

French unions seeking end to national rail strike

Our correspondent
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French trade unions were set to end a nationwide rail strike at the time of posting, after talks with the SNCF—the French national railway—over pay and pensions.

The strike, the sixth this year, is believed to have involved a majority of France's 170,000 railworkers. It began on the evening of November 21, called by four unions that cited fears that the Gaullist government intends to privatise the rail network. Around two thirds of trains were affected that night, but negotiations to end the dispute began immediately.

The largest of the four unions involved, the Communist Party-dominated CGT, was provided with unconvincing assurances by the government that it did not intend to privatise the railways. Transport Minister Dominique Perben said of a letter he wrote to the unions, "I put in black and white what I have said on several occasions over the last 10 days: there is no plan for the privatisation of SNCF."

President Jacques Chirac called on November 22 for talks and also promised that SNCF would not be privatised. It appears that concessions have also been won on pay and pensions, with Didier Le Reste, head of the CGT railway branch, reporting advances on "certain issues."

The government's conciliatory line was accepted as good coin by the CGT. But it is motivated in large part by a desire to avoid a showdown with the working class in the immediate aftermath of three weeks of riots and arson attacks that swept Paris and other major cities in protest at the death of two youths fleeing a police chase. The uprising of youth, many of North African extraction, was a protest not only against racism but against the appalling social conditions facing residents on France's huge council estates.

The government, with Interior Minister Nicoilas

Sarkozy and Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin to the fore, used the riots to impose a state of emergency that has now been extended for three months.

The government and the police have been given extraordinary powers to suppress demonstrations, public meetings and press freedom. But they clearly did not want to provoke a major confrontation at this time, when they have been seeking to maintain divisions in the working class by winning support for law-and-order and anti-immigrant measures and isolating the most oppressed layers.

The Socialist Party, Communist Party and the various trade union federations have facilitated this by mounting no defence of the youth from the *banlieues*, nor any opposition to the government's emergency measures and its abrogation of fundamental democratic rights.

The rail strike is only the latest of many involving hundreds of thousands of workers that have taken place this autumn. A separate strike broke out on the Paris Metro on November 22. But the unions are making sure that the obvious link between the desperate fate of suburban youth and the constant erosion of pay and destruction of jobs does not produce the type of unified political and industrial offensive the government fears most.



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