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Speak Out Now

speakoutsocialists.org bayarea@speakoutsocialists.org (510) 343-9105

All Together: General Strike Shuts Down France

On Thursday, December 5, hundreds of thousands of workers in France went on strike against the proposal of French president Emmanuel Macron to raise the age of retirement and carry out cuts to workers' pensions. Strikers included workers in the bus and subway lines, railroad and airlines, hospitals, postal workers, government employees and cultural workers. They were joined by students, teachers, retired workers and others in demonstrations all over the country. Oil workers blocked eight refineries. The strike continued Friday and on Saturday a march was also organized by unemployed workers.

Those workers have reason to be angry and to protest. Over the last decade French governments, whether conservative or so-called socialist, have carried out attacks on the standard of living of the working class. There have been attacks on the pension system, job classifications and the benefits of railroad workers. There have been cuts to education that reduced the number of places for students in the universities. The conditions of work and care in the hospitals has steadily degraded. Also, as big companies shut down plants the government continues to support and subsidize businesses while workers face layoffs and plant closures.

When faced by those attacks, the large national unions organized limited strikes, one group of workers at a time. This strategy kept the struggles separate, each group striking alone. The goal for the union leaderships has been to get the government and the bosses to negotiate with them, rather than using the power of the workers to oppose the attacks. And this strategy has failed to stop the attacks and has demoralized the workers.

A little over a year ago, a movement began against the government's decision to increase the price of diesel fuel for cars. This became known as the Yellow Vest movement because the people demonstrating began wearing yellow vests as they

occupied roundabouts outside their towns. The yellow vests made them visible to drivers, especially as they blocked traffic. The movement is made up of the the poorer sections of the population – unemployed workers, people on pensions, workers in small workplaces, housewives, and small business owners. It was based mainly in small cities and towns, though it later held weekly demonstrations in Paris and other big cities. The demands went beyond the increase in fuel prices, focusing on the growing poverty, the rise in the cost of living and growing unemployment. Now the Yellow Vests have joined with workers in the larger workplaces to protest the Macron government's latest attack.

The attacks on retirement affect everyone and the anger is widespread. Feeling the growing anger, the union leaders called for a general strike and now have called to extend it at least until Tuesday. This time, instead of the strike being orchestrated totally by the top union leaders, the workers are involved. They are meeting in general assemblies and selecting their own strike committees to organize their strike and to decide whether to continue the strike.

So far the government has refused to back down. The union leaderships are hoping that these days of action will force the government to meet with them to make some compromises next week. But for the workers and the poor of France the outcome is not yet decided. They have seen and felt their power and if they continue their fight they can not only block this latest attack by the Macron government. They can begin to reverse the take aways of the last period and use their power to change their situation.

***Come to the Speak Out Holiday Party
Saturday, Dec. 14. A potluck with good food,
music, a discussion of the uprisings around
the world and more. Tickets \$5 from the
person who gets you this newsletter.***