

Discussion on the lessons of the French strikes

Workers must have “a way of acting politically on a global scale”

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The WSWs interviewed Jacques, an employee at the Paris town hall, about the strike by French railway and urban transport workers 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 WSWs November 29. The statement analyses the record of the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Communist League), led by Olivier Besancenot and Alain Krivine.

The LCR, which in the past has claimed to be Trotskyist, is proposing to set up a new “anti-capitalist” party in the new year. 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 (LO), 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 the required service to 40 years, combined with a harsh penalty for falling short of the required annuities.

Due to be completed before Christmas, negotiations are proceeding with all the rail unions, including SUD-rail, except the autonomous train drivers’ union, which is negotiating separately. They are discussing the details of how to align railway workers’ pensions with that of other government workers. This means accepting the unfavourable terms forced on teachers, hospital and municipal workers by the sell-out of the struggle in 2003 in

defence of their pensions, a defeat that paved the way for Sarkozy’s present offensive against the special regime pensions of rail and Paris urban transport workers as well as those in the gas and electric utilities.

Jacques, who is 49 years old, has been working for the Paris town hall for some 20 years as an administrative secretary, a job that gives him an overview of the social conditions in the Paris region.

He told the WSWs that he was not in a union “because there was such a great dispersion of small town hall unions that it’s not easy to choose between the different policies of all of them. This is typical of French workers—a smaller percentage are members of unions than even in the United States.

WSWS: What do you think about the rail strike?

J: It reminded me of previous big strikes—the energy of the 2003 strike. But at the same time, there was wavering. I think the organisation was rather similar. There were strike committees and very weak support from the unions.

WSWS: Do you agree with us that it was betrayed?

J: I’m not sure. What I do not think is right is that there’s a sort of complicity between the trade unions and the government: the secret meetings before the strike. I think the relations between the trade unions and the government should be totally transparent and open. There should be no relations that the union members are not informed about. Due to the fact that this is not the case, we can have no confidence in the trade union leaders.

I was well aware of the significance of Sarkozy’s statement, “We must be saving Private Thibault [referring to Bernard Thibault, general secretary of the Communist Party dominated CGT—General Confederation of Labour]. They were negotiating on so-called beneficial things other than what was demanded by the rank-and-file strike committees, against their demands.

Being a town hall worker, I was affected by the 2003 “reform of pensions,” but being involved in looking at the politics, I was not involved in the actions.

WSWS: What do you think will be the consequences of the betrayal of the railway worker?

J: They must be negotiating certain advances in career and wages and things like that. It’s better than nothing for the workers, but it does not maintain the special-regime pensions. Most importantly it’s part of a confrontation between workers and the government.

There's pressure on the labour code, social security, out-of-pocket medical costs. A lot of things don't make sense. There's a sort of intention to create a chaotic situation in things like the labour code, social security, a lack of balance. Then they are going to say of these beneficial things: "They don't work. You see!" They are going to dismantle them gradually. They don't want to know about making things work better. They want to smash things that are working well so that afterwards they can make proposals for a very free-market France.

The Socialist Party, the Communist Party and the unions, they accept this.

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."

What do you think of this devastating analysis of the LCR and LO?

J: Indeed, they are much more supportive of the trade union apparatuses than they are of the movements of the rank-and-file. They are opportunistic. I think their strategy is largely directed at the media, and then there's a formal support for the trade unions and the workers.

They don't really involve themselves with the workers in a dynamic way for a deepening of the understanding and action of workers on the ground, in the strike.

WSWS: That means bringing in a socialist consciousness.

J: Absolutely. The crisis of capitalism must be understood in a framework that goes beyond the national framework, as the WSWS proposes. There must at least be a European perspective.

WSWS: We propose the building of a socialist and internationalist organisation completely independent of the organisations that keep the capitalist system going: the trade unions, the Socialist Party, the Communist Party.

J: I agree completely with that. It's essential. It's necessary to build in each country. I can see that in France it's a small group that is setting it going. I think especially there is going to be a need for people able to follow and analyse different issues. There has been the strike, for example, but there's also the complex question of the labour code, social security, healthcare.

At the same time, we need to bring international action into the national, people able to analyse what's happening in this country and then to coordinate internationally.

The bosses are already united. There are tens of unions and just one bosses' organisation. At a European level, the bosses are extremely well organised. They organise with international and global organisations, between the US and Europe.

We have to have the same way of acting politically on a global scale. Otherwise, there's a sort of impotence that destroys workers' capacity to act.

WSWS: What are your thoughts about the Villiers-le-Bel youth riots?

J: Perhaps we should not concentrate too much on the incident where two youngsters died in an accident. There are very harsh relations between pauperised youth and the police in certain municipalities where there are frightful levels of unemployment. I've seen some incredible levels. They are communities where they suffer frequent police checks based on their colour or look, constant police pressure, so there are very strong tensions. You have to see the situation in this context. That's why there are periodic explosions as soon as there's an accident or a police slip-up.

In the case of Villiers-le-Bel, it was kept local because of the enormous resources mobilised to stop it from spreading.

WSWS: Were you surprised that that no left organisation called for the withdrawal of the 1,000-police intervention force?

J: I was astonished. Anyway, there is no attempt to educate the youth politically. It suits everybody that the youth are involved in self-destructive actions rather than developing a political consciousness, real demands.

Since the 1980s, we've seen the political parties trying to create phoney organisations supposed to represent the youth on the council estates. They're completely controlled from above. There's no socialist political education for the youth to have a role in society.

For example, there was SOS Racisme, which has completely degenerated. The entire leadership was controlled by the Socialist Party, but so that the youth would keep quiet, nothing to do with developing political awareness.

WSWS: What do you think of our web site?

J: It's very rich. At the moment, I'm trying to read the "History and Culture" section. I find it quite interesting. I know a little Marxism, not particularly deeply, but Trotskyism had more or less escaped my attention. It was Trotsky who wanted to save Marxism and Leninism from the Stalinist reaction and other tendencies to maintain the revolutionary spirit of the last century.

I'm reading about the setting up of the Fourth International and how it was done at an extremely difficult moment. It was for the long term, and it was indispensable because, otherwise, if he had not founded it, as there was a complete political genocide of the Bolsheviks in Russia, nothing would have remained of the Bolshevik spirit.

So it's all that dimension which I'm studying. I'm interested in human history, and these are things that I had not known about.



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