

**“MONSTER” DEMOS ARE NO LONGER ENOUGH.
STRUGGLES FOR SIGNIFICANT INCREASES IN WAGES,
UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS AND PENSIONS MUST TAKE
THEIR PLACE**

And the third one...

The third giant demonstration against the pension “reform” is taking place this 7 February. Like the two that preceded it, it will be hailed by the unions as yet another historic event. The government, for its part, will recognise this success but will explain once again that the “reform” is “necessary” to “preserve the redistribution system” and “solidarity between generations of workers”. Otherwise, the government will once again raise the spectre of a switch to defined contribution pensions. Meanwhile, in the National Assembly, amendments, decrees, improbable referendums, motions of censure, etc. will be discussed once again. Without all this shifting the balance of forces with the dominant classes one iota.

In other words, the masquerade of power will continue unhindered; the trade union show will continue as well, and so will the mock fights between political parties. And the bosses, silent so as not to disturb the government at work, will continue their business without a hitch. On the other hand, the next day, proletarians will return to their places of exploitation, for those “lucky enough” to work. The unemployed will return to their difficult days waiting for an internship, a cheap job or the end of their benefits, and most of the pensioners to waiting for their bank account to be empty at the end of the month.

“Citizens” demonstrations to do what?

The “monster” demonstrations have never made governments bend, with the apparent exception of 1995. But at that time the workers directly affected by the project to abolish the special pension regimes gave the decisive blow to the “reform” by massive strikes and offensive actions. Giant demonstrations only marched side by side with these strikes. Today the situation is quite different. The strikes, although happening in several sectors of the public service, are not taking off, and even retreat here and there. The private sector is not really moving. Calls for strike action are just to allow participation in the marches. The polls, for what they are worth, say that the majority of public opinion is against the “reform”, but that more than 70% of those questioned do not intend to participate directly in the movement, and even less to go on strike. In this game, after four or five shows of force in the streets, the government will be able to pass its “reform” by betting on the discouragement of the workers involved.

Strikes over pensions are difficult to get going for two fundamental reasons:

- the immediate concerns of the vast majority of proletarians take precedence over the issue of pensions. These concerns are well known: wages, unemployment benefits and current pensions are not enough to absorb the increases in prices, fares and service charges sufficiently to allow a decent life;
- the “alternatives” to the government’s “reform” hardly question the principle that the pensions of older workers should be paid for by younger workers. This idea is enthusiastically shared by the unions, the bosses and their state. In the name of this idea, it is forgotten that pensions are deferred wages. As such, they should be fully financed and guaranteed by companies and the state.

The “reform” of pensions will widen divisions between proletarians

In this context, negotiating, as the unions are about to do, certain aspects of the “reform” project, is tantamount to playing the part that the government has assigned to them. The main areas under discussion concern taking account of arduous work, long careers, the employment of older workers and the status of women.

- On the subject of difficulty of jobs, the government is proposing implementation of a complex mechanism that will first define “arduous” occupations within the framework of branch and then company negotiations. Workers whose jobs are not on this list will be able to have their degraded health recognised by the occupational health service. This opens the way for different retirement ages and different contribution periods. As long as labour is a constraint determined by the imperative of capital growth, any consideration of hardship is an instrument of division.
- On long careers, the government promises to “open the debate” without further commitments. Here again, it will be necessary to work like mad to get recognition for long working lives.
- On the employment of older workers, the government said that it was prepared to punish companies that let go of too many older workers if they do not implement an “action plan” to keep them. The aim is to get older workers to work longer, even if it means giving them lower-paid jobs as part of a possible gradual cessation of activity.
- On the retirement of women who have had interrupted careers, those who have had children could eventually benefit from the “gift” of two quarters of contributions per child. As a result, according to Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne, two out of three women will have to work two years longer. And the remaining third will be made up of those who will be compensated for their uneven careers by the production of children, as natalist policy requires.

What unites these four specific aspects of the “reform” is the creation of particular features that individualise the conditions of access to retirement while preserving the purpose of making proletarians work longer. The urgency of passing this “reform” - which will certainly not be the last one, according to many economists - for the government is exclusively a matter of showing Treasury Bond investors a clean bill of health regarding its capacity for “control of public accounts” and “budgetary discipline”. Finally, the ultimate goal of the “reform” remains for the state to no longer spend a single euro to keep the pension funds in balance. This money is used elsewhere, for example, to finance booming military spending.

Linking the struggle against pension “reform” to struggles for higher proletarian incomes

Focusing mainly, or even only, on the pension “reform” does not create the conditions for the workers’ offensive necessary to beat the government and makes us forget that the central battle of the moment is in workplaces, in front of Job Centres and pension fund offices. This battle must be massive and requires the direct and active participation of the largest number of proletarians. To achieve this, it is necessary to respect the necessarily different rhythms of mobilisation of the sectors that are involved in the struggle. To trumpet the slogan of a renewable general strike before struggles have taken root for a long time in productive territories is to set the bar for the movement at a level that is currently unattainable.

The bosses have understood the risk that this situation of social instability poses to their businesses. Several large and medium-sized companies have distributed bonuses and granted pay rises as a preventive measure to calm things down. But the workers concerned know perfectly well that this is not enough. They know that these increases are insufficient, often individualised in the form of bonuses and in exchange for an accelerated pace of work, total submission to company management, foremen and HR departments. The empty ritual of the NAO certainly satisfies the trade unions, who find a bit of legitimacy with the bosses, but not the workers. As for the unemployed, they find themselves with shortened benefit periods and tighter control by Job Centres, whose aim is to exclude as many as possible from benefits. Finally, pensioners are suffering the consequences of galloping inflation much more than employees, as their pensions are being re-evaluated at a rate and level that is significantly lower than that of wages.

**Proletarians can only count on their own direct action
and on their autonomous organisation to win**

FOR THE REVIVAL OF WORKERS’ INITIATIVE

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