

Amiens railworkers vote to continue strike against French President Macron

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More than 300 rail workers voted to continue strike action yesterday at a general assembly in front of the Amiens train station, with two votes against and four abstentions. Workers, students, teachers and “yellow vest” protesters had come to express support for the ongoing mass strike, which has lasted since December 5 and shut down rail transport across France.

In Amiens, strikers pointed out that their struggle has now lasted longer than the celebrated 1995 rail strike against then-Prime Minister Alain Juppé’s pension cuts, a precursor to President Emmanuel Macron’s current, far broader attack on the French pension system. They expressed their hostility to the campaign of the Macron government, the media and factions of the union bureaucracy for a “holiday truce.” Workers at the meeting unanimously insisted that there could be no return to work while Macron’s cuts might still be passed.

A confrontation is emerging between the working class and the Macron government. Members of the Parti de l’égalité socialiste (PES, the French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International) attended the meeting and distributed the WWSWS article From Cavaignac to Villiers: The class struggle in France and the lessons of history.

As in all the other strike committee meetings and protests in the strike movement against Macron, a visible class barrier separates the workers from trade union officials. While workers want to launch a political struggle against Macron and are increasingly mistrustful of the unions, the union officials are proposing to continue the movement only so that they can arrange for the withdrawal of the current cuts, and then continue negotiating with Macron.

The question of organizing the struggle independent of the unions, as “yellow vest” protesters did on social

media, is increasingly raised. The only viable strategy for a struggle to defend pensions and living standards is to organize independently of the unions for a fight to bring down Macron.

Sophie, a bus driver, told the WWSWS: “The right of the trade union leaderships to decide to stop the movement is a real problem. There can also be issues about financial ties between the government and the trade union leaderships. Then, there are the smaller people who are at the bottom of the ladder, like the ‘yellow vest’ movement, who have shown that one can achieve great things without going through the unions.”

She expressed her doubts as to whether an acceptable deal could ever be reached with Macron: “One thing is clear, it is the small people like us who can really lead to real change. I do not know where this will go today, but we must resist everything that the government is trying to impose on us. This is a struggle for our future. It is so hard today to work, I do not know if we will even have retirements, it seems complicated. So we must continue and resist to the end.”

Sophie added that “the struggle here is part of a movement on an international scale. I ask all those youths and workers to continue, to mobilize, and to demand their rights and hold on until the end.”

The union officials who were overseeing the meeting and spoke before the strike vote tried to give as much as possible a “left” veneer to the unions’ maneuvers and talks with Macron. Officials of the Solidarity Union Democracy-Rail (SUD-Rail), the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT), Workers Force (FO), and National Union of Autonomous Unions (UNSA) called on the meeting to vote to continue the strike until the cuts are withdrawn. One UNSA official said the UNSA national leadership had lost an internal vote in favor of a “Christmas truce.”

A SUD-Rail official told the WSWS workers should place their confidence in the unions' talks with Macron: "We are calling for continuing until the withdrawal of the cuts and Macron's proposal to organize retirements on a points system. We are in a power battle, we can make Macron step back and then negotiate an improvement of the current system."

A CGT representative spoke to the meeting to promote the social concessions negotiated at the end of World War II by the National Resistance Council (CNR), which included right-wing Gaullists, social-democrats and Stalinists. The CGT and the Stalinist Communist Party disbanded factory committees, folded Resistance militias into the army and strangled a revolution against the Nazi-collaborationist Vichy state. In exchange they obtained Gaullist and social-democratic approval to set up the pension, family and health benefits of France's Social Security system.

The CGT member said, "What is this government doing? It's dividing Social Security to sell it. Look at what is happening with the hospitals, the attacks on pensions, what is happening with family benefits ... Just remember one thing: their goal is to privatize all of our pension funds, the system of public mutual responsibility that was established by the National Resistance Council."

He added, "They want to grab what we call the common good for their pockets. ... So let us fight together with the rail workers, fight all of us together in the private and public sector. It is a matter of our future and the future of our children."

After decades of capitalist globalization, imperialist military build-ups and tax handouts to the super-rich, however, no such concessions are on offer in Europe today. The last major wage concession in France—the Grenelle Accords the CGT and PCF used to sell out the 1968 General Strike and prevent workers from taking power—occurred over 50 years ago now. The way forward for workers to defend social rights established in earlier periods is a struggle to take state power.

A PES member spoke and recalled the 1995 strike he participated in as a teacher, where Juppé, staggered by the strike, ultimately saved the situation by calling the unions in to negotiate a deal. He recalled how workers "asked the unions not to go but to bring down the Juppé government." A struggle to bring down the Macron government, he added, "is precisely what we must do

today."

He recalled how in 1995, teachers "knew the rail workers were striking for everyone, that the rail workers were representing the entire working class. The teachers unions refused to strike, but we went out anyway in the high school and went into the street in order to join your picket line."

He stressed that no one believed Macron would ever quit attacking the workers. He proposed workers build committees of action independent of the unions, to fight to bring down Macron.

A strike fund was set up at the meeting to assist striking rail workers.



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