

Interview with a French Airbus worker

“All the parties, even the far left parties, are moving to the right”

Antoine Lerougetel
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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently interviewed Claude Néau, a CGT (General Confederation of Labour) member at Airbus in Nantes, France, about the railway and urban transport workers strike in defence of their pensions. The basis for the discussion was the statement, “The betrayal of the French rail workers strike and the role of the LCR,” posted on the WSWWS November 29.

The LCR (*Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire*—Revolutionary Communist League), which has claimed to be Trotskyist, led by Olivier Besancenot and Alain Krivine, is proposing to set up a new “anti-capitalist” party. This organisation will be a centrist amalgam, bringing in disaffected elements of the Socialist Party and Communist Party, whose aim will be to block a genuine socialist and internationalist movement from emerging in the French working class. In order to do this, the LCR has officially abandoned any reference to Trotskyism.

Lutte Ouvrière, another organisation that still claims to be Trotskyist, has recently announced its decision to participate next year for the first time in its history in joint lists in the municipal elections with the Socialist Party, whose policies differ only marginally from that of the right-wing Gaullists in power.

The rail workers, who had struck for eight days in the face of government and media hostility and the rottenness of the trade union leaderships, were delivered an enormous blow when all the union federations, including the majority CGT and the “left” SUD-rail (Solidarity, Unity, Democracy), entered into negotiations with the government and the employers November 21.

Until then, SUD, which is strongly influenced by middle class left organisations, had refused any negotiations without the prior withdrawal of the government’s “reform,” which destroys the rail workers’ pension scheme currently permitting retirement on a full pension after 37.5 years of service, extending it to 40 years, combined with a harsh penalty for falling short of the required annuities.

Claude Néau, 51, has been a member of the CGT for 10 years and a member of its leading committee in Airbus, Nantes, for three years and took a leading role in the strike against Power 8 at his site this year. His facility makes and assembles A320 and

A321 planes. He has been a sympathiser of *Lutte Ouvrière*, which opposes a political struggle to bring down the regime of President Nicolas Sarkozy and argues merely for militant pressure.

WSWS: How do you see the rail workers’ strike?

CN: The rail workers were well motivated. As far as the rank and file go, I think it got off to a good start despite the fact that right from the start Thibault [Bernard Thibault, general secretary of the CGT] wanted to break the strike. The rank and file resisted all the same, but there were the continual interventions of the trade unions and especially Thibault. These interventions were directed against the strike, asking for negotiations to be carried out enterprise by enterprise—and especially not to combine the movements of other workers as well as the students.

He told the students to go back to their universities and to get off the railway tracks. The railway workers were knocked back, but I think they’re still ready to start again.

Thibault serves Sarkozy well. His job is to contain the anger of the railway workers and the others. There were the public service workers, more or less all sections. Sarkozy was afraid that the strike would generalise into the private sector, too. So “Private Thibault” has an important role to play. [During the strike, Sarkozy famously declared, “We must be saving Private Thibault.”]

WSWS: How do you see the role of the LCR and LO during the strike?

CN: I think LO in Nantes worked well. I can’t say for the other towns and the national level. As far as concerns the LCR, we know they have a strong presence in SUD, and SUD gave way somewhat at the end.

WSWS: But SUD gave its support to the round table by being present at it. As we said, the negotiations were about the price of the sell-out. The LCR and LO did not say that. They did not break with the trade union bureaucracies.

CN: Yes, I know that LO said that during the negotiations, “the strikers should keep up the pressure.”

I have the impression that all the parties, even the far-left parties, are moving to the right; they are not the right, but they are going that way. As for LO’s decision to participate in joint lists with the Socialist Party in the municipal elections in the

middle of the strike, my LO friends assured me that there had been no compromise. It was so they could have electoral lists where there are not very important Communist Party mayors. Those were the sorts of arguments they tried to use to deflect my anger on the question.

Thibault and Didier Le Reste [CGT rail leader and CP member] are there to help the government, there's nobody to defend us against this government apart from ourselves through strikes and even going on to a revolution, or to represent us in our fight, in what we need to do to change the system.

WSWS: Our call to build a party based on real socialism, a revolutionary perspective, do you think this is necessary and feasible?

CN: Necessary yes, but feasible right now, I don't know. There's a lot of work to be done. Sarkozy has the media working for him. He's a good communicator and a good liar. He manages to delude the population.

WSWS: Because there is no organised opposition.

CN: Amongst other things. There's no political or trade union opposition, and he uses that. We don't get any help.

WSWS: We see the revolt in Villiers-le-Bel as linked to the sell-out of the strike; it isolates the most oppressed sections of the working class.

CN: It's the logic of developments, the eruption of violence. There was an accident that sparked it off, but that was brewing. They are on the scrap heap. It's the same for the working class—they are oppressed, on the scrap heap, hated. It's nothing to do with the "hoodlumocracy, "scum (*racaille*)" or whatever. It's the result of right-wing, far-right politics. Because they've got foreign parents, they are not considered to be French, though they are. They find it hard to get work, and when they do, they are completely exploited. They live on council estates that need repair. You can only expect explosions, and I reckon it's not going to stop. Sending in the police solves nothing; it just increases the hatred.

WSWS: I'll read from the statement: "LO and LCR have used their authority to cover up the betrayal carried out by the trade unions and official left and nip in the bud any rebellion against these organisations. Had the LCR openly mobilised its forces against the trade unions and warned against the sell-out, which was on the cards from the first day of the strike, it would have had a considerable effect on the course of the dispute. But they did the exact opposite and deliberately worked to head off any rebellion against the trade union bureaucracy."

CN: Besancenot was not exactly revolutionary. He's going right off. You can tell because he's even questioning Trotskyism. When you talk to LCR members, they don't seem to know what he's up to. They refuse to recognise it. His new party will be a reformist party, not a communist party.

WSWS: One thing that puts the LCR and LO together is that they see the unity of the working class only through the unity of the trade union bureaucracy.

CN: That's true. In the November 28 issue of *Lutte Ouvrière*

weekly, there was a headline: "The SNCF [national rail company], during the negotiations the strikers must not relax their pressure," so that means they want the trade unions to negotiate. It's true that they did not talk much about the betrayal of the trade unions. They more or less helped them when they should have been denouncing them, saying that they should above all not put their confidence in the trade unions, that the unions should not go to the negotiating table, rather continue the struggle and spread it, even bring the private sector in with the public sector. That they did not do.

WSWS: What about Airbus?

CN: We are completely done for by the trade unions. There's a real mafia between the unions and management. For the blue-collar workers it's seen as betrayal but it doesn't go any further. It revolts them, but to go further, that's another kettle of fish. I know it's still brewing at the plant on the issue of striking again as we did last spring, but they're afraid of what the trade unions will do. It's difficult for those who want to fight at Airbus. And when they see what happened at the SNCF, it demoralises them even more.

We can see that the attacks are starting again with the newspaper reports today. [Louis] Gallois [the head of EADS, Airbus's parent company] and [Tom] Enders [boss of Airbus] are disagreeing over the sale of sites: Gallois wants to go more slowly and Enders faster. The unions are starting to blame the Germans.

WSWS: We can see with the German and French rail strikes the same basic issues are at stake: the destruction of rights in preparation for privatisation. The European governments and the European bourgeoisie are behind Sarkozy. The working class needs to build its own independent international organisation.

CN: There's no limit to how far they will go and the situation will explode. History tells us that even if there's an explosion, things can go wrong, Stalinism. After the French Revolution, they got rid of the royalists and we got the capitalists.

It's a necessary perspective. It's going to be a tough fight, but if we don't do it it's going to be bad. There's a hell of lot of work to be done.



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