

# France: Vast mobilisation expected November 20 against Sarkozy's policies

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20 November 2007

General assemblies of railway workers all over France voted by 96 percent on Monday to continue their strike against the dismantling of the “régimes spéciaux” pension schemes and participate in Tuesday's mobilisation of public service workers against the policies of Gaullist President Nicolas Sarkozy.

The unions have called for some five million public service workers to carry out a one day-strike combined with mass demonstrations.

Also joining Tuesday's protests will be students opposing the university autonomy law, which will open up the universities to private enterprise, limit access to high-quality education to the most privileged social layers, and diminish educational standards for the majority. Already, student strikes and blockades are affecting half of France's 85 universities. The protesters have been subjected to police violence at several campuses.

The one-day protest strike will involve teachers, 65 percent of whom are expected to walk out, hospital, as well as postal, air transport and municipal workers. Their main demands are for wage rises to keep up with the sharply rising cost of food, energy and fuel and an end to jobs cuts in the public services. The government is carrying out a policy of attrition, in which 50 percent of retirees in the public services are not replaced.

A union spokesman on France Inter radio said that over the five years of President Sarkozy's term, 85,000 teaching posts (10 percent) will be lost, while the number of pupils will rise by about 140,000.

In addition, teachers' salaries have decreased in real terms by 6 percent since 2000.

On Monday, the rail and transport workers' strike, which began last Tuesday night, remained highly effective. Although the percentage of strikers,

according to the management of the SNCF state railway company, had fallen to at 26.2 percent from the 61.5 percent recorded last Wednesday, the first full day of the strike, the movement still involved some 40,000 workers, whose strike action continued to have a major impact on the rail system. Some 18 percent of Paris urban transport workers also remained out on strike.

Monday morning news bulletins reported traffic jams and backups stretching 500 kilometres. Of the 650 TGV express trains, 350 were not running. Some 75 percent of the Corail intercity trains and half of Paris' RER commuter trains were also out of service. Paris metro traffic had been slashed by 80 percent, with several lines reporting virtually no service. Less than half of Paris trams and buses were functioning.

This powerful movement has been maintained in the teeth of a hostile media and the opposition of all the main political parties, including the Socialist Party. They have urged rank-and-file workers to cease their action and leave it to the trade union bureaucracies to negotiate the implementation the government's “reform.” This is tantamount to accepting the main features of the government attack: lengthening the required years of work for a full pension from 37.5 to 40, sharply cutting benefits for those whose years of work fall short, and indexing pensions to prices rather than salaries.

It has been calculated that private sector workers, whose pensions are already indexed to prices, have over the past 15 years seen their benefits slashed by 20 percent.

Despite the strength and potential of the movement, the aims of the striking workers are in grave danger of being thwarted. The decision of the trade unions to participate in discussions with management and the government on Wednesday, under conditions where

these have made it clear that they are not prepared to give way on any of the three planks of the “reform,” can only mean that the unions are prepared to help the government impose its pension rollback.

Xavier Bertrand, the minister of labour, reiterated on Monday that giving up the pension “reform” was “out of the question.” The government has offered to grant wage increases to retiring workers as a sop to enable the unions to save face in front of the workers.

The unions reported that the general assemblies of rail workers all over France voted in favour of a resolution sanctioning the participation of union leaders in Wednesday’s “round table” talks. However, the resolution is formulated very vaguely. It states that “in the negotiations, they [the unions] are demanding, amongst other things, a response to their demands concerning the framework of the reform.” The resolution does not oblige the unions to categorically reject the three main planks of the government scheme.

A key role in obtaining favourable votes on the resolution at the strikers’ meetings was played by the SUD (Solidarity, Unity, Democracy) union. This organization, heavily influenced and staffed by representatives of various middle-class “left” tendencies, had previously criticized the other unions, including the Stalinist-dominated General Confederation of Labour (CGT), for agreeing to enter into talks with management and the government. SUD had rejected any negotiations until and unless Sarkozy withdrew his pension scheme.

Its about-face, agreeing to participate in Wednesday’s talks, is a major capitulation and underscores the immense danger of a betrayal by the unions, assisted by the so-called “left” parties—the Communist Party and Socialist Party—as well as the “far left” parties—Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Communist League) and Lutte Ouvrière (Workers’ Struggle)..

The media reacted with surprise. Agence France-Presse reported, “Even SUD-Rail, the second union in the company, which has the hardest positions in this dispute, assured AFP that it would ‘certainly be present’ at the negotiations.”

A similar agreement has been reached with the Paris public transport (RATP) unions. But there, SUD, which has only 6 percent representation, refused to participate in the talks.

*World Socialist Web Site* interviewed Ju<sup>th</sup>Aliart, a SUD-Rail leader in Paris, on his reaction to the fact that his union accepted the invitation. We reminded him that SUD-RAIL, less than a week ago, had supported a motion strongly warning the other unions not to make any accommodation on the three pillars of the “reform.”

That motion was passed by strikers’ assemblies all over France. It stated, “We demand to be consulted on any decision which would bear on our future and to be informed about the content of discussions at every stage,” and went on to declare its opposition “to any enterprise-by-enterprise negotiations.”

Aliart told the WSWs that if SUD-Rail had refused to participate in Wednesday’s meeting, “It could have meant that SUD would be facing management on its own. Tactically, it would have been a mistake for SUD to find itself isolated.”

Isolated from whom? Not from the strikers and the millions of workers and youth who support them. The about-face of SUD exposes its supposed independence from the other union bureaucracies as a fraud.



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