

France: Mass demonstrations against social austerity plans

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Last month, France saw two mass demonstrations: the first, on January 22, to defend the special regime pension schemes (*regime spéciaux*) and the second, two days later, was a one-day strike to protest against the job cuts and declining purchasing power of salaries of government workers.

On Tuesday January 22, thousands of railway workers (According to the CGT, 50,000 people), along with RATP (public transport company), EDF and GDF workers, participated in the demonstration in Paris to defend the special regime pension, their wages and their jobs and to oppose the restructuring of the freight service at SNCF (the national railway company). The demonstration was called by the railway unions: CGT, CFDT, CFTC, CGC and UNSA. Railway unions FO and SUD rail were absent from the demonstration, and they called for a strike and demonstration with public sector workers on January 24.

On Thursday January 24, nearly a quarter of all French public sector workers — well over a million — participated in a one-day strike, and a number of demonstrations took place nationwide to defend purchasing power, demand wage increases and contest the 22,900 job cuts planned for this year. Teachers, hospital and municipal workers, students and a few railway workers participated in demonstrations held all over France. The number of participants was 400,000 according to CGT, which was less than that on the November 20 day of action (1.5 million), last year.

Though smaller than the demonstrations that accompanied the October-November railway strikes against pension cuts, these actions clearly demonstrate that a substantial layer of the working class does not intend to simply give in to President Nicolas Sarkozy's reforms without a fight. However, the opposition between the aims of the workers and the perspective of

the CGT trade union bureaucrats who called the strike could not be starker.

Publicly, the CGT bureaucracy presents itself as doing the best it can in a difficult situation. CGT railway leader Didier Le Reste explained: "My goal is that tomorrow, when railway workers retire on the new system, that they will lose as little as possible."

This pose is, however, utterly cynical. The CGT leadership, with the other official trade union federations, relentlessly fought to keep the October strikes limited to a one-day action and to prevent the November strikes from merging with the struggles of the public sector workers and of students opposing university reforms. In that sense, workers' powerful response to the current strike calls simply underlines the fact that they are objectively calling for a political leadership far to the left of the CGT, whose constant negotiations with Sarkozy represent a calculated betrayal of the workers' aspirations.

The unviability of a trade union perspective for defending workers' rights was underlined recently by the coming into effect of several measures directed against railway workers, and more broadly against the entire working class.

On January 16, even though negotiations are still underway at SNCF (the national railway company) and EDF (the public electricity monopoly), the decree reforming special regime pensions was published in the *Journal Officiel*— the register of state laws and decrees, and thus became law. The reform will take effect on July 1.

"Special regime" pensions are enjoyed by 1.6 million workers (500,000 active and 1.1 million retired workers), including workers at SNCF, RATP (Parisian public transport), EDF, GDF (the national natural gas company), and the miners. According to a recently

published article in *Les Echos*, the new reform will allow the government to save about 500 million euros per year in the medium term.

The contents of the decree are similar to the “*documents d’orientation*” describing the measures of the reform in early October 2007. So the decree reproduces the same measures initially proposed by the government. In this regard, the unions’ negotiation with government officials and company management was shown to be completely empty. This signalled the defeat of the workers’ struggle to maintain the historic social rights embodied in the special regime pension.

To qualify for a full pension, the contribution period will be gradually increased from the present 37.5 years to 40 years in 2012, the same as the rest of the public and private sector. The contribution period will increase one quarter every six months until July 1, 2012, when it will reach the maximum defined in the 2003 pension reform—40 years (160 quarters). A drastic penalty, the *décote* (deduction), eventually a 5 percent reduction of the pension per missing annuity, will make early retirement before the official age financially unviable for railway, public transport, and gas and electricity workers, in line with the reform imposed on five million government workers in 2003.

From January 1, 2009, special pensions will no longer be indexed to the movement of wages but rather to the usually less favourable official inflation figures, guaranteeing a permanent stagnation of the living standards of pensioners.

This reform is, moreover, simply a prelude to a general attack on pension rights to be carried out in the upcoming renegotiation of the 2003 pension reform passed by then-Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin. The government will revise all pension schemes, including in the private and public sectors, which will take effect in the second quarter of 2008. Under the new reform, the contribution period for full pension will be extended from 40 years to 41 in 2012 for private and public sector worker. The extension on the special regime pensions will also be raised to 41 years in 2016.

At the same time as the decrees on pensions were issued, a decree imposing a minimum service, severely restricting public transport workers’ right to strike, was issued. Up until now, an official strike notice, issued by a recognised union body five days before the beginning of the strike, covered workers from being sued for

breach of contract. A circular issued by the SNCF national rail company spells out the new regulations: the “dispute or reasons must be explained in writing to management by a trade union representative or shop steward chosen for this. A strike notice can only be issued by a trade union organisation after having carried out this procedure and after eight full days following receipt of its request for a meeting.” This, plus the 5 days strike notice, adds up to a delay of at least 13 days before a strike can be legal.

In addition to these constraints are rules designed to reduce to the minimum the effectiveness of a transport strike. Strikers involved in driving and running the trains and signalling will be required to hand in a written notification to management 48 hours before going on strike. This is in accordance with the August 21 law on the minimum service in transport which “gives passengers new rights in the event of foreseeable disruption of services, guaranteeing for them free, accurate and reliable information to be delivered 24 hours before the disruption.”

The second is the right of management to require non-strikers to carry out the work of striking colleagues. Even workers not concerned with the strike, because off-duty, will be obliged to declare themselves strikers as “staff can be given a new mission, even if initially they were due to be off-duty.”

During the strike of government workers, a major section of which is the state school system, the implementation of “minimum service” was tested in some schools. Only 10 percent of communes (1,900), mainly with right-wing majorities, experimented with measures providing alternative activities for children at struck schools. This was a propaganda effort to boost the plans of Xavier Darcos, the minister of education, to introduce legislation obliging teachers to submit to similar restrictions on their right to strike as has been imposed on transport workers.



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