

French unions negotiate rail privatization with Macron government

Anthony Torres
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On Thursday, Transport Minister Elisabeth Borne met with union officials to discuss privatizing the French National Railways (SNCF) and eviscerating the rail workers' statute. Though aware of rising anger among workers and of the government's determination to impose its will, the unions are negotiating with Borne and postponing any decision on strike action for several weeks.

The unions and French President Emmanuel Macron's government plan to discuss for two months how to implement the European Union-mandated opening of French railways to private competition by privatizing the SNCF and ending all recruitment based on the rail workers' statute. Macron and SNCF management are demanding that wages, pensions and career advancement procedures defined in the statute be watered down to conform with those of private rail firms.

The government is making quite clear that there is nothing to negotiate and that it is determined to reduce rail employees, like PSA autoworkers threatened by Macron's reactionary labor decrees, to temp workers without any real social protections. At a cabinet meeting, Macron stressed that "the necessary transformation of the rail company... will be carried out with determination." On Monday, the government announced its intention to ram an enabling act through parliament allowing it to impose the privatization of the SNCF by decree.

Nevertheless, the unions are refusing to organize strikes while holding reactionary discussions with Macron. This must be taken as a warning to rail workers as well as workers across Europe targeted for austerity. The trade unions will not fight Macron or the EU.

Against these illegitimate and anti-social measures,

workers must prepare for a political struggle carried out by their own rank-and-file organizations set up independently of the trade unions, and together with their class brothers and sisters internationally.

Yesterday morning, the trade unions announced a "social alarm" that would potentially allow them to call a strike, but at the same time insisted they were trying to "calm the situation down."

Coming out of his meeting with the transport minister, CGT (General Confederation of Labor) Rail Secretary Laurent Brun said that at the meeting there was "a lot of back-and-forth, but not a lot of room for maneuver." He made clear that the CGT is well aware of what is taking place and plans to nevertheless participate, but "without too many illusions."

Dider Aubert, the pro-Macron French Democratic Labor Confederation's (CFDT) secretary for rail, said, "If the first meeting to break the ice turns out to be the pattern for the other ones, well, it will be difficult to avoid a strike."

While complaining about Macron, the unions are effectively supporting his strategy, refusing to politically challenge a key privatization at the heart of his counter-revolutionary social program while putting off any call for strike action. The trade union alliance will meet only on March 15 to discuss a possible strike date. The CGT has called on rail workers to protest on March 22, the same day that public-sector workers are set to protest the public sector reform.

Unsurprisingly, SNCF management and the state, both of which remember the explosive rail strike of November-December 1995 and fear a similar mobilization today, are denouncing strike action. On Wednesday, SNCF President Guillaume Pépy defended Macron's reform on CNews, citing the SNCF's large profits and saying, "No one, not the workers, the

unions, their clients or our country has an interest in a long strike just now, when the trains are just getting back in shape.”

In 1995, when Prime Minister Alain Juppé tried to slash Social Security and rail workers’ pensions, workers were forced to take strike action independently of the unions. Over 1 million people went on strike or joined protests. This paralyzed France for three weeks, for the first time since the May-June 1968 general strike.

Terrified by a situation that was rapidly escaping their control, the unions and petty-bourgeois parties such as Workers Struggle (LO) and the Revolutionary Communist League (today the New Anti-capitalist Party—NPA) rushed into the workers assemblies to end the strike.

Two decades later, the situation is even more explosive. Macron is trying to liquidate the SNCF after a decade of social attacks and deepening political crisis across Europe since the 2008 financial crash. In France, the post-1968 political system has collapsed with the disintegration of the Socialist Party (PS), the implosion of the Gaullists and the discrediting of pseudo-left forces such as the NPA and LO.

A new international offensive of the working class is developing. Since the beginning of 2018, there have been major workers’ demonstrations in Iran and Tunisia and strikes of Turkish and German metalworkers, British railworkers and Greek workers opposing the Syriza government’s austerity policies. Many sections of American workers are entering into struggle, including teachers across the entire state of West Virginia who are defying the state government. In France itself, the rail workers’ struggle is unfolding amid strikes by Air France and health workers.

In the fight against Macron’s attacks, workers cannot limit themselves to a struggle on a national level, which would be dominated by the unions. Workers want to defend their social rights and win increases in wages, which have been stagnant for many years even as the financial aristocracy paid itself trillions of euros in bank bailouts and profits derived from the re-militarization of Europe. Despite their posturing, the unions are deeply afraid of this radicalization and are aligning themselves ever more openly with the financial aristocracy’s reactionary maneuvers.

The day before talks began, CGT General Secretary

Philippe Martinez deployed the CGT’s standard Stalinist demagoguery. Speaking on France2 television, he said he was “totally pumped.” He continued, “The government says it wants to discuss, we’re going to see if it really wants to discuss.” He said that rail workers “are not privileged” and that their social rights “are not negotiable.”

But if Martinez says the rail workers’ statute is “not negotiable,” what is the CGT doing in talks whose express purpose is to negotiate the statute away? Despite Martinez’s boasting, is it not clear that the unions, which negotiated for months on Macron’s labor decrees that effectively suspend the Labor Code, are preparing yet another impotent, symbolic protest that will serve only as a fig leaf for the imposition of yet another major social attack?

The CGT is not calling strikes now because it is itself negotiating the attack and fears it would lose control of strikes if it called them. The only way forward for the workers is to organize independently of the trade unions and unite their struggles in a political counter-offensive of the working class against Macron and the EU on the basis of a revolutionary, socialist and internationalist perspective.



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