

Macron launches campaign to privatise French railways

Kumaran Ira
20 February 2018

French President Emmanuel Macron's government has begun a first series of talks on the French National Railways (SNCF) with management and the trade unions, a few days after Jean-Cyril Spinetta, a former CEO of Air France-KLM, delivered his report on the SNCF. The content and negotiating calendar are reportedly to be announced on February 26.

Macron is moving to privatise the SNCF, citing a European directive mandating the opening of the French railways to private competition. It aims to destroy railworkers' social rights—including a standard salary schedule, a retirement age of 52 for train drivers and 57 for other workers, and guaranteed lifetime employment—established after World War II.

Spinetta submitted his 127-page report, commissioned by the government in October, on Thursday. While it claims to be modernising the SNCF in the interests of travelers, the report in fact calls for liberalising railway transport and transforming the SNCF into a private company (*société anonyme*), which has had disastrous consequences elsewhere in Europe. It would also allow the SNCF to hire large numbers of short-term contract or temporary labour. The report defends the decision to dismantle the public enterprise by claiming this is the only way to deal with the SNCF's debts.

It declares, "Within the framework of the law, it could be possible to end the hiring of workers with the [railworkers'] statute, while strictly preserving the individual rights of staff who still benefit from it. The new recruits could be hired...on the basis of contracts whose contents is still to be fully determined." The report also proposes that the SNCF could "make use for two years of plans for voluntary departures." The number of workers who would be expected to take a "voluntary" departure could be around 5,000.

The report proposes to "concentrate rail transport on the areas where it is pertinent" and declares, "The decision to maintain lines inherited from a time when rail transport was the only means of transportation must be reconsidered." To speak plainly, the state plans to shut down smaller, less profitable lines as well as many smaller train stations.

This policy, which aims to free up vast sums of money for the banks and the state, is a reactionary absurdity. During the 2008 Wall Street crash, the French state found from one day to the next the cash to make a €360 billion guarantee to the banks, which had crashed the financial system. But it denounces the living standards of railway workers making €1,800 a month as an intolerable burden. Everything indicates that privatising the SNCF would lead to a collapse in working conditions and the quality of travelers' experience.

Le Monde, which supports privatising the SNCF, compares it to the privatised British railways and writes: "faster, cheaper, the superiority of the French railway network is well established." It admits that British regional private franchises are "far from being a systematic success" and even that calls for renationalising the British railways to improve their performance are "very popular." But it nonetheless endorses privatisation, peddling illusions that it might improve service on French regional lines—even though the Spinetta report plans to eliminate them outright.

According to the Spinetta report, the state would acquire the SNCF's debt to free up the privatised entity to make profits for its new owners. "The treatment of the debt is a necessary prior condition for a return to financial equilibrium of the entity overseeing rail infrastructure," the report states.

The media and the political establishment will no

doubt cite this report to try to divide the workers, attacking train drivers' right to retire at 52, when the retirement age in the private sector is 62.

Workers in the public and private sector should reject such attacks on the rail workers, and all the other socially regressive measures Macron is negotiating with the trade unions.

The immediate target may be the rail workers, but all workers in France and across Europe are targeted by the political forces arrayed behind Macron. Having imposed labour decrees allowing bosses and unions to negotiate contracts that contain "exceptions," that is, violate the Labour Code, facilitating mass sackings and the imposition of salaries less than the minimum wage, Macron aims to smash the public service. He aims to crush all the social rights established by the workers in the twentieth century and return it to the conditions it knew prior to the October 1917 revolution in Russia.

The goal of this policy, which has no democratic legitimacy whatsoever, is to finance a massive military build-up and the development of the Berlin-Paris axis as a militarist power capable of mounting aggressive interventions around the world.

Macron wants to spend €300 billion on the French armed forces by 2024. Draconian cuts in living standards and social services would be required to finance the construction of a military machine on such a scale. According to the French Observatory of the Economic Conjuncture (OFCE), the wealthiest 2 percent of French society would obtain 42 percent of the gains linked to Macron's social policies, while the poorest households would see their living standards collapse.

Deep opposition exists among workers to the attack on the SNCF and Macron's broader austerity drive. *Le Monde* points to the "memory of the major [railworkers'] strikes of 1995, which have continued to haunt all the governments over the past two decades."

The Stalinist General Confederation of Labour (CGT) has called railworkers to protest on March 22, together with public sector workers protesting Macron's calls to end the statute of the public sector. "If we're attacked, we defend ourselves," CGT chief Philippe Martinez told France Inter.

But workers' opposition cannot find meaningful expression in the straitjacket of symbolic trade union protests, directed by bureaucracies that are, at the same

time, negotiating austerity policies with Macron. Today, they are sitting down with SNCF management, while at the same time admitting that the SNCF has issued a "declaration of war" to the workers.

To oppose the draconian measures being prepared at the SNCF and elsewhere, the struggle has to be taken out of the hands of the trade unions, and be waged as conscious political fight against Macron and the European Union. Workers need rank-and-file organisations of struggle, created and run independently of the trade unions, on a European scale. These organisations would oppose the drive to war and austerity and coordinate opposition to the repression of strike activity being prepared under the terms of the state of emergency and the anti-terror law.

It is critical to draw the lessons of previous struggles—above all, the need for a revolutionary perspective and leadership. When, in November 1995, Juppé announced his planned cuts to pensions, railworkers had to take strike action independently of the unions in order to begin the struggle. Over 1 million people joined strikes and protests, bringing France largely to a halt, for the first time since the May-June 1968 general strike.

Petty-bourgeois groups like the Workers Struggle (LO) party and the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR), terrified by the strike, went into strike assemblies to shut them down. Refusing a struggle for power, they saved the Chirac presidency and much of Juppé's reactionary agenda.

A confrontation between the working class and these old political machines is being prepared. In this, the *Parti de l'égalité socialiste* fights to connect growing militancy in the working class to a socialist, internationalist and anti-war political movement to take state power and reorganise economic life across Europe on the basis of socialist policies.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact