

France: Railway workers resist unions' plan for sell-out

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On Thursday, the third day of the massively supported strike against attack on pensions by the Gaullist government of President Nicolas Sarkozy, mass meetings of railway workers all over France voted by overwhelming majorities to continue and spread their struggle.

They expressed rejection of the three main pillars of the reform: the extension of the years of service necessary to entitlement to a full pension from 37.5 annuities to 40, the *décote*—deduction for early retirement—and the change from indexation of pensions based on wages to the less-favorable indexing according to prices.

Workers participating in the mass meetings expressed great mistrust of the actions being taken by the trade union leaderships and particular resentment toward the proposal by Bernard Thibault, the CGT (General Confederation of Labour) general secretary, that there should be branch-by-branch negotiations within the framework of the reform. This is a de facto recognition of the destruction of the *régimes spéciaux*—the special pensions long given to workers in particularly arduous occupations—and collaboration in the implementation of Sarkozy's reform.

The WSWS participated in a mass meeting of strikers from the sector of the Gare du Nord station in Paris. In attendance were train drivers, reception staff, ticket inspectors and also a delegation from the Le Landy workshops in Seine-Saint-Denis, north of Paris.

There were members of the CGT (the majority railway union), Sud Rail and Force Ouvrière (Workers Power)—the second and third largest unions—as well as members of the UNSA (National Union of Autonomous Trade Unions—close to the Socialist Party) and non-unionised workers.

Reports were read out from workplaces in the Paris

region, where between 60 and 100 percent of the workers were on strike.

Nazima from the CGT, who plays a leading role in the organisation of the mass meetings, said she had received a phone call from Tolbiac University, where students are on strike against plans to open up the universities to private enterprise, calling on the railway workers not to give up. She expressed disgust at the beating that had been meted out the previous day by riot police against students demonstrating at Nanterre University, calling it “a big blunder by the government.”

The meeting voted with three abstentions to continue the strike until the next day.

It also voted to set up a strike committee whose tasks would be to organise pickets and to spread the strike, particularly among urban transport workers and electricity and gas workers, whose special regime pensions are similarly under attack from the government.

The committee would also organise work to win support from the public and counter Sarkozy's propaganda machine, which is fully supported by the media.

The previous day, the Gare du Nord strikers had voted unanimously for a motion, which then received a wide circulation throughout France and was adopted in many mass meetings. This motion was now resubmitted as the basis for a reply to a letter sent by Xavier Betrand, the minister of labour, on November 14, inviting the unions to negotiations. The letter was rejected by all speakers at the mass meeting, because it proposed no withdrawal of the three pillars of the reform.

One worker, asked about the proposal made by CGT leader Bernard Thibault to the government, replied:

“What good do tripartite negotiations (between the management of the state-owned companies, the unions and government representatives) do? They offer absolutely no guarantees.”

Most significantly, it was decided, not only to circulate the motion to railway workers throughout France, but also to send it to the railway union leaders, who were meeting at 4:30 Thursday afternoon to discuss their reaction to Betrand’s invitation.

The motion declared: “We reject the move from 37.5 years to 40 years of contributions, the *décotes* penalties and the indexation of pensions on prices rather than salaries.”

The motion insists that the trade union leaderships make no agreements with the government without the consent of the rank-and-file. “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,” it says. “We declare that we are opposed to any negotiation enterprise-by-enterprise.”

Several participants in the debate pointed out that Betrand’s letter proposed negotiations in the different enterprises over a month with the idea that the strike would be dragged out over this period in order to wear down the movement.

Nazima, reproached the leadership of the CGT union for wanting to negotiate enterprise-by-enterprise when, “the government has given nothing on the key points. One month of negotiations means one month of striking for nothing.” She noted that “there is a divorce between the trade unions and the rank and file, who want to fight and have the reform withdrawn.”

A worker without a union badge said: “I was expecting the trade union leaderships to organise something bigger. The demonstration yesterday was only organised at the last minute. We’re at a crucial transitional period. Sakozy is playing musical chairs with the unions and telling us we are all going back to work. We must communicate that the mass meetings are the ones who decide. We must organise a collective organisation. We must win the public, point out that we are in the struggle with them on the rise of the cost of living and show that we aren’t privileged.”

He spoke against blocking the special high-speed trains—the TGV—and playing into the hands of those who wanted to portray the railway workers as Khmer

Rouge.

Other workers pointed out the urgency of picketing to stop the return to work and prevent trains from running, in order to spread the movement. A ticket office worker said that they had already set up a 6 a.m. picket to keep the offices closed

The WSWS spoke to Nazima, a CGT representative for the drivers, before the meeting. She said, “We want control over the movement. Yesterday, 70 percent of the drivers were on strike, and today it’s the same. Now we want the maximum of people to join together and to overcome the dispersed nature of the movement. We refuse to be impoverished. We don’t want negotiations behind our backs.

“I’m not against respecting the leadership of the CGT, but they must respect us too. We’re not just a bunch of nobodies. With these enterprise-by-enterprise negotiations, they should stop treating us as idiots. We don’t want to help Sarkozy apply his reform. Today, there are the students, the RATP, the EDF-GDF—we mustn’t allow people to get between us or let them break up the movement.

“We won’t give up until we get what we want. [CGT leader] Bernard Thibault said he would not negotiate in the framework of the government. I hope he has not changed his mind. If he discusses such a possibility, it cannot be on the basis of accepting the 40 years and the *décote* and so on. This is unacceptable. He must absolutely give up on that.”

René-Claude, a non-unionised worker on the suburban Paris trains employed by the SNCF, said: “The thing I’m most against is the *décote* penalty. The different unions don’t understand what’s happening at the grass roots. You get the impression that the unions do what they want and the grass roots are left flailing the air. It’s rather disappointing for the people directly concerned. It’s not acceptable that they don’t listen to us.”



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