

France: Train drivers strike against attacks on working conditions

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Train services throughout France were heavily disrupted as train drivers strongly supported the call for a one-day strike on Thursday November 6 by SUD (Solidarity-Unity-Democracy) and the CGT (General Confederation of Labour, close to the Communist Party). The two union groups, representing 60 percent of the drivers, are protesting attacks on working conditions in the freight division of the SNCF national public railway company.

It is the first national strike to be organised since the explosion of the financial crisis in September obliged governments in France and all over the world to bail out the banks with massive injections of public money, amid a rapidly deepening recession and sharply rising unemployment.

The strike began at 8 p.m. Wednesday and finishes at 8 a.m. Friday. Half the regional and intercity trains did not run and the high-speed TGV train services were reduced by between 50 and 25 percent. The key outer Paris RER urban lines were running at half capacity. The suburban trains operating from Paris's mainline terminals were particularly affected, with only 35 percent circulation from the Gare de Lyon. The Paris metro and bus services have not been affected.

The CGT and SUD-rail issued the strike call on October 30 in opposition to a plan to induce volunteer drivers to work outside existing regulations. Last June the drivers had already carried out two strike days to protest against the company's plan. The unions are trying to exert pressure on a joint management-union commission called to discuss the plan, due on November 12.

The news agency AFP reports November 3: "The SNCF management appealed this summer for drivers to volunteer under a 'transitory' regulation in the freight

division. It said that 800 drivers out of 4,000 had responded to this appeal."

The SNCF claims that in order to face private competition it must "change the drivers' working conditions" in the freight sector by introducing "flexibility in the regulations" —that is to modify rest periods. It will be possible for drivers to have longer work stints and they will have to be more flexible in their schedules.

There are also plans to make workers "poly-competent"—interchangeable to carry out different tasks beyond their normal job description. The rail workers see this as regressive, undermining their working conditions and threatening those of the entire industry.

The strength of the drivers' support for the strike can be seen as part of a growing movement of resistance to government austerity measures with cuts in the education and health services, the continued lengthening to the years of work required to enjoy a full pension, the erosion of protection from the work code, the growth of unemployment and the loss of the purchasing power of wages.

Although passenger train drivers are not immediately affected by the proposed changes in conditions for their colleagues in the freight division, they have massively supported the action. This is significant because, unlike the freight drivers, they come under the new minimum service regulations, imposed on the passenger sector at the beginning of the year along with the sell-out and defeat of the pensions' struggle, which require them to give two days notice in writing of their intention to strike. This could have been expected to have acted as a deterrent.

Fabien Villedieu, a SUD freight train driver at the Paris Gare de Lyon station, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "This issue of RH007 [the code regulating

work and rest times] is a continuation of the loss of our rights represented by the attack on the special pension schemes and the minimum service requirement. This is the first time our regulations on rest times have been touched in a negative way—before, changes have always meant an improvement."

"They'll start with freight and then it'll be all rail workers. A surprising amount of passenger drivers have committed themselves to supporting the action."

The French rail system has been opened up to private competition in the freight sector since 2006, and private enterprise now represents 10 percent of the rail freight market. A CGT leaflet points out that in 2007, just 40 GTK (kilometre tonnes transported) of freight were carried by the SNCF with a deficit of about 260 million and the perspective for the next 5 years was of "only 44 GTK with an imposition of mobility, job losses, regulations with no concern for health, safety and family life."

Bruno Duchemin, general secretary of the exclusively train drivers' union the FGAAC (Général Autonomous Federation of Train Drivers, representing nearly 30 percent of the drivers) and which did not call its members and supporters out on this strike, observed, "But you can't ask a driver to work eight hours at night without a rest."

However, he did not reject the reform out of hand and continued, "Financial compensation will have to be found but also ways of providing for safety and the drivers' rest periods." His union, he said, is preparing for a possible "unlimited strike" from November 17.

The drivers make up about 10 percent of the 160,000 workers employed by the SNCF. Management is attempting to break the special status of train drivers and to make freight drivers part of a "freight family" wherein they would be an integral part of the freight railway worker force including all categories. This same elimination of their special status could then spread into the passenger section.

The traditional militancy of train drivers, who have derived their strength from their ability to immediately stop the rail system and thus exert pressure on the state, is inadequate for countering French capitalism's drive to compete through driving down the rights and living standards of all workers.

Workers can place no confidence in sectional trade union actions, nor the trade unions to defend them from

this offensive. The CGT and other unions, joined by SUD-rail at the round table discussions at the end of 2007, negotiated the end of the fight against the dismantling of the special pension schemes. The CGT and the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour, close to the Socialist Party) collaborated with the government and the employers this year to deregulate the working week with the "Common Position".

The struggle to defend workers' rights and conditions and the social services can only be carried out through a break from the trade unions and the building of independent organisations of struggle—action committees which link up their struggle with colleagues throughout the railway industry Europe-wide, and with workers in all other sectors facing similar attacks.



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