

French rail strike continues, despite union leaders' efforts to end it

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The rail strike that brought France to a standstill on Thursday continued Friday, although on a somewhat reduced scale.

Despite the opposition of the Communist Party-led General Confederation of Labour (CGT), the bargaining agent for some 40 percent of railway workers, mass meetings of workers held Friday morning voted to continue the strike.

The strike is the biggest labour walkout on the French railways for more than a decade. Participation on Thursday was higher than in 1995, when railway workers paralysed the country for three weeks and finally forced the prime minister at the time, Alain Juppé, to withdraw a plan to slash the rail workers' pension plan. That strike undermined the government and led to Juppé's resignation.

The issue in the current strike is a similar proposal, advanced by France's Gaullist president, Nicolas Sarkozy, to dismantle the rail workers' pension plan. Some 75 percent of the workforce of the national railway system, SNCF, participated on the first day of what the CGT intended to be a one-day protest.

Amongst train drivers, participation was 90 percent. They were joined by local transport workers, postal workers, museum employees and workers of the state gas and electrical companies. Less than one out of twenty long-distance trains was running and the Paris Metro was completely paralysed.

On Friday morning, urban public transport in Paris was still disrupted, with 50 percent of Metro service and one third of bus service shut down. No trains were running on the heavily travelled suburban RER lines A and B.

International high-speed Thalys trains were running at only 60 percent, national TGV high-speed trains ran at 35 percent, and only one third of TER regional trains were functioning.

Service is expected to remain greatly reduced on

Saturday.

At the Gare du Nord station in Paris, SUD Rail union members told the *World Socialist Web Site* that striking rail workers of all categories had voted overwhelmingly to continue the action. Maintenance workers voted to continue their stoppage pending a mass meeting on Monday.

A mass meeting at the Gare St. Lazare station voted to continue the strike, as did train drivers and other workers at a smaller meeting at the Gare de Lyons.

In Marseilles, FO (Force Ouvrière) and SUD Rail voted at mass meetings to continue the strike until Saturday, whereas at Nantes the workers voted to return to work.

The CGT bureaucracy boycotted the mass meetings, but in some areas, particularly at the Gare du Nord, many rank-and-file CGT members attended and voted for a continuation of the strike.

The strike has a clearly political character. It is directed against a president and a government that have made the dismantling of the *regimes spéciaux*—the retirement scheme for rail and other public service workers—a central plank of their policy. It heralds the beginning of a vast movement in opposition to the dismantling of the welfare state.

The government was clearly taken aback by the scale of the strike. While all of its leading spokesmen, as well as the leaders of the Socialist Party (PS), have insisted that “reform” of the pension system is inevitable and cannot be postponed, the government signalled its readiness to work closely with the unions to impose pension cuts.

The unions are more than willing to work with the government and are eager to stifle the strike. They are not prepared to lead a political struggle against a right-wing government with which they regularly meet and collaborate.

The leadership of the small Autonomous General Federation of Drivers (FGAAC) signed a deal with the

government on Friday evening which, in return for insignificant concessions, accepts the principle of the dismantling of the railwaymen's pension plan.

Xavier Bertrand, the minister of labour, made clear that the government has no intention of backing down. He affirmed in parliament: "We are determined to continue with the reform, we cannot do without this reform." At the same time he made an appeal to the union bureaucracies, saying, "We have more to gain by negotiating than by conflict."

Jean-François Copé, the leader of the Gaullist Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) parliamentary group, declared on Thursday: "The deputies of the majority were elected four months ago with a very clear pledge in favour of the reform of the special regimes pension schemes. The French people knew what they were voting for and they expect this reform in the name of social justice."

Former Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, interviewed on TV on Thursday, also insisted that a reform of the pensions was indispensable. He offered the trade unions concessions for difficult working conditions: "At some moment we have to get round a table and negotiate what has to be negotiated.... There can be discussions on difficult working conditions."

President Sarkozy summed up the position: "Reforms have to be made. Everyone knows that. I was elected for that. We will get on with them calmly, keeping the dialogue going."

Laurent Fabius, a leading figure of the Socialist Party, also insisted, "A reform is necessary, both of the general pension scheme and of the special regimes." He urged the government to negotiate. François Hollande, the Socialist Party's first secretary, agreed, saying, "We need a fair and equitable reform of the special regimes."

Annick Lepetit, another leading light of the Socialist Party, said, "The PS is in favour of the evolution of the special regimes, but the government must open up negotiations as soon as possible with the social partners."

The union leaders have given unmistakable signals that they are ready for a rotten deal with the government of President Sarkozy. Didier Le Reste, general secretary of the CGT's rail union, said, "The railway workers on strike expect that the government will send them a message."

Assuring the government and the French ruling elite of the "responsible" role of the unions, he said that "in a social movement on this level, the unions have responsibilities, but there are other actors like the government and the company executives who must

effectively assume their responsibilities."

Bernard Thibault, the leader of the CGT, added his voice to those supporting "reform" of the pensions, expressing the hope that his confederation's proposals "would be the sort that could influence the general framework of the reform."

The unions will not meet until Monday to discuss their further course of action.

As the unions work to stifle the movement, there is a danger that workers are left unprepared for the political conflict with a government that is determined to impose the most far-reaching attacks on workers in postwar French history.

The massive strike and the incipient revolt of workers against the union leadership are clear signs of growing resistance and militancy in the working class, not only in France but across Europe and internationally.

In Germany, train drivers are striking for a decent wage in defiance of the major trade unions and court orders banning their right to strike. In Britain, postal workers are engaged in wildcat stoppages against their union leadership. In America, General Motors workers went on strike for the first time in 37 years—and were immediately sold out by the UAW auto union bureaucracy.

The defence of workers' rights and living standards requires a new political perspective. Workers must break the grip of the Stalinist and social democratic unions and the "left" parties, such as the Communist Party and Socialist Party, which collaborate with the Gaullist right wing in destroying all of the gains won by previous generations of workers. They need to turn to the European and international working class and develop a new political movement based on socialist and internationalist principles.



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