

A million workers march against pension cuts in France

Antoine Lerougetel, Stephane Hughes
26 May 2003

Over a million workers demonstrated across France on Sunday, May 25 against the Chirac-Raffarin government's proposed cuts in pensions. In Paris alone more than 600,000 marched, including over 100,000 demonstrators who travelled to the capital from the provinces in 35 special trains and 1,000 buses.

The organizers had underestimated the numbers of people living outside the Paris area who wanted to participate, so they quickly put together rallies in many of the major towns throughout the country. Large numbers of demonstrators turned out in cities such as Marseilles, Bordeaux and Toulouse.

The mobilization was called by all the unions that have refused to accept the "reform" proposals put forward by President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin. The only major union to sign onto the package to date is the CFDT, traditionally close to the right wing of the Socialist Party.

Supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* in Paris distributed over 7,000 copies of the WSWs Editorial Board Statement entitled "A political strategy to fight the attack on workers' pensions in France".

Sunday's demonstrations were held under conditions of ongoing strikes by many thousands of education workers, who first walked out on May 13. They are striking not only on the pensions issue, but also in opposition to the government's attacks on the national education system. The determination of the education workers was reflected in the many homemade banners brought to the Paris march from the 2,500 schools that are on indefinite strike.

The largest contingents were comprised of primary and secondary school teachers and non-teaching staff. There were also delegations from the postal service, hospitals, railways, the prison system, local transport and many other public service sectors. Private industry was also represented, with delegations from the SNECMA aerospace company, Ericson Telephones, Aventis, Pechiney and the FNAC, to name but a few.

All age groups were represented, from school students to

old-age pensioners. Many marchers came in family groups. There were flags and banners of unions on display in large numbers, including the CGT, the largest union, which is traditionally aligned with the Communist Party; Force Ouvrière (FO), another Socialist Party-orientated union; SUD, a breakaway radical union, and many smaller unions. Large numbers of workers without union affiliation also took part, many holding placards they had made themselves.

The various groupings of what is called the "far left" in France had nothing to propose that went beyond the discredited policies of the previous Plural Left government, headed by then-Socialist Party leader Lionel Jospin. The Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire's four-page leaflet made no criticism of the Jospin administration and avoided any suggestion that the struggle to defend pensions and other social conditions required a fight to bring down the center-right government of Chirac and Raffarin.

In its latest newspaper editorial, Lutte Ouvrière declared that mass pressure alone would succeed in halting the government's attacks, writing, "[T]he movement must develop on the 25th and beyond. Let the strike movement develop until the Raffarin-Chirac government is obliged to withdraw its plan, just like Juppé had been obliged to withdraw his." Again, there was no criticism of Jospin's Plural Left government.

While these organizations were seeking to spread a spirit of complacency and obscure the political issues, the mood of the demonstrators was one of seriousness and anxiety about the outcome of the confrontation with the government. There was widespread scepticism that mass protest by itself would suffice.

"We came here for our children. If we stop now, we've had it," said Philippe, an EDF (Électricité de France) worker in his early forties who had travelled from Angers with his wife, Bernadette, and their two children. She added, "Yes we're here for our children. I'm a housewife, but I'm completely involved in this for the future of the children."

Philippe explained, "I've come here to fight against capitalism and high finance, in defence of decent pensions

for everybody. Although we in the EDF aren't in the immediate firing line on pensions, we know we won't be spared. I'm in the CGT, and the CGT is always in the struggle. I'm also a member of ATTAC.

"We know that the Socialists didn't repeal Balladur's reforms. The politics of the Plural Left was soft compromise politics. That's why Jospin lost the election."

A WSWS reporter asked him about the policies of the Communist Party and its leader, Robert Hue. He replied, "Hue didn't know which way to go. He torpedoed himself on his own. It was impossible for the Left to win the last election after Jospin signed the Barcelona document of the European Union on the lengthening of working lives."

Asked what would signify for him a victory in the struggle, Philippe said, "That the ordinary people of France no longer have to pay for the disastrous employment policies of the government, that the income and profits from production should be taxed, that a proportion of wealth should go to the ordinary people."

The WSWS pointed out the role of the CGT in supporting EDF management proposals to prepare the privatization of the state gas and electricity companies, which involved a 50 percent rise in workers' pension contributions.

Philippe responded, "Well, at the start we thought it was OK. The management tried to rush us into making a decision. Since then, we've been able to think about it some more and we realise the proposals were wrong and it was right for the workers to vote against them."

When the WSWS noted that the CGT had urged the workers to vote for the plan, which was clearly hostile to the interests of the workers, Philippe said, "I can't explain it."

Similarly, Philippe said he could not explain the failure of the CGT leadership of Bernard Thibault to call the entire Confederation out on strike, despite recent strike action by sections of rail and transit workers, as well as teachers.

The WSWS also spoke with a group of Parisian students on the demonstration. Cécile, a philosophy student at the Sorbonne, and Jean-Baptiste, who is studying administration at the IPAG Business School, said they were not members of a political party, but had friends in the Communist and Socialist parties and the anti-globalisation movement ATTAC.

Asked what had prompted them to join the march, Cécile replied, "Ultimately, to bring about the overthrow of the government."

Jean-Baptiste joined in, saying, "When Raffarin said, 'It's not the street that runs this country,' this really got me going. We're here to get the pension reform withdrawn. We can't accept pensions requiring people to live on 85 percent of the SMIC [the legal minimum wage]. I'm thinking about the hospital workers and the way pensions are going to be

calculated.

"You get the impression that it is possible to push the government back. But then again, when you think about what's coming after this [the planned reform of health care and sickness benefits], it makes me wonder if it is going to be that easy."

Cécile added, "What is needed is to renegotiate the entire question, and that will have to be on a European scale."

Jean-Baptiste then said, "We're reformists. We think its possible to solve this problem of pensions and social rights at the level of Europe."

The WSWS reporter asked whether they really believed the corporations would accept reductions in their profit margins, when the whole tendency in Europe was to reduce social and labour costs, to which Cécile replied, "I know that Jospin and the Plural Left were not able to resist the pressures of market economics. But we hope all the same that the a real left alternative can be reconstituted from the left wing of the Socialist Party."

Hervé, a CGT member working for the Normandy Regional Council road works department, told the WSWS he feared the wholesale destruction of the pension system built up since 1945. His college friend Albert said, "With this decentralisation they want to smash the public services."

Hervé added, "The struggle has to be broadened if this government is to be pushed back. The crunch will come in June. If the railwaymen and transport workers come out, the balloon will go up. We've got to make sure that the government doesn't split the private sector from the public sector. It's a shame the railwaymen didn't come out after May 13 on an indefinite strike."

"For me, winning this struggle means negotiating on a completely different basis: the taxation of company profits. It'll have to be negotiated on a European scale and even on a world scale through the World Trade Organization."

"There's no solution just on a national basis. If we forced the government to resign, the Socialists [Socialist Party] would be no different. The Socialists have been in power in many countries in Europe and they've done nothing to sort out the pensions question. Jospin was in power when France was chairing the European Union. He could have done something about it, but he didn't."

"What's needed is to organize an international movement. I'm on the lookout for a political movement."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact