

# How the French railway workers strike was betrayed by the unions

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On the day of action June 24, involving two million workers throughout France, 40 percent of the SNCF French national railway company workforce struck and halted services by between 25 and 75 percent for 24 hours. This shows that the combativeness of the railway workers remains intact despite the fact that the rail unions have consistently isolated and sold out their repeated struggles to defend their pensions and working conditions since the election of President Nicolas Sarkozy in May 2007.

SNCF rail workers were called out on strike April 6 by the General Confederation of Labour (CGT—close to the French Communist Party) and the “left” SUD trade union (Solidarity-Unity-Democracy) against job cuts, management methods and changes in working conditions, and particularly the company’s project of opening up the freight market activities and Regional Express Trains (TER) to outside competition.

The strike movement ended April 28 following the setting up of round table discussions between the SNCF and unions—which was the unions’ central demand for launching the strike—and which, in the end, produced nothing concrete.

Since then the unions have organised sporadic and sectional actions designed to wear down the militancy of the workers.

## The lessons of the April strike

The strike in April 2010 unfolded in the context of transport strikes in France and Europe: Lufthansa, British Airways, Paris air traffic controllers, Air France flight attendants. Above all, Greek workers and youth were mobilising against the austerity policies imposed by the PASOK social democratic government at the instigation of the European Union and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The Greek government policy, a harbinger of things to come in every European country, has reduced public sector workers’ wages by 30 percent. With the bailout plan of €750 billion to save the European common currency, combined with austerity policies throughout the euro zone, the attacks against the working class have been enormously aggravated.

Throughout France workers are fighting to prevent factory closures, layoffs, and the deterioration of changes in working conditions, such as the struggle at the Total oil refinery in Dunkirk and the public sector workers’ opposition to Sarkozy’s austerity policies. This shows in a particularly sharp way the need for an organisation in the working class capable of uniting these struggles and giving them a political orientation.

In a *Le Monde* article April 16, entitled “The social discontent is discretely rising”, the author warned that there were a number of conflicts in France that were not reported on by the media but which showed a radicalisation among workers.

After citing a lengthy list of factories in struggle, *Le Monde* quotes Stéphane Vannson of the CFDT union (French Democratic Confederation of Labour—close to the Socialist Party): “What we can note is that the workers are becoming considerably more radicalised than before. I admit that we have sometimes been overwhelmed by strong reactions, with factory occupations. What we notice rising among all our members is the feeling that they can no longer accept blatant injustices, like being refused bonuses while the dividends for shareholders are increased.”

Every worker has to ask himself the following question: Why is it that, in spite of the growing anger of workers, the government, the SNCF, and other companies affected by workers’ strikes have been able to stay on course?

The SNCF, SUD and the CGT, far from seeking to link the railworkers’ fight to these other struggles or to give them a political perspective, on the contrary, have isolated them on the

basis of a nationalist perspective of negotiating with the state and the employers.

However, the SNCF Director of Human Resources (DHR), François Nogué, in an online debate revealed a full awareness of what is at stake. He explained that the introduction of the free market economy into the rail sector was imposed by the European Union: “The opening up to competition flows from European [EU] rules whose implementation in France is being progressively undertaken. Rail freight, for example, has been open to competition since 2006; passenger traffic has been so since 2009. Discussions are currently taking place at the heart of ‘the commission of involved parties’ presided over by Senator [Francis] Grignon concerning the conditions for the opening up to competition of the regional public rail transport (TER)”.

In answer to the question “Do other European rail companies experience the same strong pressure?”, Nogué affirmed: “As an example, the German rail company (Deutsche Bahn) experienced a particularly long and hard strike provoked by its train drivers and which ended in very important negotiations. The Belgian and Italian rail companies ... are also experiencing this type of situation. It is not specific to the railways either, because airline companies, as we often see, are also affected by such strikes”.

In fact, the trade unions and their allies in the official bourgeois left (Socialist Party [PS], Communist Party [PCF], Left Party [PG] of Jean Luc-Mélenchon) and the ex-left of Olivier Besancenot’s New Anti-Capitalist Party [NPA], as defenders of the capitalist system, refuse to make the link between these conflicts in order to prevent the development among workers of a real understanding of the crisis and the development of a revolutionary socialist consciousness.

According to SNCF figures, some 5,000 rail workers participated in the April strike, which was supported with determination, principally in the south of France and the Paris region. SUD and the CGT limited the movement to drivers and ticket inspectors, which are militant and strategic sectors, as they are conscious of the economic impact of their action. But the unions did not seek to mobilise the mass of the SNCF’s 154,000 workers and conducted a series of regional strikes which left strikers isolated.

The SUD union, presented by its leadership and petty bourgeois parties such as the NPA as a super-militant union, revealed itself in fact to be essentially no different from the others. SUD accepted participation in the roundtable proposed by management—just as it did in helping the CGT sell out the rail pensions strike in 2007—and called the strike to an end before the talks started. Moreover, SUD did everything possible

during the strike to get closer to the CGT.

Two articles published on April 19 in *Libération*—probably with the intention of demoralising the strikers—nevertheless demonstrated the complicity of the different union bureaucrats who operate among rail workers.

The newspaper reported that “eleven SNCF trade unionists are currently giving evidence in a criminal inquiry in Lyon for breach of trust and forgery ... these witnesses are from every trade union tendency (SUD, Unsa, CFDT, CFTC, FO, FGAAC) with the CGT at the head, responsible for managing the regional works council (CER) in Lyon in the Rhône-Alpes region ... Since 1996 there has been an agreement—between the eight unions represented on the CER, and others who do not have elected representation—concerning the sharing out of two-thirds of the funds from the CER budget, that is €339,500 out of the €504,742 operational budget”.

The other *Libération* article reported a complaint against the CGT as an employer where a thousand workers, occupying positions in local works councils and a central works council at the SNCF, accused the union of behaving like a gangster employer. The CGT is accused of unfair dismissals and not respecting the right to freedom of expression of workers who decided to join a different union. In total, local works councils of the SNCF were obliged to pay out €134,000 to the central works council in damages.

The French unions, like unions everywhere, are no longer workers’ organisations, and their aim is to defend their own interests, which are in common with those of the state and the ruling elite. For that, they use national divisions and divisions between different economic sectors, as was the case in this struggle, to demoralise the most militant workers with the help of the ex-left parties. That is the meaning of the NPA’s letter to the CGT last year, which confirmed it would not oppose the Stalinist-influenced union’s policies.

The French working class must understand that it can only defend its gains on the basis of a political perspective that is at the same time socialist and internationalist. To that end, it must break from the unions and their political allies such as the PS and PCF and their ex-radical apologists and build organisations of struggle entirely independent from them.



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