

French unions seek to end airport security workers strike

Kumaran Ira
27 December 2011

Union officials scrambled over the weekend to negotiate a sell-out to isolate a week-long strike launched on December 16 by airport security workers across France. In an attempt to break the strike, policemen and gendarmes have been deployed in French airports since Wednesday.

On Saturday, at Paris' Charles-de-Gaulle airport, a large majority of some 200 striking workers had voted unanimously in a general assembly to continue the strikes on Saturday and Sunday, after the failure of a deal between the unions and the airport security company.

On Friday, unions had negotiated with the SESA airport security company, which includes several security firms such as ICTS France, Securitas, and Brink's, employing 10,000 workers altogether. Management categorically rejected any increase in wages of 200 euros demanded by security workers, whose monthly wages are between 1,100 and 1,400 euros.

Since police deployed to the airports, air traffic was reported to be normal, including at terminal 2E and 2F of Charles-de-Gaulle and at Paris-Orly, Lyon, Lille, Toulouse-Blagnac, Bordeaux-Mérignac and Bâle-Mulhouse on Friday. In Lyon Saint-Exupéry, where the strike paralyzed air traffic, the movement was reportedly brought to an end.

Yesterday the Charles de Gaulle airport security workers again voted to continue the strike, however.

At this point, the unions and management announced they had negotiated a "crisis exit" agreement to wrap up the strike. Workers were not to obtain the raise they were demanding, but instead the unions announced they had negotiated a yearly bonus of up to 1,000

euros—of which 250 euros would be paid only based on employee performance.

The unions have played a key role in isolating the workers, who after a week-long strike only see the reduction in their wages and ultimately being forced to go back to work without achieving anything. For their part, the unions capitulated to the state and the company, both of which moved aggressively against striking workers. They made no attempt to mobilize broader opposition in the working class to the state's use of police to break the airport strike.

The unions and the state are concerned that if the strikes continued, they could escape their control, broadening to wider layers of the working class.

Along with the security workers, almost half of all workers in France earn less than 1600 euros per month, and more than 30 percent earn less than 1300 euros. Amidst a rising economic crisis, with unemployment expected to reach 10 percent next year, and deep cuts in social spending, there is rising social discontent among the working class over the deterioration of their living standards.

The unions are currently trying to justify their sell-out with absurd claims that, as the strikes wind down, the airport authorities will be more likely to give in to workers' demands. CGT (General Confederation of Labor) union official Danielle Hanryon said, "I cannot guarantee that we will obtain a pay increase, but from the beginning, the bosses gave in as we went along."

Management, for its part, made clear it expected the unions to wrap up the strikes without further concessions. After negotiating a deal with the unions, SESA President Patrick Thouverez declared: "It is now up to the union organizations to live up to their responsibilities."

In the meantime, the courts and the government are

moving rapidly to curb the constitutional right to strike. On Friday, the Administrative Court rejected a request by the CFDT union (French Democratic Labor Confederation), calling for the end of the deployment of police at Charles de Gaulle airport.

The Court's decision made clear that it views the use of police to serve as scabs as entirely legal: "The replacing of striking workers by state functionaries, whose mission includes guaranteeing the security of goods and persons, does not threaten the right to strike, as no requisitioning [of strikers] is taking place."

These developments are particularly significant, coming one year after a broader social movement against Sarkozy's unpopular pension cuts, including a determined struggle by oil refinery workers across France. The social movement was ultimately betrayed by the unions and its defenders of pseudo-left organization like New-Anti Capitalist Party (NPA).

The strike was eventually ended when the police requisitioned oil workers and forced them back to work. The Administrative Court's decision implicitly recognizes that this action—carried out without any real opposition from the unions, which called for "symbolic" protests—was a flagrant violation of the strikers' constitutional rights.

As the previous betrayals of workers' struggles make clear, the unions are not in any way an organ to mobilize the working class in struggle. They have been deeply integrated into the structure of capitalist state and big business, working against the interest of the working class by obstructing and disarming workers' struggles—thus allowing the state to push through its right-wing cuts.

Workers cannot wage any genuine struggles without breaking the stranglehold of the union bureaucracy and the pseudo-left parties who support it. The only viable way for workers is to mount their struggles independently from the unions and its hangers-on of petty bourgeois organizations. This requires building workers' independent committee in factories and workplaces, and a new revolutionary party to mobilize the entire working class in a political struggle against capitalist rule.

Having worked to betray the airport workers' struggles, unions are trying to prevent criticism of their action by calling another strike on February 6-9,

supposedly against a proposed bill restricting the right to strike in air transport. The unions are calling the strike after the bill will have passed in the National Assembly, on January 24 of next year.

The bill, known as "minimum service," will extend measures introduced by Sarkozy government in 2007 into the aviation sector. The minimum service law has so far been used in particular against rail, bus and urban transport workers. According to the law, transport workers must give two days' notice of their intention to strike; 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 company management.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact