

Wildcat strike erupts at French National Railways over understaffing, austerity

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A wildcat strike erupted at the French National Railways (SNCF) on Friday, after a train collision in northeastern France Wednesday night that injured 11 people. When a train traveling from Charleville-Mézières to Reims with 70 passengers hit a special convoy train unexpectedly stopped near Saint-Pierre-sur-Vence, the driver, injured and in shock, was left to handle calls and assist passengers, including the wounded and pregnant women.

With anger mounting over understaffing, poor security, pension cuts and the new, two-tier wage system introduced by President Emmanuel Macron's 2018 partial privatization of the SNCF, workers walked off the job across the rail network. The strike paralyzed rail passenger transport in France. Three-quarters of regional trains, several high-speed train lines and several Paris regional express lines did not run.

The strike blindsided the unions. They worked closely with Macron to design his rail reform and then organized bankrupt two-days-on, three-days-off partial strikes announced well ahead of time, allowing management to find replacement workers and schedule the use of strikebreakers. The unions are widely discredited and correctly seen as complicit in Macron's attacks.

Stunned by the sudden strike, the unions met Friday night with SNCF management, but failed to agree on any proposals to address workers' grievances. Instead, they simply told workers to go back to work, as government ministers threatened to fire rail workers for striking illegally. "The entire week-end, the unions, stunned by the mobilization of the workers, tried to calm the situation and end the movement," the business daily *Les Echos* wrote.

Numerous train lines were still hit with delays of many hours over the weekend, and traffic only was

gradually returning to normal Monday.

Arnaud, a train driver, told the WSWS: "It was a spontaneous action. An event lit the powder kegs, and we have put people on notice, I hope, that there are serious security problems. There are no more employees inside the trains, there are no more employees in the stations, and we are left all alone to handle dangerous situations like that. ... Security on trains is not assured when there is only a driver aboard."

Arnaud denounced Macron's partial privatization of the SNCF and the pension cuts he is now preparing in parliament. "Many social rights are going away so of course we are against it," he said. "All the new hires, and there are many of them now, are working with much lower wages and I oppose that. We do the same work, we have the same problems. ... Also, I will have to pay in 10 years longer for my pension, of course I am against that, too."

He added that a rail workers' life is "hard schedules, unpredictable rest times and a life that does not match the family's schedule. You are on your own, it is a lot of solitude, a nomad's life."

Arnaud gave voice to growing class anger at social inequality internationally. Asked about US auto strikes and the international resurgence of class struggle, he said: "Of course we are in solidarity with them, we are all affected. We cannot work for free, workers need a livable wage and decent working conditions. But more and more, not just in this country and in every line of work, we are told to do more and we get nothing back, not even a thank you."

The Macron government, already bitterly unpopular, reacted with hysterical threats against the strikers. On Friday, Prime Minister Édouard Philippe denounced what he called an "abusive" movement and demanded

that the SNCF consider “all possible judicial methods ... to deal with some people who are not respecting the law.”

SNCF management dismissed the unions’ claims that workers were only exercising their legal “right to withdraw,” which allows workers to withdraw from work if their working conditions put them in danger. Only two days after a serious accident, SNCF CEO Guillaume Pépy shamelessly declared: “For the right to withdraw to be legitimately invoked, there has to be a serious and imminent danger. This is not the case.”

Junior Minister for Transport Jean-Baptiste Djebbari threatened “likely judicial action by the SNCF to establish that this social movement cannot be considered as an exercise of the right to withdraw.”

Christophe, a temp cleaning worker at a major Paris station, told the WSWs he supported the SNCF workers’ strike and dismissed both Philippe’s threats and the unions’ arguments. He said, “Legal strike, illegal strike, one gets completely lost. What I know is that if there is legal strike action, we are required to start well in advance, so the bosses can plan out how they will replace the workers who are on strike. So I would much rather that they take strike action this way.”

He added, “For passengers coming here, I know it can be a problem, but the railworkers need our support. What I know is that working conditions are bad for us and for them.” For the maintenance workers, he added, the problem is “work schedules. They make us work an hour and then, two hours later, we have to work three hours, then we leave again and come back again for two hours of work. There has to be a better way of scheduling this.”

Asked if the trade unions had ever expressed any interest in addressing cleaning workers’ problems, or simply contacted him at all, Christophe curtly replied: “No, no, not at all, never.”

The wildcat strike again showed the vast power of the working class, if mobilized independently of the unions, and the growing sense among workers that they face common international problems. A real struggle can emerge only outside the death grip of the union bureaucracy. This is why the decisive issue facing workers is building their own independent committees of action, independent of the unions, and organizing them on an international scale.

The reaction of the unions and of the French government, which has nothing to propose but more austerity and threats of a crackdown, make clear that this is the only way forward to obtain a lasting resolution for even for the most direct and essential workplace problems.

Cissé, a cleaning worker at a SNCF station, told the WSWs: “Even we cleaning workers see that there are serious security problems at the SNCF. There are too many accidents. We had a colleague who died at the station. We received no information, of course the SNCF told the family how it happened, but we heard nothing. He was a private subcontractor cleaning trains and he fell onto the tracks, we don’t know how. You should always get onto trains in pairs, just like this latest accident showed. Alone, you are in danger. That is why this strike erupted suddenly.”

Cissé, whose family background is African, denounced rail privatization for increasing social inequality: “The level of inequality is serious. The big fish eat the little fish, and we little fish, we have to sit and take it. ... You see here people who work night and day, who can’t make ends meet though they are working. We have to struggle against that inside and outside France, in the former colonial countries they want the same social-political model, privatize everything. And once it is privatized, one or two people get everything and everyone else is hurting.”

He added, “We defend everyone in the same position as us—it is the same in America, in the Maghreb or in West Africa, we defend them 100 percent.”



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