

Teachers, public employees to join rail workers on strike

French workers need a new political strategy

The WSWs editorial board
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The following statement is being distributed to teachers, public employees and students who will strike on November 20, joining striking rail and electrical workers who are fighting attacks by the Gaullist government of President Nicolas Sarkozy on pensions, social programs and education.

The strikes and demonstrations taking place on November 20 all over France represent the biggest social movement against President Nicolas Sarkozy since his government took office in May. They testify to the broad and deep-seated opposition to Sarkozy's political agenda, which aims to transform France into a paradise for profiteers, where the rich can garner ever greater wealth at the expense of the living standards and rights of the mass of the population.

Sarkozy, who has publicly aligned himself with US President George W. Bush, is not only supporting the criminal foreign policy of US imperialism, he is also striving to create "American conditions" in France by destroying social rights won by the working class in decades of struggle.

The November 20 demonstrations will unite teachers, hospital, postal, municipal and other government workers with rail, public transport and electrical workers who have been on strike for seven days in defence of their pensions—the so-called the "régimes spéciaux"—as well as with students who are protesting against government plans to open up the universities to private enterprise, degrade the quality of higher education and limit access to it.

At stake are all of the social and democratic rights of the working class.

As far as the government is concerned, a defeat of the railway workers, one of the most militant sections of the working class, will open the way to attack all other sections of workers and throw the working class back to the conditions of poverty and brutal exploitation once described by Emile Zola.

It would be fatal to underestimate the dangers posed by Sarkozy's regime.

Its social base is small—the bosses, the rich and the super-rich, with whom the president socializes and maintains the closest political relations. But Sarkozy has the backing of the European governments and of international finance capital, which insist that France is far behind in "reforming," i.e., demolishing, its social welfare systems, which constitute an obstacle to the unhindered accumulation of profit. Sarkozy, moreover, has a political strategy and is determined to implement it, whatever the cost.

His aim is to isolate the most militant sections of the working

class, to inflict on them a decisive defeat, and then conduct brutal attacks on the rest of the people.

The conflict with the railway workers has been carefully prepared ever since Sarkozy took office. He has worked to isolate them by alluring the leaders of the different unions and playing them off against each other.

Under the headline "The Elyée is Counting on the Exasperation of the Travelling Public with the Strikers," *Le Monde* reported on Sunday on the strategic considerations being discussed in the highest government circles. It quoted Sarkozy as saying that the previous week he had played the card of "dialogue," and adding, "Everything we've done up to now will enable us to be firmer later."

Now, a second, more confrontational phase is to begin. "Next week we shall get onto politics and ideology," he said.

On Sunday, 8,000 supporters of the government party UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) marched through Paris, demonstrating against the strike and announcing further demonstrations should the stoppages continue.

The striking rail workers have displayed an admirable degree of militancy, courage and tenacity. However, in contrast to the government, they neither possess a strategy nor the leadership that is necessary to win the present dispute. The belief that the present government can be forced to back down by militancy alone is not only naïve, but highly dangerous.

Sarkozy has staked his entire future on the implementation of his so-called "reforms," which, from the standpoint of the bourgeoisie, can no longer be delayed. Workers and students fighting against these reforms are faced with political tasks.

To the counterrevolutionary strategy of the government, they must oppose their own revolutionary strategy. Pensions, jobs and education can be defended only through the full industrial and political mobilisation of the entire working class aimed at bringing down the Gaullist government and replacing it with a genuinely democratic workers' government.

The parties of the so-called "left," including the "far left," and the trade union organisations are utterly hostile to such a perspective. The cowardice and open collaboration of these organisations is the most important asset in Sarkozy's arsenal. A political and organizational break with these organisations, including an uncompromising political exposure of their collaboration with the government's policies, is the indispensable premise for a successful struggle against Sarkozy's attacks.

The Socialist Party is openly supporting the key element of the “reform” of the regimes spéciaux: the extension of the years necessary for a full pension from 37.5 to 40. Like Sarkozy’s UMP, it has repeatedly called for an end to the rail strike in the name of the travelling public—the classic argument of every strike-breaker. There can be no doubt that this party, should it ever again return into government, will implement social policies virtually indistinguishable from those of Sarkozy.

The Communist Party, while nominally supporting the strike, is giving full support to the manoeuvres of the trade unions with the government aimed at strangling the walkout.

The unions, desperate to avoid a political confrontation with the government, are working might and main to strike a rotten deal and betray the strike. In the electricity and gas sector, the unions have already entered into negotiations and virtually ended the strike, thus separating the gas and electrical workers from the rail workers.

At the state railway SNCF, one union, the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour) has called for an end to the strike, while the other five unions—including the CGT (General Confederation of Labour) and Sud (Solidarity, Unity, Democracy)—have agreed on a round table meeting with the management and the government on Wednesday, once Tuesday’s demonstration is out of the way.

A crucial role in preparing a sellout is played by the CGT, the most influential union at the railways. Before the strike even began, CGT General Secretary Bernard Thibault offered a major concession. This was generally interpreted as a gesture of submission or, as *Libération* put it, “the rejection of an ‘all or nothing attitude.’”

What role do Lutte Ouvrière (Workers’ Struggle) and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Communist League—LCR) play?

While both organisations officially support the rail workers’ strike and have called, in a joint statement, for “a massive offensive by the whole of the working class in order to force the government to retreat,” they cover up for the treacherous role of the “left” parties and the unions and do everything in their power to prevent the workers from breaking from them. One can hardly find a criticism of these organisations in their comments. Both organisations cultivate the dangerous illusion that pure trade union militancy will suffice to force the government to retreat.

Lutte Ouvrière, in the midst of the strike, announced that it is negotiating joint election lists with the Socialist Party in a number of cities—something the organisation has never done before. While the proverbial rat leaves the sinking ship, Lutte Ouvrière seems to be doing the opposite—providing this discredited bourgeois party with some left-wing credentials.

LCR spokesman Olivier Besancenot in the meantime is asking for unity with the Socialist Party... in support of the strike that the Socialist Party openly opposes!

On November 16, he directed an appeal to all the parties of the former Plural Left coalition—the Socialist Party, Communist Party and Greens—which formed Lionel Jospin’s government from 1997 to 2002. He declared: “The parties of the left must quickly take up their responsibility and take solidarity initiatives with the strikers.

That is why I am proposing to all the main leaders of the left parties a joint meeting, as soon as possible, so as to decide together on all the initiatives of support for the strikers and their demands.”

Whom is Besancenot trying to fool? He knows that the Socialist Party will not support the strike. His appeal is a cover-up.

It demonstrates the bogus nature of the so-called anti-capitalist party the LCR is founding in January. It will, like Communist Refoundation in Italy—which in the end joined the right-wing bourgeois government of Romano Prodi—be another mechanism for preventing workers from breaking from Social Democracy and turning to a genuine international socialist perspective.

France has a long history of powerful social movements that were aborted and betrayed. It is now almost 40 years since the general strike of 1968, when hundreds of thousands of students and millions of workers united in a common struggle against the regime of General de Gaulle. At that time it was the Communist Party and the CGT who saved de Gaulle. They refused to take power and strangled the strike by means of the Grenelle agreement. After that, it took another 13 years before the political right was removed from power.

Thirty-two years before that, a strike movement of revolutionary dimensions was betrayed by the Popular Front government of Léon Blum, paving the way for the return of the right wing and finally the Vichy regime.

It is necessary for workers to learn the lessons of these historical experiences. A political leadership must be built that can coordinate the strikes, demonstrations and political activities of the working class against the machinations of the entire ruling elite and all of its allies and political representatives, and provide a revolutionary socialist program that corresponds to the needs of working people.

This is only possible on an international level. There is no national answer to the crisis facing working people. Behind Sarkozy stands the European Union, the European governments and the big international corporations and banks.

It is no accident that German train drivers are on strike simultaneously with French railway workers. On both sides of the Rhine they are fighting against the subordination of the public services as well as every aspect of their personal lives to the diktat of big business.

These struggles must be coordinated and united.

We call on French workers and students to read the *World Socialist Web Site* and join the International Committee of the Fourth International in fighting to build a truly internationalist socialist party.



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