

The issues in the Paris transport strikes

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Strikes have repeatedly brought sections of the Paris regional public transport system to a standstill over the last three weeks. They have been mounted as a general protest against 'violence' and to call for 'more security' after several attacks on train and bus drivers. Some strikes started spontaneously, while the transport unions called others. Three of Paris's busiest metro lines were also affected.

The unions have started negotiations with the RATP, the state-owned bus and underground operator in Paris, and the national railway company SNCF. They have called for safety measures such as additional staff on 'risky' lines at certain hours and protective cabins for drivers.

Violence directed against buses and trains and their staff has been an issue of growing concern, along with attacks on teachers and firemen. Transport workers have repeatedly expressed concern that cutbacks in staffing, including the elimination of conductors' jobs and the operation of one-man trains, are leading to unsafe conditions for workers and passengers alike. The Jospin government, however, has seized upon the issue of crime in the bus and rail system to promote its law-and-order campaign for more police and harsher sentences against youthful offenders. Far from opposing the framing of the issue in this way, the trade unions have lent their support to this reactionary campaign.

Reports of increased numbers of violent crimes have been chiefly inflated. According to the SNCF, its network in the Paris area (which has over 10 million inhabitants including the suburbs) runs 5,000 trains daily and witnesses 46 'acts of malevolence' a day. Of these, however, just five involve attacks against persons including 'almost one daily against a member of staff'. According to a statistic produced by the Central Office of Public Security the attacks against public transport property have increased, as have the use of firearms,

the throwing of stones and the involvement of youth in these incidents. However, personal assaults have actually decreased.

A lot of the 'violence' invoked to explain the strikes is the result not only of the general deterioration in social conditions--youth unemployment in Paris is 25 percent and even higher in some of the suburbs--but are also a product of the policies pursued by the government, rail and bus operators. In preparation for privatisation of the bus and rail network, RATP and SNCF have hiked up fares and launched a 'struggle against fraud' by clamping down on fare-dodgers. Meanwhile the quality of the service continues to deteriorate. The increase in the general level of crime matches the increase in fares, the aggressive drive to collect them and the complete neglect of transport facilities. Growing sections of the population can no longer afford to travel, and take their frustration out on staff whom they identify with the transit authorities.

There is widespread anger amongst railway, bus and underground workers due to increased workloads, low wages and the pressure put on them by the transport authorities. The call by the trade unions for strikes over security questions is an attempt to channel this anger away from a confrontation with the government and the SNCF/RATP over the privatisation of public transport.

The privatisation programme that began under the previous conservative Juppé government was central in provoking the general strike that took place in November/December 1995. Yet the preparations for privatisation have continued under the Socialist Party government of Lionel Jospin and his French Communist Party (PCI) Minister of Transport Jean-Paul Gayssot. The reform of the transport network necessitates reducing the SNCF's debt, which means even higher fares, cutting staff by between 4,000 to 5,000 a year and the increased exploitation of those remaining. Between 1991 and 1997 the work force at

SNCF has been reduced from 200,500 full-time staff to 175,000. The opening of the railways to competition within Europe can only sharpen the existing situation.

Neither the Stalinist CGT nor the other unions have at any point opposed the privatisation plans, let alone organised strikes against them. The CGT even made a fundamental change to its constitution in the middle of the 1995 strike wave, dropping its commitment to the socialisation of the means of production. Jospin's plans to continue privatisation hinge on the active collaboration of the trade unions. To this end he set up a commission to manage the transition, partly staffed by the trade unions. In September, Gayssot together with SNCF director Louis Gallois spoke to a series of meetings organised by the unions designed to lend his 'reformed reform' package a democratic veneer.

One of the main concerns of the government is to avoid the type of social explosion that happened three years ago. It directs the resentment of transport workers away from their employers towards sections of the population. The strike that started the present series of walkouts was not linked to an attack against a member of staff, but was actually called over staffing levels.

At the same time, the trade unions are giving credibility to right-wing calls for more 'law and order'. The government's first response to the strikes was to announce the despatch of an additional 200 paramilitary CRS riot police onto the underground and the buses. There are already 400 of these troops deployed throughout Paris railway and underground stations. Last week Jospin announced a series of repressive measures such as speedy trials for those who commit offences on public transport, heavier sentences and more security personnel. He also proposed that the transport companies recruit private security operatives as 'agents of social mediation' and install video surveillance equipment.

The unions called the involvement of the CRS a positive step, providing that the government answer their calls for more staff. In response, the SNCF made clear that its main priority is the reduction of the debt and that increased spending on staff was excluded.

The perspective of the trade unions has also served to prevent the type of widespread public support that developed for the transport workers' previous stand against privatisation and cuts. While there is sympathy for the plight of those who have been assaulted, there is

little enthusiasm for the aims of the strikes amongst workers and youth. The media encourages this situation by sensationalist reporting of violence against drivers and other staff, divorced from any broader examination of the issues relating to public transport.

Moreover, far from advancing a policy to unite the working class against the social causes of crime--chronic youth unemployment, government cutbacks and the deterioration of public housing and education--the unions' policies serve to drive a wedge between transit workers and the most oppressed layers of the working class.



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