

SOME THINGS THAT ARE TRUE ABOUT FRANCE

These are a few things to help Americans understand what's happening in France (and even some suggestive gesturing as to why you should care).

- It has some of the best healthcare system in the world. This is arguable, but only in the edge cases. Access to healthcare, and the practical matters of getting help are so far and above what America offers anyone but the ultrarich that it's hardly worth nitpicking. France has one of the longest life expectancies in the world, and is second only to Japan in life expectancy at age 65 according to the OECD. That number is important, since people who do dumb things when they're young and get themselves killed shouldn't be held against the record of a healthcare system.
- This great care is threatened by a shortage of doctors in the countryside and smaller cities, and by nurses and other staff in

the hospitals. Nurses are underpaid and overworked, and so they are leaving and not being replaced.

- Not everyone is on strike, even during a general strike. In some ways, it's not that big of a strike. Doctors, police, people working in the legal system, and others considered vital to the maintenance of society take an oath not to strike. Also while everyone can join a general strike, they don't have to be paid by their employers, and striking can be difficult and expensive especially for employees of private businesses. It isn't so much how many people strike in a general strike, it's who strikes, and how that affects the country. The backbone of the French unions is public workers, and so mostly it's public services affected. Right now it's almost impossible to get around easily. The trains aren't running, city transit isn't running. Some schools are affected now, but tomorrow many more will

not be in session.

- French vacations are serious business. Everyone (other than freelancers) get a month off a year, minimum. Not even Macron will touch French vacation. “That’s a good way to get 90%+ strike,” my French partner, and sometimes translator, told me.
- Maternal leave is 16 weeks. (Sixteen weeks!)(Paid!)
- And then, of course, there’s retirement benefits, which are at the center of this current French political crisis. They are complicated but in short:

They are computed on the best 25 years of your career, which generally means that if you have some rough patches you don’t lose too much because of it. Retirement age is 62, and you get 50% of what you made for those best 25 years. Some fields, like firefighters, have earlier retirement ages, to make up for it, they pay in more money along the way.

For state employees, retirement is calculated at 75% pay for the last six months of their career.

Macron wants to change this system, to something “points-based” – or more directly based on what you made over your life. The specifics are not

public yet – some kind of draft is supposed to come out tomorrow, but even with what people have seen, it will be far less money to live on, especially for the most vulnerable. Even the police, despite reassurance that they won't lose any money, are getting nervous, and rumors are some will be in the next protest.

- France doesn't share America's let the poor die in the streets approach to the old and infirm, a stance considered to be economic stimulus and a success condition to many banking-minded economists and policy makers. At least, for now.

Tomorrow is another protest, and France will continue to contemplate what kind of France it wants to be.

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