

French rail workers strike at a crossroads

Kumaran Ira, Alex Lantier
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After the rejection of the French railway reform by an overwhelming majority of rail workers, their strike, which is at the center of the struggle against President Emmanuel Macron, is at a crossroads. While the French National Railway (SNCF) workers have illustrated the deep opposition among workers to austerity politics, the unions, terrified by workers' militant opposition to Macron, with whom they are negotiating, are working to end the strike.

Two clear alternatives are open to the rail workers. They can either take the strike out of the hands of the unions and organize themselves independently to fight Macron, making an appeal to other workers who are on strike, or the unions will strangle their fight in line with their schedule of negotiations with Macron. Macron has already made clear that he intends to impose the SNCF reform, privatizing the railroads and eliminating the rail workers' statute, at all costs.

It is in this context that the WSWs has proposed to workers to form committees of action, to organize independently of the unions and unify the struggles in the sectors of transportation, air travel, public workers, energy, etc. The way forward is a political struggle to bring down Macron, whose austerity policies and Middle East wars the working class already rejects. The immense social anger and potential for struggle in France and internationally must be brought to bear against the reactionary maneuvers of Macron and the union bureaucracy.

The French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT) is pushing the rail workers to end the strike once the Senate votes on the reform on June 5 and reconciles its bill with the National Assembly version on June 13. CFDT General Secretary Laurent Berger told *Le Journal du Dimanche* that the strike is approaching the end: "The government engaged us in a marathon of reform. We are in the last 10 kilometers." He added, "The CFDT wants to end the strike as fast as

possible."

The National Union of Autonomous Trade Unions (UNSA) also plans to end the strike and will make its decision "very rapidly," said UNSA-Rail leader Roger Dillenseger.

The attempt of broad sections of the French union apparatus to strangle the rail strike underlines the bankruptcy of the appeals of Jean-Luc Mélenchon to form a "new popular front," which would subordinate workers' struggles to a coalition of all the unions and their allied political parties. This would shackle the workers to the agenda of the pro-government unions like the CFDT, who are barely disguised partisans of Macron's reforms.

Fifty years ago, the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union betrayed the 1968 general strike, negotiating the Grenelle Accords to save the regime of General Charles de Gaulle. But now, rather than proposing wage increases like at Grenelle, the unions are negotiating with the state to slash social gains won in the 20th century. While workers' struggles are growing everywhere, and students are mobilizing against university reforms, the unions seek to isolate and dissipate these struggles, to prevent them from escalating into an all-out political struggle to bring down the Macron government.

This underlines the importance of the warning made by Leon Trotsky, the co-leader of the October Revolution of 1917 with Vladimir Lenin, in advancing the call for committees of action in 1935.

One year before the general strike of 1936, and five years before the National Assembly voted to give full powers to the Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime in 1940, Trotsky fought to alert the workers of the revolutionary potential, and the grave dangers, of the situation. He insisted that the committees of action needed to serve as the "revolutionary representation of the *struggling* masses."

He wrote: “The greatest danger in France lies in the fact that the revolutionary energy of the masses will be dissipated in spurts, in isolated explosions like Toulon, Brest and Limoges, and give way to apathy. Only conscious traitors or hopeless muddle-heads are capable of thinking that in the present situation it is possible to hold the masses immobilized up to the moment when they will be blessed from above by the government of the People’s Front. Strikes, protests, street clashes, direct uprisings are absolutely inevitable in the present situation. The task of the proletarian party consists not in checking and paralyzing these movements but in unifying them and investing them with the greatest possible force.”

The rail workers and other workers can have no confidence in the unions and their allies to lead the struggle. In negotiating with Macron, they are preparing to betray the strikes they organize. Despite their somewhat different vocabulary, the role of “class struggle” unions like the CGT and Solidarity-Union-Democracy (SUD) is not fundamentally different from that of the CFDT. They seek to demoralize the workers, sow illusions about Macron’s austerity politics, and dissipate workers’ militancy through impotent symbolic actions.

As the head of the CGT-Cheminots [rail workers], Laurent Brun hailed the state’s decision to partially take on the SNCF’s debt, thus accepting the principle that the SNCF would be separated from the state and privatized. SUD is organizing its own protests. It claims it wants to save the workers’ statute and stop the privatization of the SNCF, demands that the other unions have abandoned. But this small, minority union is incapable of imposing its demands upon Macron and is even less capable of unifying the workers in a struggle against him.

Fifty years after May 1968, French capitalism, exhausted by a half-century of austerity and tax handouts to the rich, no longer has the resources to offer concessions to the workers. The principal factor in this is the economic and military crisis of global capitalism. Macron is responding by trying to transform class relations in France, pauperizing the workers and ramping up the military budget to spend €300 billion between 2018 and 2024. He will not offer any Grenelle Accords to the working class.

But the socially regressive policies he is plotting with

the European Union and the unions will inevitably meet with deep opposition amongst workers in France and across Europe. The decisive question will be to bring an independent, socialist and revolutionary organization and perspective to the masses of workers who will enter into struggle against austerity and war.

The *Parti de l’égalité socialiste* (PES) encourages workers and youth to discuss the ongoing struggles, the alternative to the unions and traditional parties posed by the PES, and its party program. We invite them to participate in the public meeting in Paris, June 3, at 3:00 p.m., to discuss the revolutionary perspectives for struggle and mark the 50th anniversary of the May-June 1968 general strike.



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