

Union Leader Emerges as Public Face of French Strike

Philippe Martinez has used the strike to revive his moribund movement and rise as a visible counterpoint to President Emmanuel Macron.



By **Adam Nossiter**

Jan. 20, 2020

PARIS — The reckoning for France’s longest-ever transport strike is not yet in, even as the action itself is losing steam. On Monday, the national rail company said traffic was “near normal” on much of its network, although the strike is not officially over.

But when the winners and losers are tallied, one man previously consigned to the political dead will have to be counted among the living: Philippe Martinez, the combative head of the country’s most militant union.

Behind his giant mustache, Mr. Martinez, an ex-communist who heads France’s oldest union, the General Confederation of Workers, or C.G.T., has become the public face of the strike, which he has used to revive a moribund union movement that was shedding members.

He has risen as the counterpoint to President Emmanuel Macron and to his business-friendly vision for France. He is omnipresent on television and radio. His giant image plasters the walls of the city’s news kiosks. He is visible at the head of weeks of marches through Paris. He pops up at early-morning pep rallies to keep the strikers mobilized.

Mr. Martinez has been the Mr. No of the strike aimed at stopping Mr. Macron’s ambition to overhaul France’s pension system. It has been no to Mr. Macron’s pension plan, no to the concessions offered by the government, no to the conciliatory gestures of more moderate unionists.

He has said throughout that he wants nothing less than the government’s total surrender. He is not going to get it. But the strike has already given new energy to a union movement that was hurt last year by the Yellow Vest protests, which rocked Mr. Macron’s presidency even as they bypassed organized labor.

The strike has also, by Mr. Martinez’s reckoning, forced some major concessions from the government as it gets ready to formally unveil its pension reform at a cabinet meeting on Friday.



A demonstration in Marseille last week as part of the nationwide protests. Christophe Simon/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Mr. Martinez argues that the French government’s numerous capitulations would never have happened if he hadn’t kept tens of thousands of his people in the streets, week after week. The strike is now well into its second month — the longest in the country’s recent history.

Over the course of it, the government has pushed back by 12 years the starting age for its planned pension changes — only those born after 1975 need be concerned — and carved out at least nine exceptions to its “universal” plan. It has restored, for now, Europe’s lowest retirement age. Mr. Martinez claims the credit.

“It’s thanks to the mobilizations that we’ve gotten all of them,” Mr. Martinez said in an interview in his office at the C.G.T., a sprawling glass-and-concrete Brutalist complex at the edge of the highway that circles Paris.

Mr. Martinez, pushing the strike ever forward, has become one of Mr. Macron’s biggest headaches. He and his union have successfully played off Mr. Macron’s past as a banker to heighten fears — erroneous — that the president is planning to remake the current French pay-as-you go pension system into market-based, American-style, 401(k)-like accounts.

On Friday night, Mr. Macron was booed by pension reform protesters as he left a Paris theater with his wife, and had to be whisked away. His favorite restaurant, La Rotonde, on the Left Bank, was partly burned the same night by arsonists. Echoes of the Yellow Vest violence that rocked France are resurfacing.



La Rotonde, a favorite restaurant of President Emmanuel Macron, was burned by arsonists. Thibault Camus/Associated Press

Mr. Martinez has not pushed these new acts of wildcat defiance. But he makes no apologies for putting his people in the streets. Nearly swallowed up by his duffel coat, his brows furrowed, he buzzes around the demonstrators, stopping to chat with whoever comes up to him at the marches that have paralyzed Paris.

A world away in the Élysée Palace, Mr. Macron has preserved a kind of Olympian calm, rarely deigning to comment on the strike or the changes he is determined to push through.

“There have always been strikes on these subjects,” Mr. Macron told a group of onlookers last week in the southern city of Pau.

Instead of pension rights tailored to professions and crafts, carved out over decades, “we’ve got to construct a world where rights are attached to the person,” the president said.

The conflict “has called into being this kind of face-off between a very personal exercise of power, and a social movement carried forward above all by the C.G.T.,” said Stéphane Sirot, a well-known historian of French labor.

“Labor-capital relations in France are very much based on conflict,” Mr. Sirot said. “And historically it’s been the C.G.T. that has incarnated this conflict.”

Mr. Martinez has become a minor celebrity on television, but nobody makes a fuss over him at the marches. Some call out, “We’re with you, Philippe!”



Mr. Martinez, right, and Prime Minister Edouard Philippe of France, second from left, discussing the pensions overhaul. Thomas Samson/Agence France-Presse, via Pool/Afp Via Getty Images

To a group of demonstrators who approached him on a chill recent Saturday at the start of a march in eastern Paris, he said simply: “Look, we put a project on the table, just raise people’s salaries. That’s the best way.”

Already the government has been forced to promise raises to low-paid teachers, another striking group, that will add up to \$1,000 gross a month. Others are unlikely to be so lucky.

The strike is winding down. Much of the Paris Métro is up and running again. But this son of a Spanish immigrant mother, who became an ex-supply chain specialist at Renault — he still has an office there — is claiming a sort of victory.

His father fought in the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War, against Franco. He won’t discuss whether his break with the Communists had an ideological component.

“At the C.G.T., we like to speak in concrete realities,” he said. “Why has life expectancy increased? It’s because we work less. We say, you have to heal work.”

Analysts don’t disagree with Mr. Martinez’s assessment of the current face-off. “He’s certainly put wind in his sails, especially compared to the period of the Yellow Vests,” said a historian of the C.G.T., Michel Dreyfus.

“They’ve scored some wins, sure,” said Mr. Sirot, the labor historian. “There have been concessions, and the concessions wouldn’t have been made if there had not been this strike.”



Commuters at the Gare du Nord railway station last week. Gonzalo Fuentes/Reuters

Still, he said, Mr. Martinez’s uncompromising stand would make it difficult for him to exit the strike looking like a winner.

But the union leader says he is not concerned about winners and losers. He thinks he has made his point.

“Really, what we are in is a debate about two conceptions of society,” he said in the interview. “This is not about egos. This is about a government that wants to radically transform the history of France.”

Mr. Macron “has a vision that’s very Anglo-Saxon,” he said. “His model is British, or American, a really different vision, very

individualist. You must make do on your own.”

The C.G.T.’s vision, he said — invoking the word “solidarity,” which was among its founding credos — is “whatever happens, the community will be there to help get you out of it.”

In the Macron model, “you only get back what you’ve put in,” Mr. Martinez said. “But if you don’t put anything in, what are you supposed to do, sleep outside?”

“There are a lot of these young junior government ministers running around, giving us lessons in morality,” he said, frowning.

Adam Nossiter is the Paris bureau chief. Previously, he was a Paris correspondent, the West Africa bureau chief, and led the team that won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting for coverage of the Ebola epidemic.

A version of this article appears in print on Jan. 21, 2020, Section A, Page 6 of the New York edition with the headline: As Strike Wanes, France’s Union Leader Claims a Win