

Workers speak out against privatization of French railways

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On June 17, approximately 1,000 demonstrators gathered near the National Assembly in Paris for a protest called by the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) and Solidarity Unity Democracy-Rail (SUD-Rail) unions against the Socialist Party's (PS) planned privatization of the French railways. Rail workers who spoke to the WSWS stressed their anger with the PS government and with the media, who are denouncing the strike.

Riot police attacked a column of rail workers who tried to march on the National Assembly with tear gas, leading to clashes.

Rail workers Laurent and Nicolas told the WSWS about the difficult conditions they face, in line with workers throughout France: "There is no more middle class, it is like in foreign countries. We do not understand what is happening. They are trying to make out like we are privileged people. The media pretend that the French railways are just the train drivers. There are only 1,600 high-speed train (TGV) drivers. But no one sees the upkeep of infrastructure and track. People are paid minimum wage."

Laurent added, "I have worked here for five years and I get €1,300 per month. Young workers are hired on low wages. To get €1,500 per month, you have to be on call, do overtime, come back on Saturdays, and work nights. After the reform of the railways, moreover, that will no longer be voluntary, we will be forced to do it."

He added, "My two grandfathers were rail workers, my father was a rail worker; we want to have a life. You can't have that under just any conditions. A studio apartment in Paris costs more than half our salary. If you find something for €800 [a month], you are lucky. Rail workers have problems, we have to have a minimum level for a decent life. What about our family

life? They want to destroy our working conditions."

WSWS reporters spoke to a maintenance technician working at Lyon station in Paris, who asked to remain anonymous. He said he wanted the PS to abandon its planned reform of the railways, so they would remain a public service, and that the strike was important for all workers: "We are not just talking about the reform, but also about wages. If we do nothing, we will lose everything."

He added, "It's a year and a half that we have been telling the unions to explain to the public what was going to happen." He compared the situation to 1995, when a mass strike of rail workers against pension cuts broke out and escaped the control of the union bureaucracy.

This strike also demonstrated the bankruptcy of the pseudo-left parties, such as the New Anti-capitalist Party and Workers Struggle, who intervened in workers' strike committees to strangle the movement. They blocked a struggle for a political general strike and a revolutionary struggle against the government, ending the strike in exchange for a very partial postponement of the cuts. The cuts were continued since 1995 by governments of all political colors.

The union bureaucracy today is still doing everything it can to block the mobilization of the rail workers and the unification of the working class in struggle against PS austerity measures. Before the June 17 demonstration, they had called off an ongoing protest begun June 12 in front of the Transport Ministry. They are looking for a way to defuse the crisis, as CGT Secretary Thierry Lepaon explained in a letter to President François Hollande, adding that he supports the principle of reform of the French railways.

Cécile stressed that the rail reform would cost jobs, because ticket offices would be closed to encourage

passengers to use automatic ticket counters. She added, “They will divide the French railways into three companies, to lead to the opening up of competition in 2022. The financiers will control profitability of the railways, which will therefore cost more and be less secure.”

Cécile criticized the attack against public services and on “rail workers’ benefits, which the government wants to cut in order to align it downwards on the private sector.”

She said that she did not support any compromise on the reform and that she no longer had any confidence in pro-government unions, though she hoped that the CGT and SUD-Rail would represent the majority of workers. She called Hollande “a liar, because he claimed he would fight against the financial elite,” adding that she had voted for Hollande “by default.”

Laurent and Nicolas warned of the consequences of rail privatization in Sweden: “Here, we are going towards the privatization of the railways. We see what this produced in Sweden: the railways are on strike, they are on short-term contracts and piece work.”

Nicolas stressed that the French reform would not only attack the workers, but also passengers: “What they want is to get a lot of money out of the railways. But that is the citizens’ money. For us, we are here to provide a service to the public.”

Laurent added, “The TGV makes profits, but upkeep by itself does not. Therefore, the corporation wants to slash wages.”



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