

As the unions continue talks with the government

French rail workers, students resume strike action against Macron

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Social opposition to President Emmanuel Macron's government is growing as rail workers begin a fourth day of strike action against the privatisation of the French National Railways (SNCF) and students continue strikes and occupations against new entrance rules at French universities.

After two strike days last week, rail transport has again been disrupted since Sunday by strike action. Approximately 35 percent of SNCF workers were on strike Sunday. Only one of every five high-speed trains and one of every three regional express and Paris-area trains were running, and the Express Regional Network (RER) in Paris was also disrupted. SNCF management has predicted a 43 percent strike participation rate for Monday, including 63 percent of controllers and 74 percent of train drivers.

The student movement is continuing at universities across France. On Sunday, the National Student Coordination (CNE) called for a new day of action on campuses on Tuesday. It also called for protests on April 14 "in conjunction with the strike of the rail workers" and for students to "join the national strike day on April 19."

This movement is bringing workers and youth into a direct political confrontation with the French government, which is backed by the European Union. In this battle, the only way forward is a struggle to bring down the Macron government. The government, which is looking for money to finance its tax cuts for the rich and its plans for 300 billion euros in military spending by 2024, is determined to proceed with its cuts.

In an interview with *Le Parisien* Sunday, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe insisted that he would not

retreat but would impose the privatisation of the SNCF at all costs.

He said, "I am receiving messages from French people who support my government and say we must continue to the end. And that is what we will do. Already on February 26, in my first statement on the SNCF, I said there were issues that weren't negotiable: opening the railways to competition, restructuring the company and ending recruitment based on the rail workers' statute. We will not go back on this, which does not mean I am not open for discussion on how to implement it."

In short, the government is refusing to negotiate anything but the terms of the unions' surrender. It is determined to privatize the SNCF and smash existing protections for rail workers, including a guarantee of lifetime employment and relatively advantageous pension benefits. The government intends to raise rail workers' legal retirement age to align it with the private sector, which is currently 62. The reform package will be debated in the National Assembly starting today, with the formal vote set for April 17.

In the face of this ruling class and state offensive, the trade unions are continuing to hold talks with the government. They are seeking to limit the impact of the rail strike and prevent a struggle to bring down Macron. The tactic of revolving two-day strikes spread over a two-month period is calculated to let off steam, wear down the workers and increasingly alienate middle-class layers.

By continuing talks with the government, the unions are promoting the illusion that a satisfactory compromise with Macron can be reached. There can be little doubt that the unions, behind the scenes, are

coordinating their actions with the government.

Prime Minister Philippe alluded to this, saying he was counting on the trade unions to ultimately support his positions. “I have seen the determination of certain trade union organisations,” he said, “but they should see mine as well... I have clearly expressed the will of my government and spelled out what is up for discussion. I feel sure that in the end we will come to an agreement.”

Philippe added that he is in regular contact with former right-wing Prime Minister Alain Juppé, whose attacks provoked the November-December 1995 rail strikes. Philippe also threatened a police crackdown against student protests at universities.

“What is unacceptable is blockades or illegal actions,” he said. “We are vigilant, we are listening, and when university presidents contact us to ask for interventions here or there, they take place. There as well, we are extremely determined to not allow an ultra-politicised and at times very violent minority to act.”

The unions first negotiated the reactionary labour law of the preceding Socialist Party (PS) government. Then last year, they worked with Macron to draft decrees through which the government can unilaterally impose austerity measures and a drastic restructuring of class relations in France.

On Friday, several trade union confederations met Transport Minister Elisabeth Borne. After the meeting, they complained that the government is refusing to retreat on its measures. “There was no negotiation” on substance, General Confederation of Labour (CGT)-Railways General Secretary Laurent Brun said. The CGT said the strike action might “last beyond the month of June.”

Workers can place no confidence in the statements of the trade unions and their allies among the pseudo-left political parties, such as the Unsubmissive France (LFI) movement of Jean-Luc Mélenchon. The central question facing the working class is to take control of the strike movement out of the hands of the unions and launch a political struggle against Macron.

The *Parti de l'égalité socialiste*, the French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is building a new political leadership in the working class in opposition to the existing parties historically tied to the big business PS, which consciously work to sabotage working class opposition.

These parties are allied with the unions and share their basic support for Macron's austerity measures. They are terrified of the potential for a social explosion and bitterly hostile to a struggle to bring down the government.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon of the Unsubmissive France (LFI) movement is doing his best to bolster the authority of the unions. He declared, “Today the trade unions want to broaden their base. They are right to do that. We must respect the particular form of this energy. It is our main task.”

At the same time, he is trying to manipulate growing popular anger against the trade unions and their political allies, whom he mocked as the “selfie left.”

This is a politically dishonest comment, since Mélenchon is part of the same milieu as the individuals, such as NPA official Olivier Besancenot and former PS presidential candidate Benoît Hamon, whom he claims to be criticising. Immediately after attacking them, he expressed his hope that they would join him in upcoming protests: “I hope Olivier Besancenot and Benoît Hamon will be there, because their local organisations are calling protests.”

Mélenchon brazenly added, “The French people are lucky in one regard: they have us... We are something precious.”



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