

Transport strike brings France to a standstill

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Transport workers striking in defence of their pensions brought France's rail, bus and urban transport system to a virtual standstill on Thursday. The Gaullist government headed by President Nicolas Sarkozy is pushing through a reform that would dismantle the rail workers' retirement scheme—the *regimes spéciaux*.

The powerful strike is the first mass action in opposition to Sarkozy's plans to destroy the French welfare state system of social benefits. The rail workers were joined by gas and electricity workers, as well as sections of teachers and private sector workers.

Three unions—SUD Rail, Force Ouvrière and the Autonomous General Federation of Drivers (FGAAC)—have called for the 24-hour stoppage to be extended.

The General Confederation of Labour (CGT), which is politically dominated by the Communist Party of France, as well as the Socialist Party-aligned French Democratic Federation of Labour (CFDT), have opposed any extension of the strike and called on workers to wait until negotiations have been held with the government.

However, broad sections of rail workers defied the main union federations and called for continued strike action at mass meetings held Thursday morning. Some 95 percent of workers at train stations in Paris, Marseilles and Lyons voted to prolong the strike. In Paris, public transport workers voted to join the strike. Mass meetings are to be held again Friday morning to decide on the next step.

Officials with SNCF, the national rail company, said service would be "heavily disrupted" Friday morning, but promised service would improve in the course of the day.

The strike began at 8 p.m. Wednesday evening. SNCF indicated Thursday morning that only 46 of France's 700 high-speed TGV trains were running. It reported at 6:30 a.m. Thursday that some regions would

be completely deprived of trains and called on passengers to "cancel or postpone their journeys till Friday evening." The Eurostar service was less affected: Eight out of ten trains were running normally between London and Paris.

The RATP, the Paris urban transport company, reported that the Metro service "was likely to be virtually non-existent." It warned that the highly travelled suburban RER lines A and B, bringing workers into the capital from the outer *banlieues*, would provide no service. Only 10 percent of the buses and no trams were running.

Urban transport systems in 28 major towns were struck, including Clermont-Ferrand, Dijon, Lyons, Montpellier, Nancy, Reims and Toulouse. The trade unions in France's second city, Marseilles, did not call out the workers on its urban transport system, the RTM. These workers are not covered by the *regimes spéciaux*.

By 7:30 a.m. on Thursday, traffic was stalled around the main urban centres, especially the Ile de France Paris region, where vehicles were backed up as far away as 165 kilometres.

The SNCF reported that just under 75 percent of its employees were on strike. That is a higher percentage than in the great 1995 rail strike, also called in defence of *régime special* pensions. The 1995 shutdown forced then-Prime Minister Alain Juppé to retreat and crippled his government.

The figure given by the RATP for the Paris bus and metro network was 59 percent.

Some 50 percent of workers for the electricity and gas utilities EDF and GDF joined the strike. Under Sarkozy's reform, they will see the annuities needed to obtain a full pension extended from the present 37.5 years to 40 years, and further extended in 2008 to 41 years. As with retirees under the general pension scheme, they will face severe penalties if they fail to reach the required annuities and large decreases in

retirement income.

Over 60 demonstrations took place in towns all over France, mostly made up of railway and urban transport workers, but with important contingents of electricity and gas utility workers and smaller delegations of teachers, whose main federation, the Federation of Unitary Unions (FSU), had not called for a strike. Estimates of the numbers marching vary from 150,000 to 300,000.

CGT National Secretary Bernard Thibault and Didier Le Reste, leader of its railway section, both Communist Party members, called on workers to go back to work and await the results of discussions. On Thursday, Thibault's second-in-command, Maryse Dumas, welcomed Minister of Labour Xavier Bertrand's proposal to meet with the unions again to discuss the government's proposals.

The Socialist Party has said nothing about a continuation of the strike, but indicated its desire for the workers' militancy to be suppressed and channelled behind negotiations with the government, as well as its support for cuts in rail workers' pensions, declaring that pension reform was necessary, but that Sarkozy was going about it in the wrong manner.

A Communist Party statement issued on October 17 gave nominal support for the strike, but the CP has made no call for its extension

Christian Drouet, a Sud Rail worker at the Gare de Lyons station in southeast Paris, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Everyone is aware that 24 hours is not enough." He reported that in at least 30 of some 250 work locations in France, notably Lille in the north, CGT members defied the national leadership and voted to continue the strike beyond 24 hours.

Another Sud Rail member at the union office in the Gare du Nord station in Paris told the WSWS that he thought drivers and ticket inspectors would vote on Friday to continue the strike. He said that at the Gare du Nord most CGT members would vote to extend the walkout.

"There is beginning to be a break at the base from the national leadership," he said. "It's like when the CFDT, which used to be strong on the railway, negotiated with the government on pensions [referring to the agreement of the CFDT leadership with Alain Juppé in 1995]. Three quarters of their members left, and many joined us. They've now got only 3 to 4

percent representation. The CGT leaders want to negotiate, the rank and file say there is nothing to negotiate."

He said that the CGT leadership is now seen by many workers as working hand-in-glove with the government and management.

He added that the Force Ouvrière leadership had reluctantly called for a continuation of the strike under pressure from below. "At first, the FO leadership were not for extending the strike," he said, "but they had to give in to discontent from the rank and file."

A further report on the strike will be posted Saturday, October 20.



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