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INTERVIEW

France: & pensions “This Strike Is Uniting the Resistance Against Macron”

Wednesday 15 January 2020, by [GUENIFI Soraya](#), [PERSSON Axel](#), [PETITJEAN Clément](#) (Date first published: 11 January 2020).

A government bid to cut back pensions has pitched France into its longest strike in decades. But as one railworker organizer tells Jacobin, the dispute is about more than retirement insurance — it’s about stopping Emmanuel Macron’s whole agenda.

It’s over a month since French workers began their strike against planned pension reforms, in what is already the longest such action for several decades. Indeed, the agenda pushed by Emmanuel Macron’s government threatens a severe blow to the welfare state, promising a sharp drop in the value of workers’ pensions, an increase in the full-pension age from sixty-two to sixty-four, and a shift toward private pension funds rather as opposed to public social insurance. Even though striking workers refused a call for a “Christmas truce” — and continued their action through the festive period — they enjoy the consistent support of the general population. Polls show that 75 percent of French people want the plan abandoned in whole or in part and 63 percent back the strike itself. An online crowdfund to support the strike has already raised over €2.3 million.

Beginning on December 5, the strike immediately assumed mass proportions among workers on the RATP (Paris public transport company) and the SNCF (the French national railway company), bringing the almost complete paralysis of the capital’s transport system, as well as cancellations and limited services on high-speed trains across the country. There have also been mass demonstrations, with around one million protesters taking to the streets of towns and cities across France on each of four days of action (continuing on Saturday, January 11). Showing the broad opposition to Macron’s plans, the protesters have come from both the public and private sectors, including teachers, medical staff, lawyers, and even the dancers at the Paris Opera.

Social and political tensions in France have been running high after more than a year of gilets jaunes demonstrations. The ongoing strike relies on more traditional modes of actions and organization, with an industrial action backed up by large-scale demonstrations and local general assemblies. But it has put significant pressure on Macron and his government, whose political credibility has been in free-fall over the past months. While the authorities have promised concessions to some groups of workers, including police, overall Macron’s approach has focused on stigmatizing the strikers — and, as with the gilets jaunes, to deploy brute force to repress their demonstrations.

Axel Persson is a train driver and secretary of the CGT-Cheminots railworkers’ union in Trappes, to the southwest of Paris. He spoke to Soraya Guénifi and Clément Petitjean about the organization of the strike, building a common front against Macron’s agenda, and how to stop the far right capitalizing on the mood of social despair.

Soraya Guénifi (SG) and Clément Petitjean CP:

Can you tell us how the strike has been organized since December 5 and how you would analyze its surprisingly mass, popular dimension?

Axel Persson (AP):

The strike launched on December 5 originated from the rank and file among urban transit workers in Paris. On September 13, a massive strike had paralyzed the RATP-run Paris subway, bus, and tramway network. RATP workers then called for an unlimited strike starting on December 5, with the idea of giving enough time for workers from other branches to organize in the meantime and join them in the struggle.

This immediately resonated among railway workers from the SNCF, the national railway company. Despite already having undergone a thirty-six-day-long strike in 2018, they decided to heed the call. Across the rest of the working class, both in the public and private sectors, the strike also met with much sympathy. Railway workers and Parisian urban transit workers went on an unlimited strike starting on December 5, with certain oil refineries and dockworkers joining in as well. Teachers have been on strike in mass numbers, too, but most of them have been limited to twenty-four-hour strikes on certain days.

Within the branches that are on unlimited strike, general assemblies are organized every day, where striking workers decide whether to continue the strike or not and how to organize the actions of that day or the upcoming days.

The strike's popularity stems from the fact that the vast majority of workers have understood that the pension bill aims at destroying the terms and conditions of all workers, both in the private and public sectors. Those on strike are perceived as fighting for all workers.

Although it was not a strike per se, the gilets jaunes movement has also contributed to the further radicalization and determination of the workers on strike. The resistance against Macron has steadily intensified since 2018: indeed, the strike that began on December 5 embodies the overall resistance against Macron's whole set of neoliberal policies, well beyond the sole issue of pension reforms.

SG CP

The refusal of a "Christmas truce" by the great majority of local assemblies showed the strong determination among rank-and-file members. But this set them against union leaderships whose strategic agenda seems to focus on more negotiations with the government over the bill. How much of the ongoing battle will be shaped or jeopardized by this dichotomy?

AP

The strike and its strategy have been set by the rank and file. The trade unions that are involved and do support the strike have merely followed the agenda that these workers have put forth. And even when you look at the national unions whose leaderships have refused to support the strike (CFDT and UNSA), they also have railway and RATP locals that have decided to stand up to the national leadership's injunction and to keep striking anyway.

With this in mind, the different "negotiations" with the yellow unions, pushed by the government, have had little influence on the decisions taken by the workers on strike.

We saw this even when the government made sectorial concessions to certain categories of workers (including railway and RATP workers). Helped by the two non-supportive unions, it called for the

strikers to fall back in line as to put an end to the strike before Christmas. But the strike kept on regardless.

SG CP

Last year, SNCF workers led a massive yet unsuccessful strike over the plan to privatize the company – and the defeat was portrayed as the demise of French trade unionism. So, much like the emergence of the spontaneous, dynamic, and mostly leaderless gilets jaunes movement, the success of the present strike has surprised many. Did you expect such a massive protest – and were you prepared for it?

AP

When the SNCF strike ended in 2018, we all said in our general assemblies that we would continue to oppose the consequences of the privatization bill, which was eventually voted through in June 2018. This materialized in a proliferation of strikes, including wildcat actions, merely a few months after the end of the strike.

Several of these actions were successful in halting the attacks that the company has vowed to implement (mainly in terms and conditions and local collective bargaining agreements). In December 2018, the CGT railway union made it explicit that its aim was to organize a new massive strike by the end of 2019.

From this point of view, then, the strike was not a surprise for us. What has been a positive surprise, though, is the determination of RATP workers who had not gone on such a massive strike since 2007!

SG CP

Some have been tempted to compare this movement with the 1995 strike against the pension plan pushed by the government of the time. Then, trade union action managed to get the reform withdrawn. How far can we compare these strikes?

AP

All strikes have their own dynamic and rhythm. However, the strikes can be compared in the sense that they are supported by a majority of the population and that the central issue is a new pension bill.

The difference is that this time, all workers, both from the private and public sectors, are under attack, whereas in 1995 only the public sector was targeted by the government's bill.

The strike now is already much longer than in 1995. But while it is followed in mass numbers in the transport industry, it is less strong in the post office and the rest of the public sector.

However, the major difference between the two strikes is that organized labor is weaker in several branches, as a result of years of layoffs and redundancies. This has affected the ability of the movement to widen the strike in these sectors.

SG CP

Since the 2016 movement against the El Khomri law – whose goal was to severely weaken France's labor code – police brutality and violence against demonstrators has become a systematic feature of protest. How would you characterize the police's attitude during the current strike? How does it connect with broader anti-union repression?

AP

The police have been systematically deployed against picket lines and during demonstrations to

prevent any attempts to resort to rioting or gilets jaunes-type actions.

This connects with the wider repression against the trade union movement within companies. Since the beginning of the December strikes, several RATP union reps, for instance, have faced severe sanctions.

It has become apparent to many workers — particularly since the gilets jaunes movement — that state power explicitly rests on police violence. Hence the attitude of the government, which has made a series of concessions to the police — including in terms of pension benefits — to maintain their loyalty to the state apparatus.

SG CP

Another major feature of the political situation in France is the consolidation of the far-right presence. While Marine Le Pen voiced support for strikers, the CGT union's general secretary Philippe Martinez explicitly said that the far right was not welcome, and that agreement with Le Pen was incompatible with being a member of the CGT. What place does antifascism have among the strikers? What about the organized left's response?

AP

The far right is, indeed, paying lip service to the strikers, given the popularity of the strike. But they also need to tend to their historical electorate — and pretty much say whatever anyone wants to hear.

For example, when the workers on strike refused the so-called Christmas truce, several far-right spokespersons called the strikers radicalized Muslims who showed no respect for Christian traditions.

They have also repeatedly supported laws infringing on our ability to strike. Indeed, in 1995 the far right explicitly opposed the strikes as well as the trade unions. Several of their spokespersons have supported the idea of destroying the pension schemes of the strongholds of organized labor in the railways, docks, etc.

The CGT has very clearly called for the far right to be expelled from the demonstrations and general assemblies of strikers, if need be. So far, the far right has not had a policy of intervening directly in the strike and has not challenged the CGT within the movement. Labor is not their usual or natural battleground — quite the contrary.

The far left intervenes among the strikers where it is present and pushes for self-organization and elected strike committees encompassing both union and nonunion members. It emphasizes the need for the workers on strike to effectively politically and practically lead the strike in the rank and file. It has a certain influence within the Paris depots and train yards and has a much wider political audience now than a few years ago.

SG CP

While the experience of defeat and despair has arguably been a defining characteristic of the current situation, today there seems to be a vivid, combative sense of optimism — the sense that we can actually win this battle. Would you agree with this, and where would you say that optimism comes from?

AP

I agree. This optimism stems from the fact that this strike, for the first time since Macron has been put into power, encompasses several different branches united around a common goal: defeating his

pension bill.

Up until now, the strikes have been sectorial, and while the gilets jaunes movement opened up some wider perspectives, it did not translate into a general strike uniting all workers in a common front.

In short, the idea that only a general strike will defeat the government is very much present. Many hope or perceive the current strike as such a movement. It isn't quite that yet, but hopefully will be able to evolve into that soon.

P.S.

- Jacobin, 01.11.2020:

- <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/01/france-strike-emmanuel-macron-paris-pension-bill>

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