

France: The LCR and the unions betray planned rail strike

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The calling off of last month's planned rail strike was a significant betrayal by the trade unions, led by the General Confederation of Labour (CGT). It would have been the first major national confrontation, going beyond a one-day protest, between workers and the conservative government of President Nicolas Sarkozy since the development of the world banking crisis.

The response to this event by Olivier Besancenot's *Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire* (LCR) is therefore of some significance. Given that the LCR is on the verge of launching itself as the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA), it provides an insight into the political role that will be played by this new formation and its real relationship with the old Stalinist and social democratic bureaucracies.

The proposed strike was to be held against the government's plans to initiate changes in work schedules for drivers in the freight section. This is only a precursor to the destruction of working conditions throughout the SNCF national rail company in preparation for its break-up and privatisation. A popular one-day stoppage by drivers November 6 augured well for the open-ended strike, due to start November 23.

Whenever social tensions become too great, the trade union bureaucracies ensure that any movement of working people does not get out of hand. They act to isolate struggles and limit them to narrow demands.

Instead of mobilising the 160,000 SNCF workers, only the train drivers were called out, and just on the issue of freight drivers' work schedules. Then, in the run-up to the strike date, all the different rail unions backed off the strike as different negotiations with management produced various insignificant concessions. The *coup de grace* was struck by the CGT, when it issued a November 21 statement "suspending" its strike call. The CGT is the majority rail workers' union and is close to the Communist Party.

SUD (Solidarity-Unity-Democracy), which advances itself as a militant alternative to the CGT, was the only union to go ahead with a strike, but for just one day. Besancenot is a member of the SUD postal workers' union and has almost unlimited access to the media. Yet he did nothing to mobilise opposition to the CGT's decision to call off the strike. Instead, the LCR waited until the

strike was called off to denounce the fact that the CGT had sabotaged it. Even then, it merely called for workers to put greater pressure on the trade union bureaucracies and demand that they unite in action.

The LCR's weekly journal, *Rouge*, asserted November 27, "Fundamentally, nothing can justify the withdrawal of the CGT; it's purely and simply sabotage." But in the same issue, *Rouge* calls on the rank-and-file to "impose" on the trade unions to organise "a real united strike" and for a halt to the "dispersal and fragmentation of struggles and mobilisations." And after this appeal to the rank-and-file, it immediately makes an identical appeal to the very forces responsible for the sabotage, what they call "the social and political left," or to call things by their proper name, the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the Greens, plus the unions. These tendencies are urged to "stir up the discontent and make the movements of resistance converge."

The unions' betrayals cannot be prevented by militant pressure. They are not workers' organisations, but function as instruments of big business in disciplining their members.

The degree to which the trade unions in France have been integrated into the apparatus of corporate management and the state is extraordinary. Their actual support in the working class is minimal. Trade union membership is just 7 percent of the workforce, and that of the CGT, at a generous estimate, is between 2 and 3 percent.

However, the unions remain wealthy and influential bodies because the post-World War II setup gave the CGT and other unions joint responsibility with the employers on administrative bodies running the social security funds providing pensions, unemployment benefits, health insurance and other services. The unions provide a considerable layer of bureaucrats with lucrative emoluments and useful contacts with employers and state officials. Even the most generous estimates calculate that only half the unions' finance comes from members' dues, and this assessment naturally takes no account of the numerous perks, favours and hidden paybacks to bureaucrats from the corporations that are an open secret. The palatial headquarters of the CGT at Montreuil in Paris is testimony to the lifestyle and state resources enjoyed by its leadership.

This collaborative relationship between the state, the employers and the trade unions did not end with the electoral route of the

Plural Left and the victory of Sarkozy. He has made clear since coming to office that he considers their role as “social partners” vital in pushing through his counter-reforms. He has met continually with the French trade unions to draw up and discuss policy.

In September, in his role as president of the European Council, Sarkozy met with a delegation from the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) led by its president, Wanja Lundby-Wedin, and general secretary, John Monks, and including French trade union leaders Bernard Thibault of the CGT, François Chereque of the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour, close to the Socialist Party), Jean-Claude Mailly of *Force Ouvrière*, Jacques Voisin of the Catholic CFTC and Alain Olive of UNSA (*Union nationale des syndicats autonomes*, also close to the Socialist Party).

An ETUC statement noted: “The President also recalled how important the work of the European social partners is and how their capacity to conclude agreements amongst themselves could accelerate the process and enhance the acceptability of reforms. He, therefore, asked the delegates not to spare their efforts to use social dialogue at European level to put forward proposals and spur on reform.”

The LCR is not ignorant of the real relationship of the trade unions to the French bourgeoisie. In its own analysis of the betrayal of the rail strike, *Rouge* states, “Several explanations can be given for this about-turn: for example, a week away from the *prud’homales* elections the CGT does not particularly want TV reports showing crowded platforms denouncing ‘passengers taken as hostages’ by the CGT and SUD Rail.”

SUD-rail’s strike bulletin also suggested that the CGT preferred “not to ‘irritate’ the passenger-voter in the *prud’homales*.”

The *prud’homales* elections determine representation on labour tribunals, which judge disputes between individual workers and their employers. The results of these elections are a key issue for the bureaucracy because they are used to calculate the degree of support enjoyed by competing unions and their representation on other, often highly lucrative management and state bodies.

In the event, the elections, held December 3, demonstrated the alienation of the vast majority of workers from the trade unions. Only 25 percent participated, whereas in the 1970s participation rates were in the mid-60s. Only thanks to this could the CGT rejoice in securing 33.56 percent of the vote, just 8 percent of the working population, and therefore the lion’s share of the perks of class collaboration.

The LCR’s refusal to draw any political conclusions regarding the transformation of the unions into a second arm of management is not merely a product of theoretical blindness. Rather, over decades of political and industrial activity, the leading cadre of the LCR has been integrated into the apparatus of the trade unions, up to its highest levels. Its members occupy numerous positions within the national, regional and local bodies of the unions where they too bid for positions on joint committees with the employers.

They may propose more militant measures than some of their colleagues, but never seek to mobilise workers to oust the Stalinists and social democrats.

A meeting of CGT members, under the aegis of the NPA, took place Saturday November 29, two days after the *Rouge* article blaming their union for “a sabotaged strike.” It served to underline the fact that the LCR has a significant presence in the union, with nearly 300 participants. Yet the report of the meeting in *Rouge* gives pride of place to the speech of Jean-Pierre Delannoy, a left-talking CGT bureaucrat in the auto industry in Nord-Pas de Calais, whose only answer is for the “bringing together” of everyone who rejects “the policies of the national Confederation and want to be useful in the construction of the indispensable *tous ensemble* [Everyone together].”

In an interview for *Europe solidaire sans frontières*, November 20, Delannoy makes calls for a return to the “past struggles of the CGT,” a past that involves the stifling of the general strike of 1936 in return for ephemeral concession, the saving of de Gaulle from the revolutionary challenge of the May-June general strike. He proposes no political perspective for workers other than pressure on the government—“a struggle for our demands in a powerful and lasting general mobilisation, capable of reversing the relationship of forces and responding to the hardship of the existence of workers.”

The LCR regularly insists that its NPA will not collaborate in any political alliance with “the social liberals” of the Socialist Party. However, in its trade union work and in local government, it is in constant contact with the SP and the CP at all levels and consistently refers to them as the “left” with which it must be united at all costs.

No party that does not challenge the domination of the trade union bureaucracies and their strangling of workers’ struggles can ever be anything but a left cover for future betrayals. It is not a question of a few militant-sounding phrases, but of developing an insurrectionary spirit animated by a profound understanding of the character of the bureaucracy and its objective role.

The real unity of the working class can only be forged through a political struggle against the social democrats and Stalinists, rather than an unprincipled amalgam of pseudo-left tendencies on a few minimal demands that will break up as soon as a serious struggle is posed. This requires the building of genuine organisations of the rank-and-file that would extend to the broad mass of workers who are presently ignored by unions, particularly the youth.



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