

France: Emmanuel Macron Is Launching Another War on France's Pensions

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France's liberal president, Emmanuel Macron, spent his first term attacking key planks of the French welfare model. Now, he's launching another war on pensions.

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It's the time for opening moves, shows of strength, and warning shots as France prepares for another winter of debate (and social conflict) over its pension system. One of the main planks of his reelection campaign earlier this year, president Emmanuel Macron wants France's parliament to pass in the coming months an increase of the retirement age to sixty-five, from the current level of sixty-two. If all goes according to the president's plans, beginning next summer the retirement age would begin to gradually rise over the next decade, coupled with the installment of a new pension floor of €1,100 euros per month for a full career, below the official minimum wage of roughly €1,300.

Macron's new move to reform the retirement system is shaping up to be a key early battle of his second term. It will be the second such effort from the current French president, whose first attempt to alter pension rights in late 2019 resulted in an extended wave of strikes before being ultimately suspended with the beginning of the COVID lockdowns.

The new bill — and details about possible profession-specific exemptions — has yet to be fully presented. But the blueprint of the plan has attracted the ire of opposition forces in parliament and the country's unions. On September 29, several hundred protests and work-stoppages took place across the country. This concerted action was initially meant to demand more aggressive action against a rising cost of living — but then morphed into an early front of opposition against the pension reform. In Paris, tens of thousands of protesters joined a march called by the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) and other trade unions.

The president's inner circle is billing an increase in the retirement age as a necessary step toward shoring up France's public finances. Key government officials such as finance and economy minister Bruno Le Maire suggest that such belt-tightening is needed to [free up resources](#) for other forms of spending, as the president and his closest allies have ruled out any possible tax increases over the next term. It's a red line that has its corollary in another Macronist adage, according to which the French need to "work more, and work longer," as the president [said this July](#).

Lost Initiative

From Macron's perspective, a fight over retirement is likewise laden with symbolism, and would serve as a staging ground for the president's efforts to regain the initiative at the beginning of his hobbled second term, having lost in June the absolute majority he's enjoyed in parliament since 2017. During the presidential campaign in April, Macron seemed to back down from the sixty-five-year marker, saying that it was not a "dogma." The first retirement reform drive in 2019 and early 2020 aimed to peg access to a full minimum pension to the age of sixty-four.

Facing the inexorable erosion of political authority afflicting a lame-duck, second-term president, the temptation is to strike quickly. But given the state of public alarm over the rising cost of living, other members of Macron's coalition are wary about following the president through a brash reform drive that risks uniting public opinion against the president, and are cautioning against overreach.

Indeed, as many as [70 percent](#) of French people are opposed to government's plan to raise the retirement age, according to an Elabe poll conducted for BFM TV. With energy bills rapidly rising, and as grocery prices approach inflation levels of [10 percent](#), only [32 percent](#) of the population consider that it is the right time to address pension reform, according to a September 29 survey by pollster Ifop.

"They're going to try to push through a reform which the great majority of the French population oppose," says Aurélie Trouvé. She is president of the so-called "parliament" of activists and experts created by the [Nouvelle Union Populaire Écologique et Social](#) (NUPES) alliance and an MP from the Paris suburbs who caucuses with France Insoumise. "They know they're going to have to go very fast. The only thing that can make them fall back is if people take to the streets on a massive scale like in 1995 and 2020."

As it currently stands, the actual path toward a passage-by-vote of a retirement reform bill is difficult but not impossible for the Macronists. With 250 of 577 seats in the National Assembly, the presidential majority will have to win votes from among the opposition blocs if it goes through with the president's latest declarations that the retirement reform should be subject to normal procedure and passed by a simple-majority vote. At a dinner on September 28 with key ministers and leading figures of the Macronist bloc in parliament, Macron decided in favor of starting off on a more traditional legislative path, after he and his surrogates have spent weeks stoking rumors about enacting retirement reform through decree.

The Macronists' options for negotiation are limited, however. The largest reservoir of votes with 151 MPs, the opposition parties making up the left-wing NUPES alliance have largely rejected the president's blueprint for retirement reform.

"They're striking right at the heart of the welfare state — the retirement system and unemployment insurance," Trouvé told *Jacobin*, alluding to the government's parallel push to peg unemployment protections to the broader macroeconomic conditions. "He has a very clear agenda, which is to unwind step-by-step some of the most important forms of social protection in France."

If he intends to pass the law through normal procedure, the more feasible path for Macron and his prime minister, Élisabeth Borne, will be to try whipping up votes from the right-wing opposition. The far-right Rassemblement National is publicly amenable to work with the government — and is eager to show that it can be a responsible governing party. But following Macron on such an unpopular initiative would be a difficult move for Marine Le Pen's party if it intends to shore up its support among working-class voters.

The wild card, and main target of the Macronists' finger wagging over the responsibilities of the parliamentary opposition, is the center-right Republicans, whose sixty-two MPs could allow a bill through. But the remaining Republicans in parliament — who have many former party comrades now in the Macronist ranks — find themselves in the difficult situation of wanting to stake out an identity in opposition to the president, all while being fundamentally in agreement with the spirit of a reform that makes budget cuts on the backs of one of the principal institutions of France's welfare state.

Ready for a Fight

If negotiations with the right-wing oppositions prove fruitless, Macron's could resort to a riskier second route: governmental decree. Article 49 Section 3 of the French constitution authorizes the government to force the enactment of a legislative text, which can only be retroceded by a vote of no confidence from the National Assembly. The so-called "49.3" can be used once per legislature for normal legislative packages and an unlimited number of times for budget-related bills, opening another avenue as the Macronists weigh the possibility of amending the pension reform plan into upcoming finance laws.

Using the "49.3" would allow the Republicans to avoid throwing their support behind the president's unpopular initiative, allowing them to passively oppose it by neither voting for the text nor cosigning a vote of censure. Many figures of the NUPES alliance and the Rassemblement National have made clear that they would vote no confidence should the government go through with reform-by-decree. Unity from the opposition forces behind a vote of no confidence would provoke a dissolution of the National Assembly and snap elections.

"The method is shocking," says Trouvé. "It says to everyone: 'If I don't get what I want, I'll go for dissolution [of parliament].'" What does that mean? If the National Assembly doesn't bow down to every reform, we go back to elections . . . That being said, we're ready for a fight. But it's not a good way to look at the National Assembly in a representative democracy."

"If he does it, that's war," said retired factory worker and CGT rep Fernandez, on the possibility that Macron could enact pension reform by decree. "I think we're going to see a very strong front develop against the retirement reform. We can't not fight this battle."

Mira, who works at a Monoprix department store in the Paris area where she is delegate from the CGT union, said that a movement against retirement reform could unify a broad opposition front, especially given the backdrop of a cost-of-living crisis. At the national level, the CGT is calling for a rise in the minimum wage to [€2,000 per month](#).

"We're asking for salary increases for all workers across the board," Mira told *Jacobin*, citing the increasingly tense pace of work at her local store, where stagnant wages have pushed her coworkers to quit and as management is hesitant to hire new staff. "People have been leaving left and right, and they refuse to hire. We're exhausted, physically tired."

"We won't be able to stop this in parliament without a major mobilization on the streets," says Trouvé. France Insoumise, the leading party in the NUPES alliance in parliament, is looking ahead to a new day of marches scheduled for October 16, as the next step in building an opposition front.

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P.S.

- Jacobin. 10.07.2022:
<https://jacobin.com/2022/10/emmanuel-macron-welfare-france-war-on-pension-system>
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