

France: Despite success of strike, trade unions prepare a sellout

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On the first day of their strike against the attack on pensions prepared by the Gaullist government of President Nicolas Sarkozy, French rail workers virtually paralysed the railway network. According to the railway management, about a fifth of all trains were operative, but many Paris stations were barely functioning. Motorways around the capital were jammed for a distance of 350 kilometres.

Virtually no trains were running on the Paris suburban railway (RER), nor on most Metro lines. Gas and power stations were also hit by strike action on Wednesday.

Participation in the strike was approximately ten percent lower than the action of October 18, when the unions first called a one-day protest strike against the pension “reform.” At every single general meeting, which are held on a daily basis by all the workers involved in the strike, an overwhelming majority voted for a continuation of the strike in the rail system and Paris transport on Thursday.

On Wednesday afternoon, protest demonstrations by strikers were held in several cities, with large numbers of students marching in solidarity with the workers. A wave of protest is currently spreading through the universities in opposition to a new law which is regarded as the first step toward privatisation. On Wednesday, 33 of the country’s 85 universities were closed following strike action by students.

Several thousands took part in demonstrations in Lille, Marseille, Rennes, Toulouse, Bordeaux and Rouen. Despite the difficult traffic conditions 25,000 gathered at the Gare de Montparnasse in Paris.

The mood was characterised by a stubborn determination to hold out. Sébastien, who is a maintenance worker at Paris Saint Lazare, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that 100 percent of the workforce in his station had voted in favour of a continuation of the strike. “For us, there is nothing to negotiate,” he said. “The government is very hard. In order to win we must expand the protest action, otherwise we do not have a chance.”

The day before, President Sarkozy and his government went out of their way to stress their uncompromising stance. On Tuesday afternoon, Sarkozy spoke before the European parliament, where he called upon European delegates and governments to support his course.

“I have committed myself to a policy of reforms,” he said. “It is not in the European interest that they fail. Thanks to these reforms, should they succeed—and they will succeed—France will reorganize its public finances and keep its obligations.”

Sarkozy added that his election last May had legitimised his plans for reform. “Frenchmen voted in favour of these reforms,” he said. “I told them everything before the election in order to be able to do everything afterwards. I will carry out these reforms to the end. Nothing can hold me back from my goal. That is the best service that France can perform for Europe.”

At the same time, Prime Minister François Fillon mobilized the government parliamentary faction in the French National Assembly. It is frankly impossible not to carry out the reforms to end, he told jubilant deputies of the majority Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), which only a few weeks ago agreed 15 billion euros in tax gifts for the rich. “With your support, the government is simply carrying out its obligation,” he declared.

In the parliamentary plenum, Fillon replied to a question posed by the head of the Socialist Party, François Hollande, with a demagogic appeal to those elements in the population who are hostile to the strike. “Millions of Frenchmen,” he said, “are threatened with the loss of a fundamental freedom... the freedom to move around and even the freedom to work.”

For some time, right-wing agitators in the UMP have been urging action against the railway workers. They have prepared a leaflet and are seeking to organize demonstrations in support of the government. So far, Sarkozy and Fillon have blocked their initiative. They do not want to overheat the situation so as to give the trade unions a chance to capitulate voluntarily. If this should not happen by the weekend, the first counter-demonstration is due to take place on Sunday.

While Sarkozy and Fillon have sought to agitate against the strike, they have also indicated they are ready to negotiate. On Sarkozy’s instruction, the employment minister, Xavier Bertrand, has been meeting on a regular basis with the leaders of the individual unions in order to soften them up and play one off against the other.

Up to now, the government has rejected the sort of summit meeting between the unions, the executive committees of the state companies involved and the government that has been

demanding by the Communist Party-dominated General Confederation of Labour (CGT). The government is not prepared to back down on the three main planks of its “reform” of the rail workers’ special pensions. It has insisted on bilateral discussions between the unions and company executive committees to decide on the exact form of these three planks for each of the companies.

The three points consist of an increase in the number of years necessary for a full pension from 37.5 to 40, the linking of pensions to price increases, rather than to wage increases, and the introduction of an additional deduction for those taking early retirement. Through these measures, the Treasury hopes to save the approximately 5 billion euros it pays annually to supplement the pensions of railway workers, gas and electrical workers, and state employees, who have a claim to the so-called “régimes spéciaux.” In other words, the relatively low pensions of those concerned are to be cut by around five billion euros.

The leaders of the unions fail to show any of the firmness or determination which characterises the stance of the government. The leader of the CGT, Bernard Thibault, made a major concession to the government even before the strike had begun. The attitude of the CGT is particularly important, since it has the most influence amongst railway workers.

On Tuesday evening, Thibault met with Employment Minister Bertrand for long discussions and consented to the demand of the government for separate negotiations based on individual concerns. In order to allow Thibault to save face, the government agreed to trilateral negotiations, which means that in each case a representative of the government will also participate in talks. There was no shift, however, with regard to the government’s insistence on the necessity for the three planks of the “reform.” Thibault indirectly admitted this. Aside from the principal positions, he said, there are “numerous regulations... which justify real negotiations.”

Thibault’s concession was welcomed by the government. The secretary-general of the president, Claude Guéant, told *Le Monde* that the executive had accepted the suggestion made by the CGT. “Bernard Thibault made arrangements so that the crisis can be resolved after the first day of the conflict,” he said.

On Wednesday morning, Employment Minister Bertrand received the representatives of the other trade unions in order to prepare negotiations.

Most newspaper commentaries assume that the CGT will try to end the strikes on either Thursday or Friday and enter into talks. “The real difficulty for the CGT,” according to the newspaper *Libération*, “is to achieve sufficient concessions in negotiations to pacify its troops.”

Thibault has thus far refrained from committing himself publicly, but has indicated he is moving in this direction. Surrounded by television cameras at the head of the Paris demonstration on Wednesday, he explained that he wanted the strike to continue until his proposals are met with “an official

reaction of the government.”

“The CGT has made its proposals,” he said, “now we are waiting for the official reaction of the government. We are waiting for a letter which explains the attitude of the government. We will see what is in it. I cannot say at this stage whether the dispute will be broken off.”

Similar comments were made by Didier Le Reste, the head of the railway department of the CGT. When asked if the strike would be continued, he replied, “Much now depends on the reaction of the government.”

President Sarkozy has already instructed the employment minister to send the unions a letter with a proposal on the further course of action because, in the words of the presidential spokesman, David Martinon, “there is a chance that a sense of responsibility intercedes in the conflict over the ‘régimes spéciaux.’ ”

Also on Wednesday, the secretary of the Socialist Party, François Hollande, expressed his hope that the strike would end “even this evening.” Should the dispute go on, he said, “This would inflict damage on service users. I therefore wish, I demand even, that from tomorrow morning separate negotiations begin based on individual companies.”

If the unions break off the strike, it would represent a betrayal of historical dimensions. They would give Sarkozy and his government the possibility of isolating and playing off against one another those affected, making the removal the “régimes spéciaux” the starting point for comprehensive attacks on the entire working class.

The conservative newspaper *Le Figaro*, which functions as a mouthpiece for the campaign against the strike, is well aware of the broader significance of the current confrontation. In an editorial on Wednesday it again stressed how crucial a breakthrough against the railway workers was for all of the other proposed “reforms” of the government. “If one can push through this reform, then one has the means to accomplish all reforms” the newspaper explained.



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