

Assault on pensions: French mass strikes raise the stakes

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On December 5, approximately one million French workers struck against an attack on pensions [1]. As Leon Cremieux wrote in an article in International Viewpoint [2], “All-out strikes have continued in the SNCF [national rail] and the RATP [Paris public transportation] since December 5... [Transport workers have been joined by] teachers (70% on strike on December 5), gas-electricians and firefighters, students and high school students and a significant number of walk-outs in the private sector... On 10 December, another day of strikes and demonstrations took place at the call of CGT [General Confederation of Workers], FO [Workers Force], Solidaires [the Solidarity radical union federation], FSU [United Federation of Education Workers] and high school and student unions.” Here, French revolutionary socialist Antoine Larrache analyzes the balance of forces and argues for the need to escalate the strikes to win.

Since French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe’s announcement on December 11 that he will push ahead with pension reforms [3], the strike movement has entered a new phase. We must now analyze the elements at hand so that we may reorient ourselves and win. The Prime Minister’s announcements confirm everything that the movement has been denouncing in President Emmanuel Macron’s plans: a higher retirement age for those born after 1975, measures that discriminate against women, pensions calculated over a person’s whole working lifetime. An overwhelming majority of workers reject these measures and the strike set for December 17 promises to be even more successful than the December 5 strike, while workers on prolonged strikes are winning recognition, encouragement, and support for their movement.

Is the CFDT joining the movement a good thing?

The Prime Minister’s announcements pushed the French Democratic Confederation of Labor (CFDT) into action, with the moderate union federation saying the pension reforms “crossed a red line.” This is new is a double-edged sword. Of course, we must look favorably on the possible entry into the mobilization of such an important trade union structure, which will only strengthen the December 17 strike and help to tip hesitant workers over the edge into joining the strike. The government’s declarations have also hardened union leaders’ mobilizing rhetoric, “reaffirming their call to strengthen strike mobilization and to back ongoing strikes whenever employees decide to do so.”

But we know that the CFDT leadership – and it is not alone in this – is at the same time preparing to compromise with the government and abandon the movement, particularly if it backs off raising the retirement age from 62 to 64 years.

But we know the best way to convince the leaders to stick with the struggle is to set it in motion, we must multiply communications and connections from below, raise slogans in the demonstrations, the

general assemblies, and cross-industry meetings in order to convince the leaders on the question of complete withdrawal of the government's reform package.

The danger of divide and conquer

Breaking ranks is the most important danger. Indeed, the government is trying to defuse the mobilizations by proposing meetings with unions in certain sectors (transport, education, etc.) to discuss various issues such as when the reform goes into effect, promises for wage increases (in which no one believes), etc. The government wants to salvage the heart of its reform, that is, a new point retirement system which calculates pensions over a lifetime. This system would allow them to weaken workplace and sectoral solidarity, to individualize pensions, to drastically reduce payments, and to introduce private pensions based on individual contributions.

It is absolutely necessary to convince all workers who are mobilized of the need for a total withdrawal of the reforms and for them to weigh in on this in their trade union organizations so that it becomes a real red line.

Fill up the calendar with action

The unions, faced with the difficulties of mobilizing on December 10, in fact, retreated by not really calling for action until December 17, at the same time, they encouraged on-going strikes. What explains this contradiction? The union leaderships represent the great mass of workers, including the private sector, where the strike movement remains very small, this was true even on December 5. Therefore, their orientation is aimed at sectors that are poorly mobilized.

By not calling a strike on December 12, the leadership, on the one hand, gave workplace union teams time to prepare for the strike in under-prepared areas, on the other hand, where little work has been done by union teams, the absence of a clear, short-term strike date makes it, paradoxically, difficult for these teams to prepare. What interests us most here is how this delay frees up space for initiative from below. Indeed, the weakness of initiatives coming from the top between December 11 and 16 may, in fact, demonstrate the need for workers to create their own organizing base. Self-organization hardly ever flows from a pre-existing ideological conception, rather, it comes from confronting practical tasks. Already, cross-industry meetings have organized local demonstrations, actions in hospitals, in front of big companies, at commuter hubs, in mass meetings, etc. Actions like this show how to move forward.

Indeed, mobilizations in the SNCF national rail, the RATP Paris public transport, and the national education system might be capable of bringing more people into the fight, provided that we take the time, again and again, to convince those who hesitate, those who are not on strike to join in. We must do this on a daily basis in their own workplaces, and we must turn to new sectors to help them get involved.

In order for a real phase self-organization to emerge, strike committees elected by General Assemblies must organize the struggle and cross-industry links, local cross-industry meetings must choose their own leaders... all the while taking care not to neglect the necessary work of workplace activist teams building the strike step by step.

Does the government have skin in the game?

Edouard Philippe's announcements are a form of all-out attack. No government has dared to attack the whole working-class at this level for a long time. He bet the unions, with the exception of rail and public transportation, were unprepared for the current mobilization.

Thus, the level of confrontation necessary to win will be very high and we must prepare now to spend the school holidays fighting. But, if we manage to build something that looks like a general strike, the government and the employers may lose their shirts. Because lurking behind this reform is a gigantic transfer of funds they are counting on from workers' pockets to the bosses in a situation in which capitalism is in crisis. A mobilizing victory will therefore necessarily change the balance of forces between the classes and signal the launch of a counter-offensive.

If we can defeat the pension reforms, then constructing an alternative to Macron and the capitalist system will be a task in itself. When workers in struggle forge bonds, when they generalize their understanding, it is not primarily in discussions about wages or working conditions, rather, it is when they begin to raise the question of power: who is in charge, why was a Macron elected, how can we change our situation, how can we establish a more just world? And revolutionaries will have plenty to say in this political debate!

Antoine Larrache

P.S.

- NO BORDERS. DECEMBER 14, 2019:
<https://nobordersnews.org/2019/12/14/antoine-larrache-french-mass-strikes-raise-the-stakes/>
 - Translated by No Borders News.
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Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 51415), [France: The mass strike against Macron can win](#).

[2] Available on ESSF (article 51517), [France Assault on pensions: Macron faced with strikes and mass mobilizations](#).

[3] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50740933>