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France

Mass Strikes Defend Public Sector

- News from around the world -

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Last week saw the biggest movement of strikes and demonstrations by public sector workers since the defeat of the movement over pensions in 2003.

On Tuesday January 18, postal workers struck and demonstrated as Parliament discussed plans (which were subsequently adopted) to restructure the still public postal service, which will lead to job losses and the closing of "uneconomic" post offices, mostly in rural areas. On Wednesday it was the turn of rail workers and gas and employees of the newly privatised electricity and gas companies EDF and GDF. In both cases the protests were against plans to cut jobs.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Manif_fp_janv05.jpg]

On Thursday there was a general strike of civil servants (both state and local government employees). Over 300,000 people demonstrated in towns and cities across France, with high points of 50,000 in Paris and 30,00 in Marseilles. Half of the Paris demonstrators were teachers in the biggest mobilisation of the profession since the long national strike two years ago. Their strike was motivated both by demands over wages and staff levels and by refusal of a new government plan that would lower the quality of education for the vast majority of school students.

Over and above the specific demands of each category of workers the overall significance of the movement was in defence of public services and against privatisations. Opinion polls showed that the strikes were supported by 65 per cent of the population, in a further sign of the continuing massive refusal of neo-liberal "reforms". Polls also showed that 46 per cent of those questioned were ready to join a union, 58 per cent to go strike, 67 per cent to demonstrate and 73 per cent to support other workers on strike.

The success of the three days of strikes and demonstrations has had a salutary effect, coming after the rather morose period that followed the defeat in 2003 and the rather subdued protests against health service reforms last year. After the success of Thursday's strike, teachers are discussing follow-up strikes. The next big rendezvous for the movement as a whole is a day of demonstrations in defence of the 35-hour week on February 5.

This will involve workers from both the public sector and the private sector, where there have been some sharp local strike over recent months. It looks as if the campaign for the referendum on the European constitution, which will be held in May or June, may be taking pace against a background of renewed working-class combativity.