French rail workers protest privatization plans

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On Tuesday, as negotiations continued between Prime Minister Edouard Philippe and the trade unions on the privatization of the French National Railway (SNCF) and the Senate began examining the government's bill to overhaul the SNCF, rail workers struck and mounted protests in Paris.

While the protest took place under union banners, a political gulf separates the positions of the union bureaucracies from the aspirations of the strikers. Several unions, including the French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT), are already suggesting that they might call for an end to strike action. All of the unions have accepted talks with Philippe, even though he has stressed that the proposed attacks on rail workers' wages and conditions, the privatization of the SNCF and the opening of the railway to private competition are not negotiable.

The rail workers, 95 percent of whom voted in a company referendum against the SNCF "reform," are continuing to protest while the unions organize periodic strikes at Air France, the hospitals and the public sector. This vindicates the Socialist Equality Party's call for the formation of committees of action, organized independently of the unions, to unify these different strikes into a political struggle to bring down President Emmanuel Macron. Protesting rail workers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* indicated they were sympathetic to this perspective.

WSWS reporters at the Paris protest spoke to François, a rail worker at the Villeneuve-St-Georges site.

He said the rail workers are demanding "firstly that the SNCF not become a publicly-traded company." He continued: "Secondly, we want to conserve the rail workers' statute. There are also the SNCF's debts that should not all be placed on the rail workers' backs … There is the renationalization of freight services, and not opening smaller rural lines to private competition. So today this is a social movement, because the reform bill is going to the Senate, so we are trying to show we are here for a more social-oriented policy to save our company."

François spoke of his lack of trust in the talks between Philippe and the unions, which are calling only for the state to take over a portion of the SNCF's debts: "The unions, I don't exactly understand their policy when they go to their meeting with the prime minister, given that they are arguing over only one of the issues when we have at least eight demands."

He stressed his hostility to Macron's entire agenda. "Macron's policy is aggressive," he said. "He wants to save money everywhere, for everything to make profits. But the public services are not there to make money, but to offer a service. It is paid for by taxpayers, so it doesn't need to be profitable so much. But tomorrow if it is privatized, there should be no illusion that private investors will come to offer services, they will come to make profits. So we would lose on a number of counts."

He also pointed to Macron's lack of democratic legitimacy, given the small percentage of registered voters who voted for him in the first round of the presidential election last year: "He was elected after getting only 16 percent of the vote. It's worth recalling that."

François said he was sympathetic to the SEP's call to form committees of action: "Committees of action, you want to bring everyone together in one struggle? That is good. You should spread that on social media … I agree with bringing everyone together against Macron. The unions have not called for a united struggle."

He added, "We have to press forward. There are other

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movements by other sections of workers—the public sector, even private enterprises today where people endure poor working conditions, like Carrefour. Many companies have shut their doors … That is why we should be mobilized, we should be out every evening."

The WSWS also spoke to Sandrine, a rail worker who works in the Paris area. She stressed her hostility to Macron's privatization policy and her disappointment with the current main parties of the "left."

She explained, "I know that as soon as we are privatized, we won't have the same working conditions anymore. We are really asking ourselves about our public service: how we will keep it going, how we will ensure regulations are still obeyed, how we will deal with all the private competitors they want to put on the market. Our working conditions are not easy. We work split shifts, on weekends and holidays, and I have children … I don't think I am a privileged person, I have problems coming from my work."

Sandrine stressed her opposition to the policies of both Macron and the European Union: "Macron was not elected in a legitimate way, I think. I voted for him simply as the lesser evil against [neo-fascist presidential candidate] Marine Le Pen … But now, I do not agree with the decisions he is taking at all. He is not the president I elected. I elected him so we would not have a racist woman running the country, not so someone would sell off the public services to his friends, the bankers, so they can make money."

She added, "The Europe they are building is a Europe of money and profits. They do not have the interests of all European workers at heart … when you look at it, they are actually working to divide us."

The policy of the EU and Macron, she said, "is a policy of cutting public services that we all need and that are useful to everyone, so I am firmly opposed to it—cuts to health personnel, cuts to subsidies for drugs and medical treatments, and so on. Public services are the property of everyone and we must preserve them … The issue is that everyone should have access to them. It is a principle of equality that should be maintained."

Sandrine stressed the relationship between the reactionary policies being implemented across the EU and the bankruptcy of political parties tied to French and European social democracy.

The official left parties in France, Sandrine said, "are not left-wing enough." She continued: "We need a real left, which really represents the laboring people, in the broad sense of the term. Virtually everyone is a worker, including self-employed people who do little jobs working for Uber … It's not just traditional laborers working at big companies. France is a country whose population is overwhelmingly made up of workers, who struggle to make their salaries last to the end of the month."

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