

French transit workers strike against attack on pensions

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The public transportation system of Paris and the surrounding region of Ile-de-France was brought to a near-total standstill yesterday. Bus and rail workers launched a 24-hour strike to oppose the Macron administration's proposed pension reforms.

Ten metro lines were completely closed, with a small number of lines operating at one-third capacity during rush hour, and driverless trains continuing throughout the day on two lines. The bus system was almost completely closed, as were regional lines. According to *Le Monde*, it was the highest participation in a strike by RATP [Paris Autonomous Transport Authority] workers in twelve years. The trade unions reported strike participation of between 60 and 98 percent in different sectors.

The mobilization expresses the immense opposition in the working class to the Macron administration's attack on the pension system. Under his proposal, 42 different pension entitlement systems that were won by workers in different sectors—including RATP and national railway workers, teachers, nurses, and other public sector employees—would be immediately done away with. Many workers, including in the RATP, would lose hundreds of euros per month and be forced to work as many as five or six years longer as a result.

The law is directed at the entire working class. Under the new universal pension system, workers would accrue benefits not in the form of a guaranteed monetary amount, but via an arbitrary system of "points." When workers retire, these points are to be converted into a monetary amount via an as-yet undisclosed mechanism, allowing every future government to continually reduce pension entitlements. The administration is also seeking the immediate raising of the retirement age by two years.

These policies have no support in the working class.

A poll released by the right-wing *Le Figaro* daily, which supports the pension reform, yesterday, found that 72 percent of the population was against Prime Minister Edouard Philippe's proposed legislation.

The strike in Paris is part of a growing movement of opposition in the working class in Europe and internationally against the escalating assault on its social and democratic rights. Three days earlier, 4,000 British Airways pilots stopped all flights for two days in opposition to years of wage and pension cuts. It took place one day before the expiration of a contract of autoworkers across the United States, who have voted near-unanimously to authorize strike action, under conditions of mass outrage at the corruption of the United Auto Workers union, which has been exposed taking millions of bribes from the companies with whom it is supposedly "negotiating."

Boris, 41, a maintenance worker with 16 years at RATP, spoke to Socialist Equality Party campaigners who were distributing copies of a statement to workers rallying outside the RATP headquarters yesterday. "I'm going to lose 20 percent of my retirement," he said, "and work at least two and a half years longer. Between the ages of 50 and 55, if I work for five years, I earn 7.5 toward my retirement. With the reform, we lose all that. It's normal that we have to fight against that. There is plenty of money, but they don't want to put it into the hospitals, the pensions, the schools. They want to put it where it will help the companies and to their wars.

"The conditions have become worse and worse," he added, "and little by little we are losing everything. In 2024 parts of the RATP are becoming opened up for tender by private companies. Then we will lose all our rights and conditions. Soon the RATP actually will not exist."

Responding to the SEP statement's call for an international struggle by the working class, Boris added that "it's true that the capitalist system is international. We see in China the workers make more and more money for the companies and are paid so little."

In seeking to conduct a fight against Macron's attacks, it is critical that workers understand the political forces that are arrayed against them. The trade unions which called yesterday's strike are not seeking to mobilize the working class in opposition to the pension reforms. They are actively negotiating and discussing with Macron how they will impose the law and suppress any struggle against it by the workers.

Laurent Escure, the general secretary of the National Union of Autonomous Syndicates (UNSA), which called yesterday's strike, blurted this out in an interview with France Inter on Thursday evening. UNSA is the largest union covering RATP workers and the second-largest covering national railway workers.

Escure stated that as far as the union was concerned, Macron's law will be put in place. "We know that things have to change," he said. "I think the president is determined to complete his reforms. So, we are not going to fight fights that maybe seem lost in advance."

Escure insisted that Macron, the "president of the rich," and Philippe "have understood that certain sectors require additional particular attention so that [the workers] are not punished by this reform." The union "does not believe in politics with an empty chair," he said, and so would negotiate on the new law. He even added apologetically that the timing of the strike, one day after a public speech by Philippe announcing consultations with the unions, was "by chance." "If at the end, we don't like the law, but at least we've improved it ... then that's still something."

There you have it—straight from the horse's mouth. The union supports the law, wants it to be implemented, and insists in advance of any struggle that it will be. The strikes are, therefore, directed not against Macron, but to deceive the workers themselves.

That is why the unions have called a series of one-day isolated strikes and demonstrations by different sections of workers, all of whom are targeted by the same law. After the RATP strike yesterday, this month will see a strike by professional associations on September 16, a national day of action by Workers Force on September 21, and a single day of action by

the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) on September 24, including a national railway workers' strike.

The purpose of these one-day events, as workers have seen countless times, is to let off steam and wear down the working class. In 2017, the CGT used the same method of one-day actions and slowdowns to sabotage the three-month struggle by railway workers and enable Macron to open up the SNCF to privatization and tear up the railway workers' statutes.

Faced with growing opposition in the working class to the pension reforms, the Macron administration's strategy is to deepen its collaboration with the unions. In his speech to the national business association on Thursday morning, Philippe announced that the government will delay the introduction of the law until the summer of 2020, while it conducts a series of "concertations" and "citizen consultations" that will continue until the end of the year. But "workers will have to work longer," Philippe declared.

To wage a struggle, workers must take the conduct of the fight into their own hands, and form their own independent committees of action, directly elected and controlled by workers themselves and independent of the pro-corporate unions. An appeal must be made to all sections of the working class in France, including healthcare and education workers, for a united struggle, as well as workers across Europe and internationally who confront the same assault on their democratic and social rights.

Above all a new political perspective is needed. The fight for the most basic social rights of the working class requires a frontal assault on the fortunes of the corporate and financial elite, and the socialist transformation of society internationally.



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