

French railway strike betrayed

Antoine Lerougetel
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France's trade unions have succeeded in isolating and betraying the transport strike in defence of the special regime pensions. After ten days, bereft of a perspective on which to defeat the government of president Nicolas Sarkozy, general assemblies all over France voted to go back to work. Large pockets of resistance, some 10 percent of railway workers, about 14,000, were still on strike.

The massive one-day strike of more than one million workers and demonstrations by public service employees on Tuesday, which brought some 700,000 out on the streets alongside the transport workers, was conceived of by the unions as a means of preventing a genuinely unified *political* offensive against Sarkozy's regressive social policies.

The running down of the strike and the isolation of the most determined workers over the next days was prepared by the decision of the trade unions, including the CGT (General Confederation of Labour, which is dominated by the Communist Party) and SUD-RAIL (Solidarity, Unity, Democracy), to enter into negotiations on Wednesday with the government and management without a prior withdrawal of the planned attack on pension rights.

SUD, in which many radical groups are active, including the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Communist League—LCR), had previously rejected participation in negotiations without the prior withdrawal of the government's reform. In particular were cited its three pillars: the lengthening of years of service required to qualify for a full pension from 37.5 to 40, the harsh *décote* penalty for retiring early and the indexation of pensions on prices rather than salaries.

SUD-RAIL agreed to attend the round table meeting with the government, SNCF state rail company and RATP urban transport management. The union bureaucracy worked for the endorsement of this

negotiation in strikers' general assemblies all over France, despite the adamant declarations of Sarkozy that he would not give way on the central issues.

The shift came at a point when the strike was causing great concern to Sarkozy's big business supporters. Laurence Parisot, the president of the main employers association MEDEF (Movement of French Enterprises), told RTL radio, "It's a real catastrophe for our economy... I see it as an earthquake," he said. "The cost of the strike is incalculable...Who knows how many investors have given up this or that operation in France?"

The government has said that the strike was costing the economy 400 million euros a day. The *Economist* commented, "The length and intensity of the strike has taken even veteran observers by surprise."

Sarkozy's fear was that the unions would be unable to control the railway workers. An article in the conservative newspaper *Figaro* on November 22 was entitled, "The head of state does not want to get the unions' backs up as long as the strike is not yet over."

It quotes an unnamed presidential advisor: "We were counting on the strike finishing yesterday, and we are resigning ourselves to waiting for 'white smoke'."

The article continues, "The head of state is unwilling to harden his tone against the unions in difficulty with their rank and file. He knows he needs them in order to continue with his reforms: the labour code, the merger of the employment exchanges with the unemployment welfare offices, private sector pensions, vocational training. 'The special regimes are just the aperitif for the other reforms, we will be needing responsible unions,' argues David Martignon, an Elysée [presidential] spokesman."

Sarkozy is worried about the decline in his popularity ratings due to the rise in the cost of living, which is making a mockery of his main campaign slogan, "Work more to earn more." The *Figaro* article points

out that the Elysée is already expecting French people to tighten their belts: “‘We’ve already voted the budget and we haven’t got a magic wand’, the Elysée recognises.” A minister confided to *Figaro*: “Everything we propose is insufficient. He’s looking for the philosopher’s stone, and can’t find it.”

Sarkozy’s belief has always been that his reorganisation of French society, to make it a haven for the self-enrichment of the wealthy elites and investors, must be done with the support of the trade unions.

While posturing as an oppositional tendency, the SUD and the radical groups within it have collaborated with the efforts of the other unions in imposing a sell-out. The *Financial Times* November 22 reported: “Even local committees of the hardcore SUD union voted on Thursday to end their action. Members have been calling for an end to the strike since the Wednesday talks. ‘We have to face reality,’ Philippe Touzet, a SUD union representative at the Paris’s transport operator RATP said in an interview. ‘Since yesterday’s negotiations, things have changed. The strike is no longer the solution. The strike strategy is no longer winning’.”

A statement issued on Thursday from the RATP branch of SUD said that it continued the strike “without any great conviction, and only out of respect for those members who are still pursuing the action.”

A SUD-RAIL press statement November 22 affirmed its continued alliance with the betrayers of the transport strike. It declared, “We shall wait for the emergence of a more unified mobilisation, the only sort that can counter the reform of our special regime—to call the workers into action again.”

Didier Le Reste of the CGT gave no recommendation to continue the strike, and left it to the junior ranking bureaucrats and political activists of the Communist Party, Socialist Party and assorted left radicals in the general assemblies to formally push for a decision to end the strike. The next negotiations will be November 29 for the SNCF, finishing on December 18, and for the RATP from November 26 to December 13. Bernard Thibault, the CGT leader, said that his union had no intention of disrupting the holiday season after the negotiations.

Turning reality on its head, the Communist Party daily *L’Humanité* claimed, “The negotiations have begun in transport. They have been won in a hard fight

by long days of striking and represent a first advance by the SNCF and SNCF workers.”

Olivier Besancenot of the LCR has both endorsed and covered for the trade union’s betrayal of the strike. In a speech Thursday he said of the return to work, “It’s not a defeat, neither morally nor on the main issue, even if the initial demand of the railway workers has not been obtained.” He declared himself “in solidarity with the decisions of the railway workers’ general assemblies.”

In contrast, *Libération* on November 23 gives a flavour of the betrayal felt by railworkers. A Marseilles striker and member of SUD said it was “Mindblowing... Eight days on strike for that. A sprinkling of offers, peanuts.”

At the Gare de Lyon station, a stronghold of the CGT, two out of three assemblies voted to continue the strike, “much to the annoyance of the CGT representatives,” *Libération* reported.

Even before the sell out on the SNCF, workers lobbying the meeting between RATP unions and management and government on Wednesday were enraged. *Libération* reports, “Whistles. Then boos. In the lobby of the RATP headquarters.... the CGT official, having come back down the stairs from the tripartite negotiations, had difficulty finishing his report. ‘Traitor’, ‘Sell out’, shouted most of the crowd, though they were mostly CGT members. The atmosphere was electric. Small groups formed arguing hotly. Sitting on one side Jean-Pierre ‘wants to vomit’.”



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