French rail workers demonstrate after voting against Macron's privatization

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After voting by 95 percent to reject President Emmanuel Macron's planned privatization of the French National Railways (SNCF) in a company referendum, rail workers held rallies across France. Protests took place Thursday and Friday in cities including Paris, Bordeaux, Avignon and Périgueux amid growing opposition among workers to the militarist and austerity policies of Macron and the European Union (EU).

The conflict between the growing militancy of the working class and the cowardly policies of the trade unions is ever more open. The union bureaucracies announce contradictory policies, divide the struggles and all the while continue to negotiate a reform that the workforce has already rejected. Now, they are announcing that they may move to end the strike action.

This vindicates the call by the WSWS for the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions, to take the struggle out of the unions' control and unify them in a political movement aiming to bring down the Macron government. Otherwise, the unions—who are already dividing and dispersing strikes of rail workers, public sector workers, Air France workers and electricity workers in order to block a movement towards a general strike, as in May-June 1968—will move rapidly to strangle protests against Macron.

WSWS reporters spoke to Farid, who works for a train maintenance subcontracting firm at a major Paris train station. He applauded the rail workers' vote against privatization and the moves to eliminate the rail workers' statute for new hires at the SNCF: "They were right! Really, the reforms would mean that new hires would not have the same rights of others who would be doing the same work at the SNCF. So they were right to oppose that."

Farid pointed to the impact Macron's scrapping of the rail workers' statute would have, speaking out against the inequality between workers protected by the rail workers' statute and subcontracted workers: "We are on minimum wage, unlike them. The rail workers earn €2,000 or even €2,500 a month, we're on minimum wage, or maybe €1,600 tops if we are lucky. The rail workers got these rights long ago." Farid added that workers in subcontracting firms have less advantageous conditions on pensions and traveling in the trains.

Farid stressed his bitter disappointment with Macron: "He doesn't care about poorer people at all. The more he made all sorts of promises early on, the more we are disappointed today. It is not just the rail workers, everyone is complaining now." He also stressed his disgust with the rapid rise of the net worth of billionaires in France: "You hear about that and you feel disgust in the pit of your stomach. It's totally outrageous, there is only money for the rich."

He added that many workers would go on strike if they saw a clear perspective for improving their lives. Speaking on the advantages provided by the rail workers statute, he said, "Of course we would like to have them, and if we thought we could get them we would be striking with them. … If I thought I could get those rights, I would be striking, for sure. And I would not be the only one."

After several years of work in the rail subcontractor, however, Farid stressed he had no confidence in the unions to organize a struggle. First, he criticized the self-contradictory policies of the unions: "There are too many separate competing unions, they criticize each other and no one can figure out what it is they are saying. The bosses come out ahead because the one

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says this, the other says the opposite, and no one agrees with anyone else."

Above all, Farid stressed that he did not believe the unions would organize a struggle that would improve workers' lives: "No, really, we don't believe that anymore. Every time we elect trade union delegates, they come along and give us their pep talk, 'vote for us, we'll do this, we'll do that.' Then we do not see them again until the next election. It's always the same thing. Really, we are used to it now. … We are disappointed with them, we prefer to struggle independently, or otherwise to just put up with what happens."

At the Avignon protest, workers criticized Macron's reform, which he is imposing via decrees he linked to the former Socialist Party (PS) government's labor law. The PS rammed it through parliament without a vote despite mass protests and opposition from 70 percent of the population.

One rail worker told Jean-François Césarini, the Avignon representative of Macron's Republic on the March (LRM) party: "LRM is an association of traitors that was elected by betraying the convictions of the people. All you are doing is impoverishing the population. … Negotiation doesn't mean using decrees to impose your will against the people's wishes. That's not dialog, it's dictatorship."

The sharpest warnings must be made about the role of the French trade unions. They are not seeking to use the overwhelming vote of the rail workers against the reform to intensify the struggle against Macron. Instead—terrified by rising working class opposition to the government, with whom they are trying to negotiate a deal—they are looking for a way to put an end to the strike at the expense of the workers and via a capitulation to all the government's demands.

They have already accepted negotiations with Prime Minister Edouard Philippe, even after Philippe said the elimination of the rail workers' statute, SNCF privatization and the EU-mandated opening of French railways to international competition were nonnegotiable. Philippe said that the only thing he would negotiate was what part of the SNCF's debts the state might take over. Thus, by negotiating with Philippe, the unions were signaling they could agree to capitulate on the rail workers' main demands.

On Friday, Philippe met with the trade unions and proposed that the state would take on €35 billion of the SNCF's €54.5 billion debt.

The rail federation of the National Union of Autonomous Trade Unions (UNSA) confederation reacted by pledging a "very quick" decision on ending the strike. Philippe had not indicated any change in his position on eliminating the rail workers statute or privatizing the SNCF, but UNSA-Rail General Secretary Roger Dillenseger happily announced that "he really listened to us" and that "it pays to negotiate."

The Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union said it would continue strike action but hailed Philippe's proposal on SNCF debt and called for a "round table" talks with the government.

From Russia, where he was meeting President Vladimir Putin, Macron demanded that the unions end the strike. He said Philippe had presented the government's "last offer," and that the unions should cease organizing opposition: "There are legitimate protests against the SNCF reform. But now I tell you, we have arrived at the end of this process. The bill is going to arrive at the Senate on Tuesday."

If the unions agree to Macron's diktat, this would amount on their part to an attempt to betray the strikes they have called and sell out historic gains of broad sections of the working class. Nonetheless, it is clear that this is the direction in which they are going. The only viable perspective for the working class is to organize independently of the trade unions in order to wage a political struggle to defend their rights and bring down the Macron government.

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