

In run-up to labour law protest, French rail workers stage one-day strike

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On Tuesday, April 26, unions at the French National Railways (SNCF) called a one-day protest strike opposing the new state decree attacking rail workers' conditions.

The trade unions had received the final text of the rail decree, after negotiating it with the SNCF and the government, over two months ago, on February 23. This was the same day as the announcement of the labour law reform of Labour Minister Myriam El Khomri. The El Khomri Law, which allows the unions to negotiate firm-level contracts violating the Labour Code and lengthens the work week, provoked escalating anger among youth and workers, compelling the student unions to call protests starting in early March.

As part of the unions' broader strategy of blocking a struggle against the Socialist Party (PS) government of President François Hollande, the rail unions did not, however, call for industrial action against the rail decree or against the El Khomri Law.

As the contents of the rail decree have become known, however, and anger mounted among the workers, the unions finally felt compelled to organise a symbolic one-day strike on Tuesday, during which they organised no demonstrations or public meetings.

The purpose of the decree is to prepare rail services for privatisation and the introduction of competition on French rail lines by operators such as Germany's Deutsche Bahn (DB) and Italy's Trenitalia against the SNCF. Since these operators will run their operations under the regulations imposed on the private sector, they are expected to intensify exploitation so as to do the same work with 18 percent less staff than the SNCF.

The provisions of the rail decree, which apply to all rail workers in France, make clear that the privatisation

process is being used to slash working conditions in the industry. The provisions include:

- *Cutting the number of days off by 16 per year and breaking up the work week, so that workers will have only 30 two-day 'weekends' yearly, of which many will be Sunday-Monday weekends.

- *Increasing the travel radius around a worker's main workplace to which he can be assigned to report for work to 50km.

Rail workers struck across France on Tuesday. Fifty percent of SNCF workers, including 70 percent of train staff, heeded the strike call. One-half of high speed trains (TGV) and Paris suburban trains (Transilien) and two-thirds of Inter-city trains did not run.

Philippe Martinez, general secretary of the Stalinist General Confederation of Labour (CGT), who has responded to youth struggles against the El Khomri Law by presenting the CGT as turning over a new leaf and adopting a militant posture, said the day of action was a 'massive warning strike.' He praised 'trade union unity' and confirmed that there would be 'other days [of action] in mid-May.'

This last statement is a signal to the ruling class by Martinez that the trade unions will continue to do everything they can to block industrial action by the working class against the PS government, and will delay even the symbolic one-day strikes until the decree is on the verge of being adopted.

WSWS reporters were invited to a trade union strike meeting (*Assemblée générale*) at a Paris train station by rail workers. The meeting drew a limited attendance, mainly restricted to low-level trade union delegates, who said that workers were angry and ready to fight, but that they did not trust the unions and did not believe in the usefulness of symbolic one-day actions. They also noted a definite reluctance on the part of the

workers to discuss strategy for strikes and protest actions with them.

After four years during which the trade unions mobilised no industrial action against the PS government as it carried out unprecedented attacks on social rights, the social gulf between the trade unions and the working class is in the open. The mood in the working class is increasingly militant, but this does not translate into increased support for symbolic union actions or for political allies of the PS and the unions, such as the pseudo-left New Anticapitalist Party.

This is an indication of the revolutionary character of the emerging political crisis. Social struggle, when it does erupt, will increasingly take the form of an explosion outside the official channels through which the class struggle was regulated and suppressed in the period since the 1968 general strike, the last great revolutionary experience of the working class in France.

For those who occupy the bottom rungs of the union bureaucracy, however, and who have for decades overseen the mechanisms through which the class struggle was contained in safe channels, the growing militancy of the workers is troubling. The more 'left'-talking officials want to organise more actions and are frustrated by the union leaderships' open sabotage of their attempts to do so.

They are determined, however, to avoid discussion of the fact that the working class can only be mobilized in struggle independently of the union bureaucracies that they are a part of, and on the basis of a revolutionary socialist perspective opposed to all the parties that have for decades worked in the periphery of the so-called Socialist Party.

At the meeting, the WSWS spoke with Serge, a maintenance worker and trade union delegate, who observed that the union leaderships were not mobilising the workers during the strike.

"Yesterday morning, I returned to the shop to see who was going to strike today, and I had nothing to propose. I was not aware of anything that was going to be taking place today. In fact, when I got more information, I learned that the CGT had said it was a day that had been scheduled, but it is a day for workers to strike at home, and for a lot of guys that were a little ..." he said, shrugging to indicate that his fellow workers thought the CGT was not fighting.

"For me, a day of strike is to do things—at least, to demonstrate, assemble, discuss, and now, now there is really nothing on offer," he said. He added, "That's a shame, because for many workers, it is a day [of action] for practically nothing."

Serge indicated that there was significant opposition among workers to war and the state of emergency imposed after the November 13 terror attacks in Paris, noting that networks of Islamist fighters who carried out the attacks are the "bastard offspring" of the NATO powers' Syrian war.

"France is deeply implicated in this war, and in fact terrorism is linked to the disorder that they, that means the French government and other rich states, bring in that region. When we see poverty, chaos and war, we cannot expect anything else ... there are plenty of wars in the world and it is still linked to the politics of the great powers," he said.



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