

French unions negotiate with government to impose railway privatization

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Despite ongoing strike action by railway workers against the planned privatisation of the French National Railway Company (SNCF), the trade unions are moving toward a capitulation to President Emmanuel Macron's government in the face of this politically explosive attack.

The union leaders are aware of the strong opposition to Macron's reforms among workers, but above all they oppose a struggle to bring down his government. Amid an international radicalisation of workers, they fear a social explosion that could escape their control, like the May-June 1968 general strike 50 years ago. They are therefore launching a series of manoeuvres to cover over the fact that their talks with the government are all predicated on agreeing to the imposition of the so-called reform.

In the wake of a meeting between officials of the French Democratic Confederation of Labour (CFDT) and the National Union of Autonomous Trade Unions (UNSA) with Transport Minister Élisabeth Borne last Friday, all the parties involved are working intensively to reach an agreement on the measures they plan to impose on the workers.

This week, CFDT Assistant General Secretary Sébastien Mariani hailed the results of the meeting: "We have begun very precise work in an exchange that could be called a real negotiation. Today, we are really opening up, you could say. We have been able to examine all of our 42 proposed amendments, which will still lead to a lot of discussions, even though we haven't yet been able to go into detail on each one of them yet."

UNSA official Roger Dillenseger said, "Our draft amendments have been received and are being looked at in detail. Now, we are starting work that will continue this entire weekend because the schedule is a

bit tight."

After the meeting with the CFDT and UNSA, Borne said: "Here are two trade unions that want to be forces for constructive proposals, and with whom we will have ongoing dialogue in the coming days." She also announced the holding of a "specific working meeting in order to clearly explain the basic position of the government."

The Stalinist General Confederation of Labour (CGT) and Solidarity-Union-Democracy (SUD) unions have refused so far to meet with Borne. But they are meeting Prime Minister Édouard Philippe, claiming talks with him will give better results than meeting with Borne—even though Philippe has stressed that the precondition for talks is acceptance of the transformation of the SNCF into a private company, the end of the railway workers' statute and the opening of the railways to private competition. The CGT-SUD strategy is not fundamentally different from that of the CFDT and UNSA.

After the May 7 meeting between Philippe and the union federations, CGT-Railways General Secretary Laurent Brun hailed this meeting on France-Info: "The prime minister has confirmed with us today that he would personally involve himself on this issue. This is a very positive element for us. He made certain overtures to us on peripheral matters involving SNCF debt and the company contract."

Brun added, "These discussions are extremely clear and frank. We are not in full agreement, but at least everything is in the open, it seems as though the government wants to clarify a certain number of points, and that is a good thing. Obviously, it is stressing that it will be firm with the strikers, so the strikers must show they are firm, too, if they want the government to come back and make concessions on its plans."

These comments alone demonstrate that the urgent question for workers in struggle against Macron is to take the strike into their own hands and build organisations independent of all the trade unions to coordinate their struggle.

Philippe has stressed that he will not budge on the planned privatisation and attacks on rail workers' wages and legal conditions, and negotiating with Macron under these conditions can only signify accepting the government's conditions and working for a sell-out behind the backs of the workers. Calling on workers to continue strike action under these conditions, without offering any perspective for a political struggle against Macron, is simply empty and dishonest demagoguery.

At the same time, by holding a referendum on Macron's reform in the SNCF work force, a measure made possible by the anti-democratic labour law passed by the Socialist Party (PS), the trade unions are working to give the weakest possible expression of opposition to the reform. Of particular significance are union statements welcoming the participation in the referendum of management staff, who are more favourable to the reform on average than the workers.

After the trade unions announced this referendum, the WSWS warned: "Even if a 'no' vote wins, it leaves the door open for negotiations to continue between the unions and Prime Minister Edouard Philippe. ... 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."

SUD-Rail's Bruno Poncet even went on LCI [all-news television channel] to announce that he would have preferred a format where workers had the choice of which reform to "propose," thus making clear that the unions also want to impose a "reform" on the rail workers.

The course of the referendum vote, which has been prolonged to May 22, is bearing out this warning. Brun, the CGT-Railways chief, boasted that the referendum "is having great success, including among management staff and despite opposition from the company." He said there are "many voters ... more than we could have imagined," but that "certain establishments or branches of management are refusing to allow ballot boxes for

the referendum on their premises."

Workers must be warned: the CGT is congratulating itself on management staff's participation in the reform, although it knows full well this is more likely to push the outcome of the vote in Macron's favour.

The trade unions' conduct in a struggle against Macron's attack on one of the most well-known and symbolic public companies in France is a warning that they are incapable of and hostile to defending any of the social gains of the working class.



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