

## **FIGHTING MACRON'S PENSION REFORM MEANS RELAUNCHING THE WIDER FIGHT FOR HIGHER WAGES EVERYWHERE**

Pensions are only deferred wages. The wage is the sum of money indispensable to the reproduction of the labour power of each person. This total sum is ceaselessly renegotiated, notably as a function of the balance of forces between the workers and the bosses backed up by their state. The contract is the formalisation of this balance of forces. Among the elements of the contract, there is one which is essential to preserve the continuity of the relation of exploitation, the guarantee of an income in old age. This is why this theme has been, for a long time, one of the great factors in class struggle. Thus, the pension is nothing other than the wage whose payment is deferred until the wage earner legally leaves the labour market.

This is why the question of pensions must be understood as a question of wages and treated as such.

### **The reform for who, why?**

All of the pension funds (according to the COR report) have only seen a small increase in outgoings. On the other hand, their incomes are falling. This is explained by later entry into the labour market, stagnant wages, exemption of overtime from pension contributions, and careers fragmented by the growth of periods of unemployment, in particular those which are not compensated. It's worth remembering that with the last reform of unemployment insurance, which went through as smoothly as an Amazon parcel, we took a real knock: worsening of the conditions of access, reduction of the duration and the total value of compensation.

For the people who dreamt up the reform, if you *don't* increase the contribution of businesses, as promised by the government (contributions which rest, like all social production, on the fruits of our exploitation), there remains only the increase in the contributions and the lengthening of the duration of contributions to balance out the funds. It's all based on the convergence of various particular regimes towards a single regime by capitalisation.

**According to the government's plans, it will be necessary to work for longer to maintain a pension equivalent to the present one. The alternative they propose? Accept lower pensions.**

It's as simple as that. Yet, the unions who co-manage the present funds with the bosses' organisations complicate things so as to lead the strikers to defend the present system which, in fact, is not so favourable to the workers as they pretend. To do this they bring two scarecrows to the General Assemblies:

- "*a points-based pension is a new horror*". ... Sorry if the complementary pension plans of the professionals of AGIRC and those of the complementary plans of all employees of the private sector of industry, of commerce, of services and agriculture (managers included) of ARRCO are based on this mode of accounting. And this system has scarcely caused a stir since it was put in place in 1947, the first time, then in 1961, the second.

- "*the investment funds are going to throw themselves onto the money of pensioners*". Unfortunately for these fearmongers these funds already exist in France, and since 1967, in the form of the Préfon-Retraite, the supplementary optional pension for employees of the civil service, managed by the founding unions, CFDT, CFTC, CGC and FO. These unions are not offended by entrusting the

management to CNP Assurances nor by administering the portfolio like any American pension fund controlled by their peers over there!

The money, which is collected by the state or by these related organisations with the declared aim of guaranteeing our pensions, does not belong in reality to us until the moment when we receive it. From now, this money “works” as capital, placed in funds, bonds or, in some cases, shares. It belongs to those who manage it, exactly like our savings in a bank up to the moment that we take it out. The only difference, and size, in relation to savings entrusted to the banks, is that the money of pensions is only transformed into a deferred wage many years after having been “lent” to the funds.

As a result, our relation to the pension funds, public or private, co-managed by the unions and the bosses or not, by sharing out or by capitalisation, is exactly like the one we have with a bank: we need to get hold of the money when the moment comes and it doesn’t matter if they are in deficit, more or less well managed etc. Our relation to the pension system, whatever it is, must consequently be the same that we have with our banker: give me my money and all my money when I need it.

**The pension is only ours when it’s in our pockets.**

**Before then, it is capital, exactly like our savings in a bank.**

The Macron reform tries to involve us a bit more in the management of the money which still belongs to us. Exactly like the CGT, FO and SUD apply themselves to instilling in us that the present system belongs to us through them as intermediaries and that we must therefore defend it. Better, defend their privileged position within the existing funds.

No! Let’s just defend our wage today and tomorrow. Without waiting.

- **Above all, providing for us, and generalising to everyone, the solution proposed for the teachers by the government to protect their present pensions: to raise their wages, and therefore their pension contributions, and to integrate the variable part of their total wage, bonuses, (around 10 to 15% of the total average wage of all workers) in the pension calculation.**
- **It’s also necessary to insist that the unemployed who are no longer or not at all compensated continue to “grow” their pension points. This is not the case now with the pension system founded on the so-called “solidarity” between generations (but not between unemployed and non-unemployed) so dear to the union high command.**
- **Following on from that it is necessary to reject any “parametric” logic, that is to say the progressive retreat of the age when we can cash our deferred wage, the pension, and let’s wipe out, while we’re at it, the reforms of the same stripe which came before this one (2003, 2010, etc.).**
- **Finally, an essential point, there is no question of accepting that the level of our pension should be calculated on the average of work earnings over a lifetime. Why put up with a brutal loss of spending power once our hands and brains no longer serve to create value for capital?**

## A strike which is getting weaker on the SNCF and RATP

If the first day led to a massive strike on the SNCF and the RATP, elsewhere the participation was lukewarm (Education, Post Office, EDF, etc.) and almost non-existent in the private sector (note, for example, the 5% on strike at Renault Flins). Following that, the strike did not bite and remained restricted to the workplaces already on strike. And today it's flat out shrinking. The defeats of the two previous movements against pension reforms (2003 and 2010) seemed to be being reproduced with, notably, the separation between workers in the public and private sectors.

And even at RATP and SNCF the number of strikers continues to fall.

On the **RATP**, if the Metro is holding out relatively well and the RER A and B lines a bit less, the trams are moving. To this can be added the weak participation in the struggle by the bus drivers who only reduced the service by 40%, on 5 December, and it's less than a third at the time of writing. Let's remember, the RATP drivers are 15,000 out of a total group staff of 43,000. They are therefore a decisive component.

On the **SNCF**, the 2018 scenario was recreated. Starting with 55% of the total staff, on 5 December, the number of strikers (including in the most mobilised categories like the drivers and the inspectors) has never ceased to shrink. The only exception so far was on 17 December with 32.8% – a percentage comparable to that during the short-term rise on 14 May 2018, the day of the referendum against the rail reform. As in 2018, the majority of the staff opposed to the reform did not want to stick their necks out by going on strike to limit the damage. In short, striking by proxy. The exact opposite of what's needed to win.

The union leaders and the strikers reassure themselves by repeating tirelessly that “*public opinion supports the strike*”. As if it was “public opinion” that decides the validity of the struggle... But what is “public opinion”? Opinion polls that publish contradictory percentages reflecting views of simple powerless consumers/spectators. We can hardly assume that this so-called public opinion will not turn around and coagulate into a reactionary social bloc where passengers and non-strikers make a common front against the strikers and pickets. Certainly, this is not the case up until now. But who can be sure that this won't happen?

Some strikers have bet on blockades of refineries and petrol depots to create a shortage of fuel and “*bring the government to its knees*”. Yet, since 5 December, only three refineries have experienced even partial interruptions (Donges, Grandpuits and Lavéra). As for the petrol depots, only one was on strike. The movements seen since 2010 have shown the uselessness of calls for blockade of depots when the balance of forces is not in our favour. Finally, betting on fuel shortages is to ignore the trump cards of the government: strategic stocks and imports. And it also has to be explained for what mysterious reason an eventual fuel shortage will convince non-strikers to join the fight.

To summarise, the government has manoeuvred well. Philippe is not Juppé. The executive has learned its lesson. This time, unfortunately, the present movement is a bad remake of 1995 with only two companies affected, SNCF and RATP, and a struggle which again takes up the conservative defence of the special regimes of the employees with a particular status and of the present system of pensions.

## **Avoiding the worst scenario for the strikers**

Then what can be the result? We have to fear that the bad scenario of the SNCF strike in 2018, extended to the RATP, will reproduce itself, or almost. It is probable that the CFDT and UNSA will give up around mid-January on the pretext of advances in their negotiations with the state-boss. As for the CGT and SUD, they will once again complain about the betrayal by their mates in the CFDT and UNSA before themselves giving up. The risk is that these two organisations leave the most determined railway workers and RATP workers to rush into an isolated and ultra-minoritarian fight, with matching abstract appeals to solidarity without content addressed to other workers so as to ease their conscience.

This movement is not the fight of the unions against the government but the fight of the striking employees of the SNCF and the RATP against their boss, the state, and of all proletarians against capital and its state. The state which proves, once again, that it is just as good an exploiter as those in the private sector.

To get things moving again, strikers must give themselves the means to control their strike, directly and horizontally, without delegating their struggle to the unions. Depriving the unions of the mandate to negotiate in their name and replying to them everywhere with hard struggles for wages and aspects of the Macron reform which worsen our condition. Nor is a solution provided by the ghostly “inter-pros” [inter-professional category meetings] which have replaced the “convergences of struggles” of the same sort in 2018 – front organisations for far-left groups in search of legitimacy.

It’s also necessary that strikers clearly understand the real balance of forces, presently unfavourable, and rapidly change their approach by avoiding, at all costs, ultra-minoritarian forms of struggle. The bitter-endism which claims to “not give up anything” now shows its complete impotence. Many of the strikers hope for a rebound of the strike starting in January. We do as well. But already money is running out and strike funds will have difficulty filling the hole. And then there is the repression right in front of us against sick leave using surprise checks. Finally, the number of non-strikers is at risk of increasing.

## **Fighting on the same bases as now doesn’t pay**

The mechanism of capitalisation objectively reinforces the relation between the direct wage and the pension. Let’s take advantage of that in our own way. We have to fight urgently for wages without forgetting about working conditions. In perspective, the best way to preserve pensions and to work for a shorter time within a system based on capitalisation by points is to uniformly raise basic pay and to increase the compensation for unemployment as long as it lasts. In this framework, it’s necessary that the points calculation is not based on the basic wage but on the real wage including bonuses. Those famous bonuses which so divide the employees of the SNCF...

### ***FOR THE REVIVAL OF WORKERS’ INITIATIVE***

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