

French rail workers protest one year after rail privatization

Anthony Torres
6 June 2019

With anger growing among rail workers over station closures and worsening working conditions, the unions felt compelled to organize a symbolic one-day strike on June 4. The national protest, called by four union federations, was the first since the promulgation of a rail reform privatizing the French National Railways (SNCF) and eliminating the rail workers' statute. Fifteen thousand rail workers protested and marched in Paris, according to union sources, to denounce President Emmanuel Macron's privatization.

The SNCF's privatization has produced a social disaster for the workers, underscoring the necessity for rail workers to take the control of their struggle out of the hands of the corrupt unions.

Some 2,100 jobs are to be cut this year, as well as 300 in freight service, while many stations and even entire lines are closing, especially in rural areas. Twenty suicides have taken place at SNCF since the beginning of the year, connected to the SNCF's restructuring. This has provoked comparisons with the wave of suicides at France Télécom caused by management's decision to force workers to resign by driving them into mental anguish and depression.

Now that the "yellow vest" movement has gone on outside the unions for over six months, and strikes against austerity are spreading across Europe, from Portugal to the national Polish teachers strike, the French rail unions feel obliged to make a pretense of opposition. "If the government does not react, it is certain that by the end of the year there will be industrial action," Laurent Brun of the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) told Agence France-Presse.

The anger and militancy of the workers underscores the reactionary role of the unions, which negotiated a labor law that was used to privatize the SNCF and then

organized an "intermittent" and impotent strike against Macron's privatization. The unions strangled powerful opposition that existed among rail workers to deep attacks on jobs and working conditions at the SNCF.

In Paris, WSWs reporters spoke to Laurent, a station chief in the Allier region, who was protesting against "this attack by the Macron government, who wants to slash living standards and carry out a reduction of the number of SNCF rail workers in general, as this is supposed to be a public service." He added, "We want a development of the public service. We do not want plant closures or cuts to personnel."

Laurent compared the current situation at the SNCF to the privatization of the railways under Thatcher in Britain and Reagan's free market policy in the 1980s. "What we want is a competitive offer on social issues," he said, "both for workers and travelers. We are seeing what we saw in the era of Thatcher, who blew everything up. It led to a worsening of supply and an increase in ticket prices that is inconvenient for travelers. Since Reagan and Thatcher, we always use the same methods... We are realizing that it is the workers who suffer."

The WSWs spoke with a former local union representative who wanted to remain anonymous. He said he had come to demonstrate to "keep the railways in the public sector." He explained: "It's an attack, absolutely. In France, the railways were nationalized at the end of the Popular Front period, before World War II. At the end of that war, there were 525,000 SNCF rail workers. Now, while the number of travelers and their needs are larger, we are at around 145,000."

He added, "Progressively, we will lose all the workers protected by the statute, who still through it all have access to insurance and reduced costs for rail travel. All that will gradually disappear. We are

aligning everyone on what is the worst, precarious jobs, temp employment instead of keeping jobs protected by the statute. We saw in Great Britain the months that followed the privatization and the blowing up of British Airways and many other corporations. Now the same is being done to the railways in France and in too many countries in Europe, and that is why I saw that there are German comrades coming to protest with us.”

Asked about the workers’ suicides at the SNCF, the former delegate said, “It is abominable. We must prevent them from setting up situations like France Télécom.”

On the intermittent strike organized by the unions against Macron’s rail reform, he observed that it did not produce anything. “They don’t listen to anything,” he said, “as power here is held undemocratically.”

Macron’s anti-democratic regime by itself is not sufficient to explain how he defeated the rail strikers last year. The union bureaucracies and allied political parties had already approved and negotiated the entire privatization process with the French government and with Macron. They were already negotiating, five years ago, how to privatize the SNCF and break the rail workers’ statute. During the rail workers’ strike, the CGT and SUD-Rail unions said they were not opposed to the regime and demanded to negotiate with Prime Minister Edouard Philippe.

As *Challenges* magazine underscored, talks between the unions and the government were very far advanced as the Macron government took power.

Workers cannot expect anything from either the CGT or SUD-Rail, which is linked to the Pabloite New Anti-Capitalist Party. They isolated the rail workers from other striking workplaces, like Air France, energy workers internationally and the students, fearing that they would be outflanked by a movement of the population that would go massively into struggle against the existing powers in France and across Europe.

This rail reform was part of a broader repudiation of workers’ social rights established since the October 1917 revolution, and especially the repeal of those established after World War II. Having launched the privatization of the SNCF, the government is now announcing deep cuts to pensions, unemployment insurance and education. The hundreds of billions of euros transferred to the financial aristocracy from the

pockets of the workers go to pay for billions of euros in tax cuts for the rich and to more heavily equip the armed forces.

By organizing intermittent strikes, the unions effectively refused to organize any real strike to protect these social rights, which would have threatened their relations with the bourgeoisie and the tens of millions of euros they receive from companies and the state in the context of social dialog on, which they financially depend.

The “yellow vest” protests that erupted a few months after the betrayal of the rail strike by the unions have revealed the social gulf separating the union bureaucracies and pseudo-left parties from the real aspirations of the working class. This underscores the necessity for workers to organize independently of the unions, mobilizing broader support among workers in France and internationally in a true struggle, which can be fought out only as a struggle for power.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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