

Unions, pseudo-lefts strangle strike against French rail privatisation

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Last month's 10-day strike by rail workers against the privatisation and destruction of working conditions at France's national public rail network (SNCF) was strangled and sold out by the union bureaucracy and pseudo-left parties such as the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA).

Broad sections of the union bureaucracy, including the French Democratic Labour Confederation (CFDT), openly supported the privatisation. The General Confederation of Labour (CGT) and Solidarity, Unity and Democracy (SUD) unions only called strikes to defend the unpopular Socialist Party (PS) government and its privatisation drive and prevent a rebellion of the working class against the PS, the unions, and the pseudo-left.

The goal of this corrupt establishment was to block a political struggle of the working class against the PS and the European Union (EU), which demands "free competition" in the rail network. From the beginning, they tied the workers to the perspective of impotent protest strikes designed to make minor shifts in PS policy. The CGT timed a one-day protest strike to coincide with the PS placing the rail "reform" bill before the National Assembly.

The cynical character of this operation was acknowledged even in the bourgeois press. *Le Nouvel Observateur* wrote, "The day of action on June 11 was only supposed to be a symbolic gesture before the parliamentary debate sealed the deal. The CGT—taking a hard line on the surface, but a soft one internally—was supposed to climb aboard the train of reform ... [PS President] François Hollande was rubbing his hands with glee in anticipation."

Given broad opposition among rail workers, however, the NPA, sections of the CGT-SUD bureaucracy, and various disgruntled shop stewards did not feel they

could call off the strike after one day. The strike continued until the opening debate in parliament on June 18, despite the visible hostility of the national union leaderships—which tried and failed to keep strikers from protesting in downtown Paris on June 17.

The "debate" was the agreed signal for a Left Front/French Communist Party (PCF) deputy, André Chassaigne, to amend the bill so as to preserve the SNCF's "indissoluble character and unity" and add a worthless proviso on working conditions. In fact, as the strikers noted, the privatisation inevitably entails deep attacks on their working conditions to satisfy the EU and the banks. (See "Workers speak out against privatization of French railways")

This rotten deal had doubtless been coordinated closely with the PS-Green party government. PS and Green deputies in the National Assembly voted for it. All the while, the government and the media denounced the rail workers, blaming them for preventing students from going to school to pass their *baccalauréat* end-of-high-school examinations.

CGT General Secretary and PCF member Thierry Lepaon seized on the deal to push to end the strike. Declaring that the strike was "at a turning point," he said that the parliamentary debate meant that "strike action had started to pay off." He cynically told workers that it was up to them "to know if the action they led had sufficiently brought satisfaction."

The leaders of the CGT national rail federation, which had posed as "militant" defenders of strike action, relayed Lepaon's message and issued no call to continue the strike. They thus threw their weight behind the sellout.

The hostility of the unions, the Stalinists, and the pseudo-left parties to a struggle against the privatisation of the SNCF marks a political milestone. Their cynical

evasions aside, they are signalling their support for the PS's destruction of one of the major social concessions made to the working class in France in the 20th century.

The railways were nationalized in 1937, amid the Great Depression, as the government tried to halt and crush the wave of workers struggles triggered by the 1936 French general strike. The ruling class was mortally hostile to socialism, of course; three years later, the National Assembly would vote emergency powers to fascist dictator Philippe Pétain, as France's collaboration with Nazi occupation began. However, the bourgeoisie felt compelled initially to make concessions to the proletariat, whose struggles were driven by deep opposition to fascism and by the powerful example of the Russian Revolution of 1917.

Today, amid the deepest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression, the bourgeoisie and its Stalinist and pseudo-left defenders want no such concessions. The ruling elite's reaction to protests against social cuts is either to ram them through or at times, as in the 2006 mass protests against the First Job Contract (CPE) youth job program, to withdraw a measure for a few years before reintroducing it in another form.

The bourgeoisie's repudiation of basic social achievements of the working class in France and across Europe signals that the working class is at a political crossroads. In France, the groups that have dominated official "left" politics since the last great revolutionary struggle of the working class, the 1968 general strike, have proven bankrupt and reactionary. The critical task facing the political vanguard of the working class in France is the rebuilding of a genuine Trotskyist party—a perspective that the ICFI alone advances, in struggle against pseudo-left groups like the NPA.

The key role in organising defeats of workers' struggles is played by pseudo-left parties like the NPA, which supports the PS and called for a vote for Hollande in the 2012 elections. The NPA today tries to tie the workers to Hollande by advancing a bankrupt perspective of calling on the unions to adopt a "left" policy. They thus work to channel opposition towards the political periphery of the PS, of which they themselves are a major part.

NPA writer R.Pelletier admitted that the CGT's "strike calls ... were only conceived as a means to build

support for the PCF parliamentary propositions (the Chassaigne amendment) and above all with no idea of winning the fight". Nonetheless, the NPA pressed only for the CGT to adopt a somewhat more "left" guise to hide its reactionary policy.

The NPA complained that "the CGT is hesitating too directly to contest the reform ... it must not hesitate to demand the withdrawal of the reform".

This position is absurd. French unions—who, due to the collapse of their membership in the working class over the last four decades, are funded by the state and the corporations to the tune of €4 billion, or over 90 percent of their budget—are organically tied to the capitalists. Strikes and revolutionary struggles can only be victorious if workers take social struggle out of the hands of the unions and embark on a revolutionary road. It is precisely to block this that the pseudo-left groups promote the union bureaucracy.



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