

The referendum at SNCF: The unions seek to strangle French rail strike

Alex Lantier
12 May 2018

The trade unions' calling of a company-wide referendum at the French National Railways (SNCF) for May 14-21 on whether to support President Emmanuel Macron's reactionary privatization "reforms," is a dead end for railway workers. While most workers are hostile to Macron and the Socialist Party's (PS) Labor Law, under whose provisions the vote is being held, the "choice" they are being offered is no choice at all.

Even if a "no" vote wins, it leaves the door open for negotiations to continue between the unions and Prime Minister Edouard Philippe. When he agreed to meet with union officials, Philippe made clear that the transformation of the SNCF into a publicly traded company, and the ending of the railway workers' statute, are no longer up for discussion. In other words, behind workers' backs the unions have already agreed to the government's main demands; they are negotiating only the financing of the SNCF's debt.

If the "yes" vote were to win, due, for example, to the participation of managers in the referendum, or the votes of non-striking workers or strikers suffering the loss of wages, the unions will use the outcome to call off the strike.

This constitutes a warning to workers: the only way forward is to take the struggle out of the hands of the unions and organize themselves into rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions. Workers cannot conduct a fight against austerity, which is a political struggle, under the leadership of these organizations. The union apparatuses receive 95 percent of their income from the state and employers, and are controlled by bureaucrats whose aim is to boost the profits of the companies where they work. And they are determined above all to prevent a political struggle by the working class to bring down the Macron

government.

The unions that have called for the referendum include not only the Stalinist CGT (General Confederation of Labor) and the SUD, which is historically tied to the Pabloites of the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA), but also pro-government unions, such as the CFDT (French Democratic Federation of Labor). Even the supposedly "anti-establishment" unions have sent repeated signs to Macron and Philippe that they are seeking a deal.

In announcing the referendum on May 9, the general secretary of the CGT-Rail, Laurent Brun, told CNews: "The management says that 'since three quarters of the railway workers are not on strike, three quarters of the workers support the reforms...' In my opinion, the response will be overwhelming, but we will see."

The federal secretary of the SUD-Rail, Bruno Poncet, declared on LCI that he would have preferred to organize the referendum in such a way as to allow workers to choose which reform "to suggest," to underline the fact that the trade unions are themselves in favour of imposing reforms on the workers.

"We have to explain to our colleagues that we are not against reforms in principle. Today the management are making us out as radicals, which is not the case," he said.

Poncet's admission exposes the role of the unions in France and around the world. They are confronted by a working-class radicalization and the growth of workers' struggles, such as those of US teachers that erupted outside of the control of the unions, and of metal workers in Turkey, who won wage increases of more than 20 percent. At the same time, they are staggered by the implications of the growing danger of a major war against Iran in the Middle East.

The military strikes by Israel against Iranian forces in

Syria underscore the dangers facing workers as a result of the wars in Libya and Syria, against which the unions in France and throughout Europe have not mounted any struggle. In fact, the CGT and SUD even signed the declaration in 2012, solidarizing themselves with the “humanitarian” pretexts advanced by Paris for its aggressive wars. They know that in the event of a major war, the capitalist class will try to suppress strikes and all forms of political opposition inside the country.

The unions are therefore desperately manoeuvring to avoid being outflanked by an explosive movement of the working class, as took place 50 years ago during the general strike of May 1968.

The Socialist Equality Party has warned from the outset of the struggles against Macron that what workers require is not a strategy of “protest” by unions that support economic reforms, but to construct their own revolutionary leadership. The various bankrupt tactics of the union bureaucracies are another confirmation of the correctness of this warning.

In the Stalinist journal *L’Humanité*, Brun explained his strategy by citing the ongoing strike at Air France, where this week, the workers stunned the unions by rejecting an agreement proposed by management. The unions did not dare sign the deal, although they tacitly supported it and sent it to a vote of the workers.

Brun said, “At Air France, the management thought the employees were resigned to anything. The government similarly thought that the SNCF reforms would be passed without any great problems. But they ran into a snag. Any sense of resignation among the workers is falling, and the employers who believed that they were on top have found they are trapped.”

This is pure demagoguery. In fact, faced with growing anger among the workers, not only the employers but above all the unions and their political allies in the Communist Party of France and NPA feel themselves trapped. At Air France, the defeat suffered by the management traumatized the union; certain that the deal would pass, they had already written their speeches announcing the company’s victory. They were forced to confess to the media that they were at a loss for words.

At the SNCF, the unions, whose leaders are in favour of reforms “in principle,” have called this referendum—to provide themselves with a false veneer

of opposition to Macron in case of a “no” vote, or to justify their own capitulation in case of a “yes” vote.

The vote recalls the referendum on austerity organized by the Syriza (“Coalition of the Radical Left”) government in Greece in July 2015. Initially, Syriza claimed it was seeking to obtain a mandate to oppose the European Union; behind the scenes, its leaders hoped for a defeat in order to justify their own planned capitulation. Surprised by the “no” vote by Greek workers in the referendum, they trampled on the result and voted for the deepest austerity cuts since the beginning of the Greek crisis in 2009.

Everything indicates that the CGT-SUD referendum, based on the Socialist Party’s labour law that is hated by workers, has the same political purpose as the fraudulent referendum of Syriza.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)