

French rail workers, artists protest social cuts

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Since last week, rail workers across France have struck against plans of the unpopular Socialist Party (PS) government of President François Hollande to privatize the state-owned railway system, slashing jobs and working conditions. Ahead of summer art festivals across the country, intermittent workers, including performing artists and technicians, are also protesting a “reform” to slash their unemployment benefits.

The ongoing protests are the first large-scale strike action and social protest against the PS government, which has relied on the union bureaucracy and pseudo-left parties such as the New Anticapitalist Party to suppress opposition in the working class to its austerity agenda.

Last Tuesday, rail workers of state-owned SNCF began nationwide strike action, causing major disruptions on suburban and intercity high-speed (TGV) train lines. The strikes continued throughout the weekend and are set to continue this week after talks between the unions and the government broke down Friday. The General Confederation of Labor (CGT) and SUD-Rail unions called the strike, claiming that the reform will hurt working conditions and harm service quality.

The railway bill, to be discussed at the parliament tomorrow, stipulates that the train operator SNCF and owner of France’s rail networks RFF (Réseau Ferre de France) will be merged together to cut €40 billion in debt, while keeping their operations separate. The PS is preparing to privatize the rail network, reversing the landmark nationalization of 1937. This would lead to large-scale job cuts and tougher working conditions.

The unions, which support the PS government, are terrified by escalating social tensions in France. Some, like the PS-linked French Democratic Labor Federation (CFDT), are openly backing the bill, while the CGT and SUD-Rail are seeking to keep control of popular opposition by calling limited strikes and blocking a

struggle of the entire working class to bring down the Hollande government.

Opposing the strike, the CFDT declared that “the success of the rail reform is critical.” CFDT leader Laurent Berger called for an end to the strike, claiming the CGT and SUD-Rail were “bothering far too many people with this strike.”

The PS is counting on the unions to block opposition to escalating social cuts. Transport Minister Frédéric Cuvillier said, “I know 80 percent of rail workers are not striking, and a certain number of union organizations either decided to call off strike action or to support, to sign modernization agreements.”

Indeed, both CGT and SUD-Rail are supporting the bill and calling on the PS only to review the reforms, cynically claiming that the bill does not do enough to protect jobs. According to reports, over 1,000 rail workers are laid off each year.

SUD-Rail’s Stéphane Adam said: “A rail reform is necessary ... But we need a reform that puts the RFF inside a public enterprise. But in the current bill, they are cutting up the railway entity.” The CGT and SUD-Rail propose to merge the two companies into a single operation, as was the case until 1997, asking the government to take on some €40 billion of debt owed by the firms.

This proposal is a cynical charade. After Paris found over €360 billion to bail out its banks during the 2008 financial crash, the CGT and its allies have supported Hollande’s claims there is no money for social programs, with CGT leader Thierry Lepaon stressing that he was not opposed to the €50 billion in cuts in the PS’ “Responsibility Pact.” Given the opposition of the CGT and the PS to taxing the obscene wealth accumulating on the heights of French society, they will not find money for the SNCF.

On Wednesday, the government presented a revised budget for 2014, including €4 billion in new cuts,

freezing social security benefits and pensions.

On Friday, President François Hollande called for an end to the strike, urging the workers to go back to work. “This does not mean the dialogue cannot continue but the time has come and this industrial action must come to an end,” he said.

On Saturday, the CGT’s Lepaon stressed that he was looking for a deal with Hollande to end the strike: “The situation is very worrying for our country. When France is paralyzed by a conflict, I will not let people blame the CGT for this ... We can find a way out this weekend. For this, we need real talks with the CGT starting today. This is why I am addressing myself directly to the president.”

The strikes against Hollande come after a humiliating defeat for the PS in the European elections in May, amid rising opposition to the austerity policies of the European Union (EU) and the support of pseudo-left groups like the NPA to the EU and the PS government.

The unions’ strategy of calling isolated strikes while stressing their support for the deeply unpopular Hollande government is a trap and a dead end for the working class. The unions are seeking to channel workers’ opposition behind the PS by cynically promoting the lie that isolated strikes may convince Hollande to change his policies. The only way forward for workers is to unify the working class in a struggle to bring down the PS government and anti-worker governments across Europe, and to build workers governments carrying out socialist policies.

The rail strike is continuing as other sectors take action against Hollande, including taxi drivers opposing private-hire cars. Yesterday, Air France ground crews walked off the job to protest the company’s Transform 2015 restructuring plan that slashes working conditions and allows for unpaid overtime.

Since June 3, intermittent workers, including artists and technicians working in cultural sectors, have been protesting changes to their unemployment benefits. The strike is taking place amid the summer art festival season.

In March, the unions and the bosses’ organisation struck a cost-cutting deal on unemployment benefits covering all workers, as well as the specific pension system for performing artists. The unemployment bill sets tough new conditions for receiving unemployment benefits to slash €800 million in unemployment

benefits next year.

If the government approves the bill at the end of June, the intermittent workers will have to pay more tax into the system, and the conditions to access the scheme are often extremely difficult to meet. According to reports, some 250,000 workers in the film, theatre, television and festival industry benefit from the system.

Last Wednesday, the first day of the Latin American Rio Loco festival in the southwestern city of Toulouse was cancelled and a flamenco event in Paris was partially called off due to the strikes. A month-long theatre festival in the southern city of Montpellier, meanwhile, has been disrupted. If the bill was signed, the artists and technicians are threatening to escalate the strikes during summer season when many events are due to take place, including the well-known arts festival in Avignon.



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