

France: Rank-and-file workers force continuation of rail strike

Peter Schwarz in Paris
17 November 2007

Massive resistance from the rank and file has prevented attempts by French trade union leaders to bring about a summary end to the strike against the planned “reform” of special pensions. General assemblies of strikers, which meet on a daily basis, decided on Friday by a large majority to continue the walkout against the state railway (SNCF) and Paris transport system (RATP) at least until Monday.

A one-day strike, as well as mass protests, are planned in the public services for next Tuesday. The two- to three million workers employed in French schools, hospitals and municipal administrations are protesting against rising living costs and the elimination of jobs. The striking railway workers are preparing to participate in the demonstrations, and it is therefore likely that they will continue their strike on Tuesday.

Students, who have been protesting for two weeks against a new university law, are also expected in large numbers on the Tuesday demonstration, which promises to be the biggest protest action against the social policies of the government since Nicolas Sarkozy took over as president in May.

On Thursday morning it appeared that the unions were poised to call off the strikes against the ending of the “régimes spéciaux”—the special pensions for many state employees. The general secretary of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT), Bernard Thibault, had offered Employment Minister Xavier Bertrand separate negotiations on the régimes spéciaux on the basis of individual industries and factories—thus meeting one of the main demands of the government in the dispute. It appeared that a resumption of negotiations was imminent.

On Thursday, Bertrand issued a written invitation to six of the seven unions active in the SNCF and RATP to take part in negotiations on the level of individual

industries or companies, which would also be attended by government representatives. The trade union SUD (Solidaires, Unitaires, Démocratiques), which rejects negotiations as long as the government does not withdraw its reform project, was not invited.

Bertrand granted the unions a period of one month for negotiations. Afterwards, he said, “the texts regulating the reform of the different régimes spéciaux would be published and put into effect.”

At the numerous general meetings which assembled Thursday morning to discuss the course of the strike, massive resistance emerged against this attempt to strike a deal with the government. According to the unions, 17,000 strikers took part in the general assemblies across the country, with 95 percent voting for a continuation of the strike on Friday.

The meetings were characterised by deep distrust of the union leaders. A resolution which called upon the unions to reject any agreement without prior consultation with the rank and file was widely distributed and supported by a large majority at many of the meetings. (See: “France: Railway workers resist unions’ plan for sellout”)

In the afternoon, the leaders of the six unions met at the headquarters of the CGT to discuss their reaction to Bertrand’s invitation. In light of the militancy at the rank-and-file level, they concluded that the time was not right to accept the government minister’s offer.

Instead, they called for a provisional continuation of the strike and conveyed a vague reply to Bertrand, which summed up their dilemma. On the one hand, they want to keep the path open for negotiations and make a deal with the government as quickly as possible, on the other, they are concerned not to entirely lose face with the strikers.

As one worker at a general meeting put it: “The letter

of the union federations is unclear. It attempts to appease both the strikers and the government.”

President Sarkozy has pledged not to budge from the basic principles of his reform—a rise in working years from 37.5 to 40, higher deductions in the case of early retirement, and the indexing of pensions to price, rather than wage increases. But the letter drawn up by the unions did not address his demands. Instead, it mentioned in a general fashion “the central issues in the present conflict ... rejection of the framework of the government reform, the future of freight traffic, jobs and purchasing power.”

The union leaders referred to the strikers to explain their own restraint: “Railway workers spoke out at general assemblies on the need to find out more about the details on which the tri-lateral negotiations will be based.”

This is, to put it mildly, an understatement. In reality, the general assemblies unequivocally expressed their opposition to negotiations as long as the government did not withdraw the three basic principles of its pension reform. The union leaders want to negotiate the terms of the government’s “reform,” while the strikers have made clear they reject the entire project and want to force the government to bury it.

Finally, the union letter asked the employment minister to convene an initial meeting on Friday to specify “in the interests of complete transparency” the exact negotiation framework and schedule.

Bertrand immediately rejected this request and on Thursday evening explained: “There will be no negotiations as long as the strike persists.”

On Friday morning the general assemblies of strikers again voted by a large majority to continue the strike over the weekend. Once again, broad mistrust of the union leaders was evident, which union functionaries had great difficulty trying to dispel.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* attended a strike meeting at one of the main stations in Paris—the Gare du Nord—attended by some 75 strikers. Sentiment in favour of continuing the strike was so strong and unanimous that the issue did not even have to be debated.

An intensive discussion arose only on the question of whether the next strike meeting should be held on Monday or the next day, Saturday. Behind this apparently technical question is the fear that the unions

could use the weekend to organise a sellout. The meeting finally agreed to convene formally on Monday but hold an informal meeting on Saturday.

As was the case the day before, the general assembly adopted a resolution addressed to all unions involved warning them against making any concessions behind the backs of the strikers.

In the employers’ camp, Sarkozy has once again personally taken the initiative. He issued invitations for a meeting Friday afternoon at the Elysée Palace to all high-level personnel of the state companies concerned, as well as to the prime minister, the employment minister and the transport minister to discuss the government’s course of action.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact