

French Pension Protests

By Alex Taft

On January 19th, 2023, millions of French took to the streets to protest pension reforms unveiled by French president Emmanuel Macron. The pension reform in question would raise the minimum age of retirement with a pension from 62 to 64. This reform has angered many French citizens, as the reform would not only require French citizens to work longer to receive a pension, but would also mean that the younger working class has to pay more taxes to support the elderly. This fact has made the working class especially upset, as post-pandemic inflation remains an issue in France and extra taxation would worsen the financial instability that already threatens much of the French working class. Advocates of the reform, on the other hand, argue that the reform is necessary to decrease government spending and maintain a larger workforce in the midst of France's continued post-pandemic economic struggles. To obtain a better understanding of the current situation in France as well as a balanced perspective, interviews have been conducted with two French citizens as well as a British exchange student currently studying in France. All participants of the interview were asked the same questions regarding the current situation in France to collect as many different answers to each question as possible.



The first interview was with David, a French citizen who's currently a member of a French Socialist youth organization.

Interview With David (Questions in are red, answers are in blue)

“Do you support President Macron’s unveiled pension reforms? Why or why not?”

“I do not support Macron’s reforms because making people work more ain’t solving no monetary problems. He thinks that this reform will leave people more money but it’s false. The entire pension system must be changed.”

“Do you believe that the protests will lead to any real change?”

“Protests like the one that happened Thursday will make a change.”

“What are your opinions on the use of violence by some protesters?”

“I believe that violence is not an answer to the garbage Macron is doing. It just gives some bad people an opportunity to mess with everything.”

“Have you generally been a supporter of Macron’s government? Have Macron’s recent actions as president altered or reinforced your views?”

“I was a supporter of Macron back in 2016 but as time passed I see that he is hurting France more than helping it. After the 2022 elections, Macron was openly against the far-right French parties, but became more and more like them to the point of doing the same thing as a contested rightist party in France, ‘Rassemblement National’. Macron’s entire office is filled with people that should be replaced with others that are fit for the job.”

“How well do you feel that Macron has handled continued post-pandemic inflation in France?”

“I believe that Macron messed up with the inflation. The prices don’t stop growing and the overall economic system in France isn’t as great as before the pandemic.”



“Have you participated or plan to participate in the current protests against Macron’s pension reforms?”

“I’m in a youth socialist organization and we were one of many to participate in the huge strike on Thursday the 19th of January, and we will likely participate in even more.”

“In what ways have the current protests impacted your day-to-day life, if at all?”

“I’m glad to see fellow French people joining our cause against Macron’s pension reform. I acknowledge that it’s difficult in days like the protest without school, work, and mainly transportation. But something has to be done to stand up against those who are doing wrong.”

As seen by the responses above, there is much that the French people are currently upset about, from the current pension reforms, to Macron's handling of the economy, and even to Macron's debatable shifting political alignments. Even former supporters of Macron's government such as David are turning on Macron due to his recent actions, demonstrating the scale of the current protests and the wide range of citizens who have taken a stance against Macron.

Although many French have openly expressed their frustration with Macron's pension reforms, there is still certainly a side that supports the current reforms. To show the other side of the issue, I've conducted an interview with a French citizen named Tim, who supports Macron's pension reforms.

Interview With Tim (Questions are in red, answers are in blue)

“Do you support President Macron's unveiled pension reforms? Why or why not?”

“I'm for them, mainly because I believe that the French economy cannot continue to spend so much money on pensions.”



“Do you believe that the protests will lead to any real change?”

“Not really. Even if there is a lot of protests, there is not enough to make Macron change his position.”

“What are your opinions on the use of violence by some protesters?”

“I'm against violence. It has never worked.”

“Have you generally been a supporter of Macron's government? Have Macron's recent actions as president altered or reinforced your views?”

“I have approved of some of his policies, but in general I always have been very neutral towards Macron.”

“How well do you feel that Macron has handled continued post-pandemic inflation in France?”

“It was not the worst, but he could have handled it better.”

“Have you participated or plan to participate in the current protests against Macron’s pension reforms?”

“No.”

“In what ways have the current protests impacted your day-to-day life, if at all?”

“The protests haven’t impacted my life at all.”

While many French citizens hold very strong views regarding Macron, there are of course those in the middle. Some of those in the middle, such as Tim, support the pension reforms of Macron due to believing that they are necessary to remove strain from the French economy.

Providing his perspective on the current situation in France is Beck, a British college student currently residing and studying in France.

Interview With Beck (Questions are in red, answers are in blue)

“Do you support President Macron’s unveiled pension reforms? Why or why not?”

“I find Macron’s recent pension reforms to be backwards, not only because it is limiting hardworking French citizens from having a proper retirement, but also because it is forcing young people to pay large amounts of money for others to retire even though it is very unlikely that they will receive similar amounts of money when it is their time to retire.”



“Do you believe that the protests will lead to any real change?”

“I believe that if there was to be change, it would have happened by now. While I wish that something could come from this, I find it unlikely.”

“What are your opinions on the use of violence by some protesters?”

“I have heard about the violence both towards and from protesters, which I find saddening. While violence can seem like a more effective method of sending a

message than peace, it leads to a poor reflection on the movement and risks the cause being ridiculed.”

“Have you generally been a supporter of Macron’s government? Have Macron’s recent actions as president altered or reinforced your views?”

“I’m not a big fan of Macron. Although, that being said, he is far better than many other contenders for the French Presidency, such as Zemmour or Bardella. He claims to be ‘for the people’ but has very rarely shown or passed any laws which reflect this. I am no more disappointed with Macron and the Renaissance Party now than I was before his pension plans.”

“How well do you feel that Macron has handled continued post-pandemic inflation in France?”

“I don’t know enough about Macron’s post-Covid plans to comment on this.”



“Have you participated or plan to participate in the current protests against Macron’s pension reforms?”

“As an exchange student who is from abroad, I have no intention on risking my ability to freely travel between France and the UK. If this was not a concern then I would most likely be considering joining a protest.”

“In what ways have the current protests impacted your day-to-day life, if at all?”

“The current protests have massively affected my life as a student, with there being a strike on Thursday where both bus drivers and teachers were striking. This has sometimes led me to being late for a class, or turning up to a class that had been canceled due to the strikes.”

Beck’s position on the reforms demonstrate precisely why the current protests in France are so large. Not only do many see them as unfair to the elderly who now have to wait another two years to retire, but to the rest of the French populace that would be stuck paying extra money to support the elderly despite it being unlikely that they’ll

benefit from adequate pensions when they themselves retire. Juxtaposed to Tim stating that the protests have had no effect on his daily life, the protests have drastically impacted Beck due to creating transportation and staffing issues for French colleges and universities. As more and more French take to the streets in protest, more institutions may see severe understaffing such as that being seen in French universities.

As there are many different ways to look at the current protests in France, it's important to balance perspectives to get the best and most fair look at President Macron's pension reforms and the following citizen reaction. Though there are a variety of perspectives highlighted in the interviews above, something of note is that all three interviewees are against the use of violence in protests. As it appears that those who have used the current protests to spread violence are in the overwhelming minority, we can all reasonably hope that a peaceful resolution to the domestic issues that face France will be achieved.