

Strikes by railway workers and aircrews paralyze France

Our correspondents
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The strike by railway workers and Air France personnel paralyzed France on Tuesday, as Parisian garbage workers, power station workers and students also went on strike.

According to the state railway company SNCF, over one third of the 150,000 employees took part in the strike. Among train crews, which are indispensable for train traffic, participation was considerably higher, at almost 50 percent.

Seventy-seven percent of the train drivers and 69 percent of the inspectors were on strike. As a result, seven out of eight long-distance trains [TGVs], four out of five regional trains and two out of three local trains were canceled.

The SNCF expects train cancellations to remain high on Wednesday. In the next three months, the railroad workers want to continue their labor struggle. The strike will alternate between two days of strike action and three days of work.

Air France had to cancel around one third of the long distance and medium distance flights because of the strike, and half of the domestic flights were canceled. More strikes are planned for the 10th and 11th of April.

While the strike at Air France is focused on higher wages, railroad workers are directly engaged in a power struggle with President Macron's government. Macron is seeking to privatize the railway, shut down railway lines, reduce jobs and abolish the statute that protects the railroad workers from dismissal and guarantees them a pension.

“This will make our jobs more and more precarious and we will lose our protections; we will be at the mercy of the bosses. It’s unacceptable!” Youssef, a striking rail worker, told the WSW in Paris.

The railway workers are aware that this is not just about their own interests, but about defending social

achievements and public services for the entire working class.

Guillaume, another railway worker, told the WSW, “I am at the demonstration because there are government attacks against all the sectors of society. Against train workers, high school and university students, hospital staff and the whole public and private sectors.”

Guillaume continued, “Now, there is a frontal attack against the train workers to which they are reacting, and this has built up an enormous mobilization behind them. Something has to happen, and it could happen now. One has to reflect, to think about another society, to think about the problem from an international standpoint. It is not only in France that we have problems, but throughout Europe and in countries throughout the world. By showing that we can fight against our own government we can inspire workers in other countries to fight against their own governments. All together, in a struggle against capitalism, we can be successful.”

The government has treated the strike as a struggle for power. “The government and the parliament are determined to carry out the necessary reforms,” said Jean-Baptiste Djebbari, who is responsible for the SNCF reform in the government faction. “We expect a hard labor dispute.”

The conservative newspaper *Le Figaro* commented that Macron and the government risked much. If they go down, they could also say goodbye to reform plans in other areas.

On Tuesday, demonstrations of striking workers took place in many French cities. The workers were joined by a large number of students fighting against attacks on public education, named after the Minister of Education, Frédérique Vidal. It introduces a selective

admission procedure at the universities that makes it impossible for many adolescents to study.

Strikes and blockades are now taking place in numerous French universities with the aim of reversing the Vidal Law. The conflict escalated when, on the night of March 23, in the city of Montpellier, masked assailants had infiltrated an occupied lecture theater and beaten off the students carrying out a blockade and forcibly evicted them. One week later, the dean and a law professor were suspected of having organized the attack.

Youssef, with whom the WSWS spoke at the demonstration in Paris, believes that the government must be overthrown: “The objective of this movement is to get rid of the government. We have to stick together and remain active as long as we can in order to bring down the government. It is a terrible threat to all the public services both for the users as well as the workers.”

This will only be possible through a wider mobilization of workers, he said. “We can win this struggle,” he continued. “This only depends on how we mobilize people. The more we are mobilized, the bigger the chance of us stopping this government.

“It is possible: we already saw in 1995, when the mobilization was very big, that it was possible to force out the government. Macron is not God on earth. He runs the country, but it is the people who are sovereign. As long as we are mobilized and stay strong, we can change things. We must join with others—students, postmen, ambulance drivers, the Carrefour workers. Everyone is being hit: today it is the train workers, tomorrow it will be another sector that will be hit.”

The unions, on the other hand, are determined to prevent a fall of the Macron government, which they had already supported in the presidential election.

Laurent Berger, the CFDT general secretary who called for the railroad strike, announced Tuesday that he would be willing to negotiate with the SNCF on a change in the railway workers' statute. “You have to see what you need to do to develop the statute of railway workers, but not by blaming them and stigmatizing them,” he said.

The head of the union FO, Jean-Claude Mailly, advised the government to compromise in order to prevent a conflagration. “The social climate is changing, the grass is dry and it does not take much to

inflame it,” he said. “There are many trouble spots.”

Mailly fiercely opposed the so-called “convergence of struggles” demanded by the rival CGT. One should not “improvise”, he said. The “social weather” cannot be predicted. “Having multiple trouble spots does not mean they all have to come together,” he said, justifying his intention to isolate the different struggles.

Even the CGT, which usually poses as a “fighting” union, refuses to expand the strike movement. *Le Monde* quoted a CGT official in Lille who denied a railroader's request to ensure that there was not a single train moving for ten days on the cynical grounds that the union would not order strikes from above.

The railroader Guillaume, who has already been quoted, was suspicious of the unions. “Concerning the trade unions, sometimes they can be very useful in building a movement,” he said. “But later we cannot have illusions on their account. At some point they will turn and betray the movement in order to protect their bureaucratic privileges. We have to be ready to go beyond the trade unions, to go further. As long as workers agree to go further, we must do it. We cannot let anyone put barriers in our way, be it the trade unions or the reformist parties or the government. It's through the organization of the workers by themselves and for themselves that we will be able to overcome these obstacles.”

He added, “It's certain that negotiating with the government is not the way to get anything. It's more by mobilizing in the streets and in the factories that will overcome Macron. We have to keep together and not be divided. It is only through the struggle of workers all together that we will achieve anything.”



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