

New wildcat strike paralyzes French rail network

Alex Lantier

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This week, only one-third of high-speed trains on the western Atlantic network (TGV-Atlantique) are running, after hundreds of rail workers at the Châtillon repair yard went on strike. The strikers organized independently of the trade unions, openly defying the restrictions on strikes imposed by the unions' negotiations with the state. It is ever more evident that an eruption of strike activity of historic dimensions is being prepared in France and internationally.

This marks the second wildcat strike this month on the French railways, amid an international resurgence of class struggle, with a major US auto strike and mass protests in Algeria, Catalonia, Chile, Lebanon, Iraq, Hong Kong and beyond. Already on October 18, railworkers across France spontaneously walked off the job in anger after a train accident near Saint-Pierre-de-Vence. The train driver, wounded and in shock, was the only worker aboard and had to take care of all the passengers, including the wounded.

In an October 27 communiqué explaining their new strike, the Châtillon workers declare: "We can no longer accept working at near-minimum wages that have been frozen for five years, understaffed and amid growing numbers of resignations. We are ashamed to see how the National Railways (SNCF) plays with the security and comfort of travelers to boost flexibility and profits. ... We are fed up with restructuring, low wages, job cuts, and understaffing!"

They denounced that situation where travelers "pay more and more to travel with less and less service—old seats, trains that sometimes have non-working restrooms, blocked doors, or air conditioning that doesn't work during heat waves."

Amid growing anger among workers against austerity measures across Europe, including the partial privatization of the SNCF and planned pension cuts in

France, the strikers declared that it was useless to try to struggle through the trade union framework.

"Management tells us our strike is illegitimate, as we did not give two days warning before striking so management could set up minimum service, but this is the only way to make ourselves heard," they declared, adding: "We are calling on all rail workers to raise their heads with us."

The Châtillon workers' courageous initiative has rapidly exposed the cynicism and treachery of the unions. In 2018, the unions negotiated partial privatization and wage cuts at the SNCF while calling a "part-time" strike to cover their treachery. The unions set up a schedule where workers struck two days per week, allowing the SNCF to reorganize the schedules of non-striking workers to prevent any noticeable disruption to train lines. The only way forward is to break out of this pseudo-legal framework, which aims to strangle the constitutionally protected right to strike.

One railworker speaking on the "part-time strike" declared: "It did no good. We respected the rules, filed Individual Declarations of Intent (DII) to strike 48 hours before the deadline. With such a system, management gets organized, the strike has no impact and we get nothing."

The Châtillon workers, initially mobilized against the attempt to eliminate 12 vacation days, went on strike on October 21. Refusing a management offer of a €7,000 bonus to end the strike, they demanded payment for strike days and a €3,000 bonus, which the SNCF refused. A week later, the large number of unrepaired trains had disrupted the entire Atlantic rail network.

The SUD-Rail union is trying to intervene in the spontaneous strike, while making clear to management that it is trying to hold back a broader movement. Its secretary, Erik Meyer, called the decision to strike an

“instinctive, angry reaction attributable to the violence of announcements from management.”

As for SNCF management, terrified of the eruption of strikes outside the straitjacket of the union bureaucracy, they are appealing to the unions to strangle the class struggle. An SNCF executive told *Le Parisien* that it was critical to maintain the trade union diktat over the workers: “If we start playing with the rules for social conflict, we will all lose, since even trade union organizations will be overtaken.”

It is critical for workers to build their own independent organizations and break with the bankrupt, national framework of the unions’ talks with the state. SUD-Rail, which is close to the Pabloite New Anticapitalist Party (NPA), and the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union are calling to wait over a month to hold a strike on December 5. The organizers of last year’s defeat are seeking only to organize a new defeat this year.

The alternative is to build workers’ committees of action, independent of the trade unions, and to organize a political struggle by rail workers and the entire working class on not a national but an all-European scale. The “yellow vest” protests have shown how such a mass movement, independent of the unions, can be built on social media. The necessity to break out of the trade union straitjacket emerges from many basic realities of this struggle.

* Defending railworkers, even only those working within France, requires the organization of an international movement.

With the end of the SNCF national rail monopoly, Spain’s Renfe, Italy’s Trenitalia and Germany’s FlixTrain are preparing to enter the French rail network. To keep employers from playing on wage differentials between these companies requires unifying the struggles of workers at the companies from France, Spain, Italy and Germany—all countries where workers face the same austerity policies designed by the European Union (EU). But the unions organize purely national, symbolic actions, aiming to cover for their negotiations of social retrogression with the state.

*Against the French government’s resort to mass repression, railworkers will have to broadly mobilize workers in a political struggle despite the opposition of forces like the NPA and its political allies who are oriented to trade union negotiations with the

government.

With his violent repression of the “yellow vests,” French President Emmanuel Macron has shown how he will react to any challenge to the orders of the financial aristocracy. The SNCF and the state are threatening to sue railworkers who struck on October 18. In fact, it is the pseudo-legal framework of “minimum service” levels and the Labor Law—which was imposed without a parliamentary vote and in the face of overwhelming popular opposition and protests—that is trampling constitutional rights to strike and protest. But to overcome the counteroffensive Macron is preparing will require mobilizing the entire working class in struggle against the capitalist state.

*It is impossible to unify even the rail workers alone through a trade union struggle.

To unify and mobilize in struggle all the workers of the rail industry involves not simply strikes by those legally classified as railworkers, but also by the many temp workers and subcontractors linked to the SNCF. They are not unionized and give no confidence to the unions, who have always treated them with contempt and ignored their working conditions. It is only through a campaign to mobilize all the layers of the working class, and above all the most oppressed layers, that it will be possible to launch a real struggle against Macron, the EU and their reactionary agenda.



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