

French President Macron turns his labor decrees against rail workers

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On Monday, French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe announced plans to end the French rail workers' statute and privatize the French National Railways (SNCF). Aware of deep anger among workers at his agenda, amid rising class struggles across Europe and internationally, he declared he would unilaterally impose the reform using President Emmanuel Macron's labor decrees. This aims to give him time to drum up support from legislators and pro-corporate trade unions.

Philippe confirmed that he intends to eliminate the social rights granted to French rail workers in recognition of their participation in the defeat of Nazi Germany, led above all by the Soviet Union, in World War II. He said, "To new generations, apprentices, all those looking to join the SNCF, we say that they will enjoy the guarantees on working conditions enjoyed by all Frenchmen, those of the Labor Code. ... In the future, at a date that will be worked out, there will be no further recruitment based on the rail workers' statute."

Claiming the SNCF's situation is "alarming," Philippe called on parliament to pass an enabling act to allow the government to impose its reform using Macron's labor decrees. He said, "Faced with urgency, the government is determined to get key principles passed before the summer. ... In mid-May we will submit a draft Enabling Act to the parliament. Using the decrees will allow for broad negotiations" with SNCF management and the unions. He also called for privatizing the SNCF, which would be transformed into a corporation whose shares are partially owned by the state.

The policy of Philippe and Macron is illegitimate and anti-democratic, both in its form and content, and deserves to be rejected with contempt.

The claim that there is not enough money to maintain

the French rail workers' statute and, more broadly, workers' living standards across Europe, is a political lie. While attacking SNCF workers, Macron is handing over billions of euros in tax cuts for the rich (ISF). The French state gave the banks €360 billion in loan guarantees overnight during the 2008 Wall Street crash, and supported the European Central Bank's lending of trillions of euros to the banks since then.

What is driving this reactionary policy is the war drive of the major imperialist powers: Macron is intending to finance a surge of French militarism at the workers' expense.

On February 17, at the Munich Security Conference, French Defense Minister Florence Parly announced a 35 percent surge to a €300 billion military budget for 2018-2024. To join in the ongoing militarization of the European Union (EU), carried out together with Berlin, Macron intends to throw the workers back decades in order to finance wars in Mali, Syria and beyond, including wars directly between the major nuclear powers.

The government's vision of the future, as shown by its plans to impose its labor decrees on PSA autoworkers and the SNCF rail workers, is to reduce all workers to temps without any social rights. Philippe's promise to offer rail workers the protections of the Labor Code is a cynical fraud. The labor law passed with Macron's participation in the 2012-2017 Socialist Party (PS) government of President François Hollande allows the bosses and union to agree to violate the Labor Code. Even the protections Philippe claims to offer are, in fact, being repudiated.

That is what was shown when the unions and the French chemical industry agreed last year on a contract in which workers are paid under the minimum wage, which is defined in the Labor Code.

No real struggle can be mounted against Macron's regressive policies without carrying out a struggle against war and social inequality in the working class across Europe.

As Macron presents his plan to liquidate the SNCF, there is rising opposition and militancy in the working class internationally after a decade of accelerating social attacks since the 2008 crash. Since the beginning of 2018, there have been mass workers protests in Iran and Tunisia, strikes by German and Turkish metalworkers, British rail workers, and by Greek workers against the Syriza ("Coalition of the Radical Left") government's austerity policies.

In the United States, the powerful American proletariat is entering into struggle. Amid rising anger among autoworkers over the corporate bribing of United Auto Workers (UAW) union officials to impose a reactionary contract, teachers across the entire state of West Virginia are defying a right-wing governor and mobilizing to demand better wages and working conditions.

And in France, the rail workers face the necessity of organizing a struggle amid growing strikes by Air France and health care workers.

To oppose Macron's attacks, workers cannot accept the straitjacket of a few symbolic trade union protests organized at the national level. The key question is to take the struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucracy and its political allies, who are leading the "negotiations" with Macron, and organize independently to wage a political struggle against the anti-democratic and militarist policies of Macron and the EU.

The government is counting on a purely national mobilization of rail workers in France, isolated from other layers of workers already targeted by Macron—auto, chemical workers, and retirees. He aims to divide and rule, exhausting or breaking up protests in various industries, isolated from their class brothers and sisters internationally. The French trade unions are adamant that the struggles now taking place inside France should not be unified, and sections of the press are gloating that it will be possible to inflict a humiliating and demoralizing defeat on the rail workers.

Speaking to *Le Monde*, pollster Jérôme Sainte-Marie advised Macron as follows: "For him it would be best

for the reform of the SNCF to take on the appearance of a battle. If victory were too easy, he would get less out of it politically. It would be better if it were like the miners strike for Thatcher, a heroic struggle against the dreaded fantasy of the trade union monster that he ultimately wins."

The reference to the 1985 miners strike in Great Britain, in which the trade unions isolated a strike controlled by the National Union of Mineworkers, and allowed British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to wage a broad assault on workers' living standards, is a warning as to Macron's plans.

The bourgeoisie's strategy depends critically on the treachery of trade unions who fundamentally share the nationalist and militarist perspective of Macron. The call by leading members of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France (LFI) to spend billions more on the army is a clear reflection of the reactionary outlook of these layers, which include the so-called "class struggle unions" linked to LFI, like the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT).

Willing to "modernize" the country and promote its "competitiveness" and its power on the world stage, they are willing to accept any of the social attacks they are negotiating with Macron.

The unions are desperately seeking to posture as forces for opposition, while avoiding organizing any opposition. The CGT initially called for a symbolic one-day strike on March 22, and even the French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT), which hailed Macron's labor decrees and voted the sub-minimum wage contracts in the chemical industry, briefly declared it wanted to launch an "extendable strike starting on March 14."

Yesterday, however, it was announced that the unions would postpone all decisions on strike action over the SNCF reform until March 15.



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