

Small-Town France Is in Revolt Against Emmanuel Macron's Pension Reform

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Emmanuel Macron's plan to raise the pension age has stirred mass opposition. The labor minister pushing the bill is an ex-Socialist — and the huge protests in his hometown show how the neoliberalized center left has sold out working-class France.

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It's a chilly, rainy day in Annonay, just south of Lyon. In the large parking lot of the central bus station, more than ten thousand people have gathered despite the drizzle. On a banner hanging over the crowd, thick black letters read, "Dusopt, socialist one day, traitor every day." The reference is to Olivier Dusopt, the town's former mayor, who is now France's minister of labor. Protestors opposing his [pension reform](#) have been showing their dismay in record-high protests across France over the past two months.

"We feel beyond betrayed", said Sebastien Chaneguier, union representative of Annonay's city hall employees. "He's forgotten where he comes from".

Dusopt was once the beloved Socialist Party mayor of Annonay, his own hometown of sixteen thousand inhabitants. As mayor he was seen as a stalwart of progressive values in a deindustrialized area. Now, as a member of centrist president Emmanuel Macron's government, he has become the face of a historically unpopular reform, which aims to raise the retirement age from sixty-two to sixty-four. Many in Annonay see the reform proposal, and Dusopt's part in it, as a profound betrayal of them and his socialist roots.

Twice elected mayor of Annonay under the Socialist Party banner, in 2007 the then-twenty-nine-year-old Dusopt became the youngest member of the National Assembly. At the time, he had a reputation as an accessible and understanding leader.

"When he was a mayor, he was a real leftist mayor," said Chaneguier, a town hall employee for the last twenty-seven years.

Like many locals, Chaneguier recalls Dusopt's work to rehabilitate the central square, his long-term vision to revive a rural town in decline, and his affability and down-to-earth manner. It was on the strength of this history that Dusopt was resoundingly reelected to parliament with almost 60 percent of the vote last June.

Dusopt has continued to lean on his working-class family and rural background as a guarantee of

his left-wing intentions. This is more than just lip service to a distant past: his parents' garage went bankrupt in the 1990s and his mother ended up working in a medical supplies factory. In 2010, while still a Socialist MP, Dussopt challenged the right-wing minister of labor at the time, Éric Woerth, vehemently opposing his "unfair" attempt to raise the retirement age from sixty to sixty-three.

But when Dussopt finally joined Macron's centrist En Marche! party after the president's first election in 2017, his supporters began to see him changing. Last May, he was appointed minister of labor and became the face of the current pension reform bill, supported mostly by the Right. By pushing the retirement age up to sixty-four, Macron's government hopes to decrease the deficit in public finances by reducing the state's investment in the pension system.

Opponents say the reform will mostly affect those who were expecting to retire in the next few years, as well as the working poor, who often start their careers earlier and who have a shorter life expectancy.

Controversial Reform

In Annonay, Christelle Veillet, forty, a caregiver in a retirement home and mother of three, is demonstrating for the first time in her life. "We wipe asses, we take care of the elderly. It's a tough job," she says under her umbrella.

"Being a caregiver at sixty-four, with a cane, having to change and handle people, it's going to be a little bit complicated, isn't it?"

Dussopt has attempted to silence the criticism of his former left-wing supporters. "It's a leftist reform," claim the big letters next to his headshot on the cover of last Sunday's edition of the national newspaper *Le Parisien*.

From the start, the government insisted that the reform would boost the monthly pension to €1,200. But after fact-checks by economists and journalists, Dussopt admitted that the measure would apply to only between ten thousand and twenty thousand new retirees each year.

The government has continued to argue that pension reform is essential to reducing the public deficit, highlighting the fact that fewer people are paying into the system compared to the increasing number of retirees. But opponents argue that other ways to balance the system have not been considered, such as increasing companies' social contributions to the retirement system.

Pension reform has long been a hot potato in French politics. In 2019, President Macron's first attempt to change the system sparked massive protests and the longest transport strike in the country's history. The COVID-19 pandemic put his plans on hold, but after his reelection in April last year, pension reform returned to the top of his agenda.

But the record-high numbers of protesters all over France demonstrate people's attachment to their pension system. One of the most generous in Europe, it allows French seniors to be among the least threatened by poverty across the continent.

The pension reform is rejected by over 70 percent of French people, according to opinion polls. For the first time in years, unions from different sectors and political creeds are strongly united.

Former Socialists

On national public radio the day after the protest, Dussopt said that the pension bill “could have been carried by a social democratic government.”

His rhetoric illustrates a trajectory that is not unique in the recent French political landscape. After Macron’s first election in 2017, claiming to unite “both Left and Right,” many local mayors and MPs left the crumbling Socialist Party to join him. It is a trend explained in the work of sociologist Rémi Lefebvre. He says that Macron’s En Marche! party provides an opportunity for Socialist officials with national ambitions for professionalization, reconversion, and promotions. These switches in allegiance are also symptomatic of internal conflicts in the Socialist Party, and the polarization between different views of social democracy.

“His behavior is typically what makes people lose interest in politics,” said Christophe Goulouzele, from the left-wing party La France Insoumise, who lost out to Dussopt in the 2022 parliamentary election in Annonay.

During the [election of the new first secretary](#) of the Socialist Party a month ago, incumbent Olivier Faure and his opponent clashed over the alliance with La France Insoumise and other left-wing parties. After the Socialists’ resounding defeat at the last presidential election, Faure chose to join a coalition with La France Insoumise, Greens, and Communists in order to create a credible parliamentary group against Macron and the far-right Rassemblement National. This coalition, known as NUPES, has [led parliamentary opposition to the pension reform](#).

Effective Action

In Annonay, the industrial sector represents almost a third of jobs, down from 40 percent ten years ago. The largest private employer is one of the bastions of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union, the Italian-owned bus manufacturer Iveco.

“At forty-two years old, I already have health problems, because of the repetitive movements,” says Erika Loursac, a worker at the Iveco plant and member of the CGT, wrapped in her red puffer jacket. As a mother, she says she also participates in strikes to show her kids that life is not only about working.

“I’d rather lose €200 on my income this month [by striking] than two years of my life,” she says.

Other protestors came from the surrounding towns in buses specially chartered for the occasion.

The mobilization was sparked in a context of social upheaval about purchasing power and the rising cost of living. Macron’s policies and the dilapidation of public services feel even more intense in small and midsize towns like Annonay. Not a single train has arrived in this area in some thirty years.

In 2018, the city and its surroundings were already the scene of a number of [gilets jaunes](#) protests and roundabout occupations. Protestors drew attention to the sense of social degradation and disconnection of urban elites that the middle and low classes of rural France have felt for decades.

For the more radical parts of the Left, the pension reform is more proof that Macron is a president for the rich — disconnected from the reality of small-town France.

“We’re not just here for retirement, we’re also here for the health care system, which is on the brink of collapse,” says Yannick Boulet-Decourt, a seventy-year-old retired librarian, shouting over the chants of protesters.

“It’s an opportunity for us to state our claims, on access to care, the overloaded emergency system, education and teachers who are at the end of their tether,” she added.

She once campaigned for Dussopt’s last town hall election in 2014. “I have been extremely disappointed,” she said.

Earlier in the day, trade unionists had cut off the electricity in some areas in and around Annonay as a symbolic action. On national public radio the next morning, Dussopt said, “If the objective is to reach me, cut the electricity of my town while I am in Paris, I am not sure that it is very effective.” Trade unionists are doing it precisely because they think it is.

Juliette Gache, Léontine Gallois

P.S.

- Jacobin. 03.12.2023:

<https://jacobin.com/2023/03/france-pension-reform-protest-olivier-dussopt>

- Juliette Gache is a Paris-based independent journalist. Her writing has appeared in *Courrier International*.

Juliette Gache’s articles on Jacobin :

<https://jacobin.com/author/juliette-gache>

Léontine Gallois is a Paris-based independent journalist. Her writing has appeared in the *New York Times* and *L’Humanité*.

Léontine Gallois’s articles on Jacobin :

<https://jacobin.com/author/leontine-gallois>