

Strikes mount as National Assembly opens debate on French rail privatization

Alex Lantier
10 April 2018

Air France workers are taking strike action today over wage demands, after rail workers mounted a fourth day of rotating strikes yesterday against President Emmanuel Macron's austerity measures. Trade union officials and students occupying universities to protest Macron's moves to impose harsher selection procedures also mounted a protest outside the National Assembly, as it launched two weeks of debate on the planned privatization of the French National Railways (SNCF).

The rail strike continued, with one quarter of rail workers listed as striking, including 75 percent of train drivers and 71 percent of controllers. Only one in every five high-speed trains (TGV), one in every three express regional trains, and one in six inter-city trains were running. SNCF management reported that the strike has already cost the company €100 million in lost revenues.

The number of rail workers formally listed as striking went down yesterday, but there were many signs of growing militancy among workers and suspicion of the unions' strategy of holding rotating strikes two days a week until June, when the Assembly is slated to approve the rail bill.

Union officials and workers at the North and Saint Lazare Stations in Paris voted to authorize indefinite renewable strikes, effectively repudiating the union leadership's strategy of limited, rotating strikes while continuing to negotiate the cuts with Macron. It was in particular a rebuke to Philippe Martinez, the leader of the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union, who went on Europe1 radio yesterday morning to say that he does "not want a lasting labor conflict."

While union officials typically report that workers are staying away from their strike meetings, a number of workers showed up at the North Station meeting

yesterday, together with protesting University of Paris students from the Tolbiac and Saint Denis campuses. "Everyone was there," one union official told *Libération*, which quoted a rail worker at the meeting as saying: "They are just playing with us, we have to go all the way now. We have to break Macron."

A CGT member at the North Station disavowed the CGT's policy: "I am CGT, but I am for indefinite strike action. As I see it, we have to go for it now, we can't just wait for weeks this way."

The radicalization of broad layers of the French and European population is proceeding rapidly and moving towards a confrontation with the Macron administration and the European Union (EU). The central challenge facing workers and youth is to fully grasp the implications of the struggle that will emerge as they move into opposition to the EU's agenda of militarism and war. There will be no peaceful, negotiated settlement by which the ruling elite peacefully agrees to abandon this agenda.

The massive police build-up across Europe, the writing of the provisions of the state of emergency permanently into France's anti-terror law, and the constant NATO war threats against Syria and Russia are sharp warnings that the ruling elite is considering a crackdown and military escalation. Driven by the escalating military and economic crisis of world capitalism, they are determined to ram the attacks through and restructure class relations in Europe along authoritarian lines, so that French imperialism can compete in the escalating war drive and scramble for profits internationally.

Workers entering into struggle against the EU and Macron will be compelled to fight to bring down the Macron government and mobilize workers in France and across Europe in a struggle for state power.

WSWS reporters attended a protest held by the CGT and SUD (Solidarity Unity Democracy) unions near the National Assembly in Paris, as parliamentarians began to debate the rail privatization. Though the rally was dominated by union officials and legislators close to the union bureaucracy, some workers and youth in attendance spoke to the WSWS about their growing opposition to austerity and war.

Benjamin told the WSWS: “I am at the Post Office; what they are doing at the SNCF is what they did to us at the Post Office and they did even worse to my friends at Orange/France Telecom. That means going to more precarious conditions, more competition means systematically lowering working conditions, freezing wages, jobs where you are working next to temp workers who aren’t working in the same conditions at all.”

Government officials, Benjamin said, “tell us all the time that there is no money for hospitals, for schools, for any of the public services. But then, to buy Rafale fighter jets, they always find the money. Obviously, I’m not for that.”

Benjamin said he opposed social attacks on working people being used to fund wars in Iraq and Syria that are based on lies: “They already did this to us with Saddam Hussein and weapons of mass destruction. Now I’m not a great specialist on Syrian politics, but I think it’s the same people who absolutely want to bomb all those countries who want to crush the workers and spread misery here in France.”

The WSWS also spoke to two students from the University of Paris-Tolbiac, who said they had come to the protest out of solidarity with rail workers: “We want to be with them, and in particular we at Tolbiac are organizing a party for the rail workers Saturday on the Tolbiac campus to bring our support to their strike fund. And we think the rail workers are under attack just when we are facing attacks under the Student Plan, we want to build a stronger movement against it.”

They said Macron’s attacks would have a broad impact on students: “We know that when there is a privatization there will also be sackings, it will hit jobs and wages. We will soon be on the job market, very soon even, and we do not want our social rights degraded, to lose the right to a pension... We know that if they get the attack on the rail workers through, then it will be the public service and finally it will be an open

door to all sorts of attacks.”

They also indicated their lack of confidence in the trade unions: “The union confederations, SUD-Rail, they are only calling for rotating strikes two days per week, that is not enough to make the government back down. Macron wants to break the social rights of the rail workers and the union confederations do not have a plan that is up to the task.”

The maneuvers in the National Assembly yesterday in the opening discussion of Macron’s privatization plans reflected the attempts by the political establishment to impose the bill while trying to acknowledge and cynically manipulate rising opposition to Macron’s platform.

After Transport Minister Elisabeth Borne gave introductory remarks hailing the bill to a virtually empty Assembly chamber, Olivier Faure of the Socialist Party (PS), which introduced the labor law based on which Macron is attacking the SNCF, made a few cynical criticisms. He said the PS has “divergences” with the proposed bill, and warned that Macron would “encounter the hostility of the rail workers” and also “of commuters and of France.”

The right-wing The Republicans (LR) party indicated that it would decide today whether to abstain or vote “no” on the privatization measure, not because they disagreed with the attack on the rail workers, but because they thought that Macron’s resort to decrees to pass it would discredit the bill. “Why use the labor decrees? Macron could just have had confidence in the National Assembly and the Senate,” a LR deputy told *Le Parisien*.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact