PARIS — Spring in France is strike season — not that strikes don’t happen at other times of the year, but who wants to strike in wet, cold weather or in the midst of a hot Parisian summer when everyone (strikers included) wants to be on holiday?

René Bodiou, a 75-year-old with a full head of white hair, smiled as he marched with fellow retired union members in the late May sun at a recent protest. I fell in step with him and asked what he thought about this year’s
strike season.

“Nowadays, we have people who are too rich,” he said. “In the United States, you do not care so much about equality, but we care about it.”

“It does not mean we all have to have the same amount of money, but we all should get the same respect,” said Mr. Bodiou, a retired civil engineer.

But, he added, summing up a feeling that seemed to be shared by many on the street around him: “Macron does not speak to those who are poor, who sleep on the ground; he speaks to the people in the digital world, to the entrepreneurs, to the educated.”

Several hundred thousand union workers have taken to the streets of France this year. But President Emmanuel Macron has said he would not be deterred from his cornerstone policies to tip the balance of power in the working world toward employers and away from unions as part of his effort to create more jobs.
University students demonstrating in April against education reforms near the Sorbonne in Paris.

Ian Langsdon/EPA, via Shutterstock

**Railway workers** are the latest in his sights because they enjoy privileges that are generous even by French standards, including the right to retire as early as age 52 and a job for life that is virtually guaranteed. Mr. Macron has proposed legislation to end the generous terms for new employees. Most French workers cannot retire before age 62.

The National Assembly, the lower house of Parliament, had *approved* stripping the railworkers of their benefits in April and the Senate approved a similar measure in June. The two chambers will vote on a final version later this week.

In response to the efforts to change the law, the four railroad unions staged the biggest *strikes* this spring among organized labor, slowing train service across the country and holding protests in cities from Paris to Marseilles and Nantes to Lyon.

I spent several days this spring going to the protests to try to gauge the strength of the union cause, and by extension that of the unions’ leftist allies.

The protest Mr. Bodiou attended in Paris on the last weekend in May started, as do many union marches, at the Gare de l’Est, or Railway Station of the East.

It is one of Paris’s most magnificent *19th-century train* stations, a soaring public monument of iron and glass; trains leave from here for Strasbourg in eastern France and then head on to Germany. It was also the station where, during World War I, soldiers piled onto the trains that took them to the Western Front, where many were slaughtered.

Riot police officers detaining a demonstrator in Paris in May. Christophe Ena/Associated Press
Like so much in Paris, the railway station is a place where the past echoes in the present, if you listen hard enough.

For the strikers, too, the past casts a long shadow, not least because many had hoped that in the face of Mr. Macron’s defiance of nearly eight decades of pro-union labor policies, people would clamor for a return to the days when unions were seen as protectors of the ordinary worker.

Or at least to the heady days of May 1968 when laborers and students joined hands and for a month brought the country to a standstill and won unprecedented gains.

This year, though, instead of joining them, nonunion members seem to be barely willing to tolerate the inconvenience of the train workers strike.

Yet for those who have worked on the rails, repairing them, running the signal system, taking tickets or driving the trains, Mr. Macron’s plan is not just a loss of money or retirement benefits, but a demotion in the hierarchy of workers. Railroad workers had lived in a special state of grace and even had a special statute to legislate their terms of work, and now that was being erased.

Several strikers said people did not understand the political implications of the reforms being pushed by Mr. Macron, not just for the railways but for everyone.

“If he can take this away from us, he can take benefits from everyone,” said Christian Boumard, a union member who came from Nantes for an earlier railway protest.

Despite the sense of shouting into the wind, at least this spring, the protests still had a festive feel, a lingering hopefulness.
In May, friends greeted one another and people stopped along the route for the traditional sandwich of Moroccan merguez sausage on a baguette, which has become a staple of left-leaning protests in a sign of solidarity with many immigrant workers who came from the Maghreb region of northwestern Africa.

From the open back doors of union vans driving along with the crowd, a union loyalist led the marchers in chants.

“The truncheon’s blow is free; the university also must be.”

“Macron is screwed; the railroad workers are in the street.” (It rhymes in French.)

“Public, private, solidarity, it is all together that we must struggle; it is all together that we will win.”

Occasionally a smoke bomb would plume into the air with a bang, and here and there people lit flares. But there were not as many as at a union-only protest in March, when the anger was palpable and the flares looked like a line of small fires scattered along the route as if to jolt passers-by into paying attention.

In May the mood was lighter.

People set up stands selling T-shirts reviving some of the slogans from 1968. At another table was a collection of red-covered books — a color associated with socialism and communism. There were the classics of Karl Marx, “The Commune of Paris” and “Value, Price and Profit,” as well as his landmark collaboration with Friedrich Engels, “The Communist Manifesto,” and Lenin’s “Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism.”

Farther along was a table selling homemade drinks made with fruit and
rum from Martinique, a Caribbean island that remains part of France.

The leftists who marched ahead of the union men and women seemed to date from an earlier era. They called for all workers to unite and sang the “Internationale,” the communist anthem. Many brandished signs that said “Stop Macron.”

Ecologists handed out green fliers urging people to save the Earth, and pacifists — young affluent types and aging hippies — urged peace.

One older woman, wearing a long skirt that twirled as she spun around, waved a red flag as she marched. She looked as if she were going to dance all the way to the 1930s Spanish Civil War — one of the great leftist causes of an earlier age. Except that war is over and today’s equivalents are even more treacherous.

The May march was smaller than the ones earlier in the spring, and it seemed that everyone knew the great era of the French street was slipping away.

Prosper Hillairet, my French teacher, had stopped by the demonstration, as so many people do when it’s a nice day. “I had the feeling,” he said, “it was the last dance for them.”

Tanguy Garrel-Jaffrelot contributed reporting.