

France: One-day rail strikes in defence of pensions called off

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The French rail unions are desperately manoeuvring to reach a deal with president Nicolas Sarkozy to prevent a resurgence of the strike that paralysed the country for 10 days in November.

The unions have been involved for three weeks in tripartite negotiations with the management and the government. Their decision on November 21 to end the strike and enter branch by branch negotiations meant that they had abandoned the defence of the special pension schemes of railway and other public enterprise workers and were “just negotiating over the price of their surrender,” as the WSWs noted at the time.

However, as the one-month time limit set by the government for the negotiations is approaching its end, the unions have not been able to obtain the price they need to finalise the sell-out. The government, as it turned out, has given them nothing.

As SUD-rail (Solidarity, Unity, Democracy) noted in its December 7 information bulletin on the negotiations, “Nothing, absolutely nothing, has changed in relation to what was proposed [by the government] before the strike.”

After nearly three weeks of roundtable negotiations, the unions could report no concession from the government. A CGT (General Confederation of Labour) statement on the RATP (Paris public transport) tripartite negotiations, issued December 8, pointing to issues which needed settling, did not even mention the key demand of the transport workers: the total withdrawal of the reform. It says, “The government must still advance on the setting up of a harmonising system, the taking into account of study years for the length of the insurance, and the financing of the measures agreed in the negotiations.”

In a leaflet directed at railway workers, published December 8, the CGT admits that, despite certain cash

advances for certain categories of workers, “We haven’t got there yet ... on the maintenance and improvement of our special regime and its rights.”

It was under these conditions that the CGT reluctantly decided to call for a one-day protest. The token nature of the proposed measure was underlined by the fact that it was strictly limited to a 24-hour stoppage and that the Paris metro workers and the rail workers were to strike on separate days: on December 12 and December 13 respectively.

Such symbolic protests will not change the attitude of the government. As Prime Minister François Fillon clearly stated, “If it is a matter of making the government retreat on the principles of the reform, it is useless. It is not one more strike in December that will make us change our position: the government decrees on the reform will be published in early 2008.”

The government reacted to the announcement of the one-day strikes by extending the negotiation period from December 12 to December 18 for the RATP (Paris metro) and from December 18 to February 2008 for the SNCF (railways).

This was sufficient for the CGT to call off the strikes. Under no conditions do they want to negotiate under the pressure of an ongoing strike movement. Even though, as the SUD-rail information bulletin noted, “Without the pressure of tens of thousands of striking rail workers, the government is confirming the introduction of its counter-reform.” The bureaucrats’ fear is that the strikes might escape their control and develop into a mass movement against the government.

The experiences of the past two months have demonstrated that the trade unions constitute a major obstacle in developing and broadening a mass movement against the Sarkozy regime. And these bureaucracies are protected from the ire of workers by

the so-called far left, LO (*Lutte Ouvrière*—Workers Struggle) and the LCR (*Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire*—Revolutionary Communist League).

The first mass strike in defence of the special pension schemes took place on October 18. With a 75 percent participation rate at the SNCF, well over 60 percent at the RATP and 40 percent at the EDF and GDF electricity and gas utilities, it was one of the biggest mobilisations in recent French history.

The following day, thousands of transport workers continued the strike at the call of SUD-rail and FO (*Force Ouvrière*—Workers Power). General assemblies voted not to go back to work. The CGT did its utmost to isolate the strikers, calling on its members to boycott the meetings and to break the strike. Revolts of CGT members, against their union leadership, took place throughout the RATP and the SNCF. The strike was only brought to a halt by the decision of a joint meeting of the rail union federations to prepare large-scale action throughout November.

Lutte Ouvrière, remarkably, is still defending the CGT's role at the time. An article in its monthly magazine *Lutte de Classe* (Class Struggle) comments: "Although SUD and FO's position might have appeared more radical than that of the CGT in the eyes of the most militant rail workers—that was the intention—the CGT argued that the rail workers should not be isolated from the rest of the working class. The argument was not without merit. To continue a strike limited to the railway workers alone ... was not the best mobilisation strategy."

On October 31 the rail union federations met and, shaken by the scale of the revolt, called for an indefinite strike starting November 13. But even before the strike began, CGT-leader Bernard Thibault offered branch-by-branch negotiations to the government. Thus he abandoned the demand for a withdrawal of the key planks of the pension reform—the extension of years of service from 37.5 to 40 for eligibility to a full pension, the *décote* penalty for annuities not acquired, and the alignment of pensions on prices rather than wages—and effectively sabotaged the strike.

The delaying tactics of the union bureaucracies meant that the strike started with less participation—62 percent, gradually diminishing to 27 percent. It was slowly but surely exhausted until the unions were able to stop it and return to the negotiating table.

The present manoeuvres of the unions are entirely in line with their general treacherous role. It is impossible to defend workers' living standards and social and democratic rights without a break with the trade union bureaucracies.



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