

French government prepares to deploy security forces to break airport strike

Kumaran Ira

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France's top airports, including Charles-de-Gaulle in Paris and Saint-Exupéry in Lyon, have been hit by strikes as security workers protest low wages and poor working conditions. By Tuesday, the strikes reportedly also extended to airports in Toulouse, Mulhouse, Nice and Rennes. In an attempt to end the strikes, the government threatens to deploy security forces to replace striking workers.

Unions representing roughly 10,000 security workers in several different companies (ICTS France, Securitas, Brink's, Alyzia Safety, Sec I, Vigimark, Samsic, Serris and Securus) launched the strike on Friday.

As strikes reached their sixth day on Wednesday, airport traffic was disrupted at a number of airports. On Tuesday, according to *Aéroports de Paris* (ADP), "Of 630 scheduled departures, 450 left with an average delay of 40 minutes." In Lyon, where 90 percent of 400 security workers are striking, 133 of 150 departures were delayed.

On Monday, the government appointed two mediators from the ministry of labor in an attempt to end the strikes and prepare negotiations between management and the unions. After these negotiations failed on Monday, the government announced that it would deploy security forces at airports to replace the striking workers and break the strike.

Yesterday, President Nicolas Sarkozy held a cabinet meeting to discuss the necessary measures to end the strike. According to government spokeswoman Valérie Pécresse, "the head of State told ministers to be extremely attentive to the development of this situation, and to take all the necessary and opportune measures

given its evolution." She did not give specifics, but it is widely suspected the state will use police to smash the strikes. Yesterday, Sarkozy's special advisor Henri Guaino warned that, "starting today, and in particular tonight, it will no longer be possible for the State not to act in accordance with its responsibilities" in the airports. He added, "I do not see why it would be shocking to replace private security agents for a limited time with agents of the public forces."

Three hundred policemen and women and 100 gendarmes are already on standby to fill in for the strikers, interior ministry spokesman Pierre-Henry Brandet told AFP. While preparing police repression of airport workers, the government also intends to extend the so-called "minimum service" law, restricting the right to strike into the aviation sector. Introduced by the right-wing Sarkozy government soon after his election in 2007, the law has so far been used in particular against rail, bus and urban transport workers.

The law stipulates that transport staff must, individually and on pain of sanctions, give 48 hours' notice of their intention to strike that—after a week on strike—management may organize a secret ballot of workers on the continuation of the industrial action. If enforced, this would essentially hand over control of any further industrial action to the company management. The ruling Union for a Popular Majority (UMP) proposed a bill restricting the right to strike in air transport, which received unanimous support among the ruling elite. It will be discussed in the National Assembly on January 24 next year.

The union initially planned the strike as a one-day strike on Friday, but extended it due to growing pressure from their members over deteriorating living standards and poor working conditions. Despite the unions' attempt to negotiate a quick end to the strike

with management, the strike was massively supported by security workers, whose monthly revenues are between €1100 and €1400. Workers are demanding a €200 wage increase. After negotiations between the unions and management on Monday, management categorically rejected any rise in wages, pointing out that wages rose in January and an agreement was reached with the union a year ago for a 6 percent rise in wages over three years.

Thouverez Patrick, the president of the Sesa airport security firm, claimed that in the current economic climate “requests for additional increases are totally unrealistic.”

Amid collapsing consumer spending and soaring unemployment due to the crisis, accompanied by wage and social cuts by corporations and governments, workers’ living standards are deteriorating. According to CGT (General Confederation of Labor) union official Thierry Ménard, “The 2 percent yearly [raise that we obtained] only compensated for inflation and, ultimately, we lost purchasing power.”

The unions’ main concern, however, is not the deteriorating conditions facing workers, but the possibility that a movement of the working class could develop outside their control. They deeply fear such an event, as they are deeply implicated in the official structures of the French state for imposing pension, wage, and other social cuts on workers. Such a movement would pose a threat not only to Sarkozy but to the entire political establishment, of which they are a part.

The unions are spreading illusions that negotiations with management can satisfy workers’ demands. On December 20—well after the state was threatening to break the airport strike—the CGT published a statement asking “the government and management to re-establish dialogue ... to answer workers’ demands and airport safety.”

Such a demand is utterly bankrupt, as the government is clearly preparing a struggle to forcibly smash the strike. Under such conditions, only a political strike of the entire working class to bring down the government can satisfy workers’ demands. Nonetheless, the unions have made no attempt to call on the entire working class in a solidarity struggle to defend the security workers. This is because they well understand that such

an action would receive massive support in the working class and immediately turn the strike into a referendum on the deeply unpopular policies pursued by Sarkozy, and advocated by all factions of the political establishment.

Under these conditions, working class struggles against police strikebreaking must proceed independently, both politically and organizationally, from the trade unions.

In recent months, unions have worked systematically to isolate working class struggles in a number of industries, while occasionally calling one-day protests to dissipate social anger. This paves the way for the government and the bosses to implement social austerity measures and cuts in wages and jobs.

Last year, the unions betrayed the social movement against Sarkozy’s unpopular pension reform and the powerful oil strike, whose workers were forced back to work after unions refused to defend them against police strikebreaking.



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