely, a convergence of various mobilizations around a single objective which crystallizes the wider opposition against the entire neoliberal regime. And it is also clear that only the trade-union movement can provide the backbone for such a general movement.

This is no simple task. The successive failures of the mobilizations of the last years have weakened the trade unions, particularly the most combative (the CGT and Solidaires [SUD] federations). Last year, the reluctance of the CGT to join the *gilets jaunes* movement created further difficulties in terms of rallying broader layers around the most combative sectors of the working class.

But some, at least, have drawn strategic lessons from previous movements. In particular, increasing numbers have understood that union leaderships' tendency to opt for discontinuous forms of strike action fragmented alongside sectorial lines have turned out to be ineffective and divisive, undermining the necessary unity around shared goals.

The movement that started on December 5 benefited from this tough experience. It was clear from the outset that what was needed was the perspective of an all-out strike — an escalating strike action in which the rank and file could itself play a leadership role, through daily assemblies at a grassroots and local level. This is key not only for holding union leaders to account, but also for building from below the necessary convergence with other groups such as the *gilets jaunes*, students, and health care workers who have [already been mounting impressive strikes](#).

The Decisive Week

In the most-affected sectors (railways, public transport, refineries) the strike has been extended until Monday. The decisive test for the movement will most certainly come over the next week. The strike action may not turn into a proper “general strike” embracing all workers. But it's clear that a “strike by proxy” — in which the majority “delegate” action to strategically powerful public-sector workers, while limiting themselves to merely passive support — [isn't going to be enough](#).

In this spirit, France's trade unions have announced two further days of demonstrations for next Tuesday and Thursday, moreover, calling for the “continuation and the strengthening” of the strike across different sectors. In response to this movement, the government is expected to announce new measures on Wednesday — though any concessions are expected to be merely cosmetic. It is clear that continuing to build momentum is the first condition for a movement able to shake Macron's presidency to the ground.

In this struggle, the trade unions have a rare opportunity to reestablish themselves as the backbone of the opposition to the neoliberal steamroller. After December 5, the conditions are ready not only for a moment of exhilarating symbolic protest, but to fight for a real victory. This is itself a considerable achievement — and a precious lesson for future struggle.

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P.S.

- Jacobin, 12.08.2019:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/12/france-strike-welfare-state-pensions-emmanuel-macron>

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