

Paris transport workers vote to end unlimited strike against Macron

Alex Lantier
20 January 2020

This weekend, Paris mass transit workers voted to end the unlimited strike begun December 5 on most of the Paris Autonomous Transport Authority (RATP) network.

Only lines 5, 13 and B are still on strike. Participation in the strike at the French National Railways (SNCF) is also falling, and while workers are determined to continue a struggle against President Emmanuel Macron's pension cuts, it seems the longest strike in France since the May 1968 general strike is drawing to a close.

RATP workers told the WSWS two principal factors determined the decision to return to work. First, there was no clear perspective for a struggle after they were isolated by the trade unions in other industries (ports, refinery and auto), which refused to carry out open-ended strike action. Moreover, after six weeks of strike action, and as the unions are about to launch four months of further negotiations with Macron on his pension cuts, strikers were under intense financial pressure due to the pitifully low levels of strike pay handed out by the unions.

Protests and one-day strike actions are set to continue, but it is time to draw political lessons from the initial struggle.

How could Macron resist with public opinion overwhelmingly against him and, moreover, with strikes and protests against social inequality spreading internationally? The rail strikes in France over recent months developed alongside strike action by tens of millions of Indian workers, strikes by US auto workers and copper miners, and mass protests in Algeria, Lebanon, Iraq and across much of Latin America.

Macron, however, could rely on the close collaboration of the union bureaucracies, which had negotiated the pension cuts with him. The first attempt

by the working class to overcome the resistance of the trade unions—but in a struggle limited to the national stage and controlled by the same trade unions whose opposition they were trying to smash—did not suffice to overcome all the political obstacles facing the workers.

Sylvie, a RATP employee, said: “It is not willingly that we are returning to work. We were hoping the public schoolteachers would join us, the refineries, the major corporations. But ultimately we had the impression that we were alone.” She added, “We would have liked to strike for six months, if we could. But financially we could not, otherwise we would have.”

She added that the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT) paid RATP strikers a total of €250,000—that is €20 per striker over a six-week strike. On the other hand, the total budget of the French union federations, financed overwhelmingly by the state and the employers' federations with which they negotiate austerity, is around €4 billion. These budgets do not serve to wage the class struggle, but to strangle it.

Thierry, another RATP driver, said: “The unions want to set the tone, but the workers want something else.” Asked about the role of the unions, he criticized the CGT and its leader Philippe Martinez: “We don't want to follow Martinez. He says we will meet again only in February.” Thierry added that according to the legal definition of a trade union, which states that it must have as its “objective... the definition of the rights, as well as the material and moral interests” of workers, the French “unions” in fact have not been unions for many years.

Franck, a RATP train driver, said of the unions: “They ultimately managed to do what we did not want them to do. For example, during the two weeks of Christmas vacations, we told them we wanted no truce in the struggle. But before Christmas they announced

that the next national protest would be January 9. Then we wanted them to start campaigning for a general strike, even if we know it is not so simple in the private sector. I worked as a temp there. I know that if you strike there, you get replaced. But we did not get support from other industries.”

RATP workers stressed their determination to return later to the struggle, and they know public opinion overwhelmingly supports them. After a six-week strike, two-thirds of the population still backs the transport strike, and a new national protest is called for January 24. However, it is also evident from the statements of the principal union bureaucracies that they are seeking to stop indefinite strikes and return to one-day actions that are more directly subordinated to them.

According to the National Union of Autonomous Unions' (UNSA) RATP branch, “After 45 days of strike action, most of the strike meetings of the rail network decided to reorient the unlimited movement as of Monday and engage in other forms of action. This will allow us to ultimately wage, as French women and men, this struggle.” The UNSA called “in conformity with the will of strike meetings on the rail network to continue and engage, women and men together in cross-industry mobilizations.”

Union bureaucrats shaken by the working class offensive against Macron have seized on any pretext to push strikers back to work. According to RATP workers, officials attending strike meetings attacked strikers who entered the headquarters of the pro-Macron French Democratic Labor Confederation (CFDT) on January 17 to criticize “violence” and call for moderation.

In a *Le Parisien* interview, Martinez denounced these strikers, who were protesting the CFDT’s support for the cuts. “Such excesses will never be a legitimate mode of expression in a democracy. Exchange elevates debate, but violence degrades it,” Martinez said.

“We mostly disagree with him,” said one RATP worker. For now, there is no proof that the strikers who entered CFDT offices acted violently.

One of them, Anasse Kazib, denied accusations from CFDT Secretary Laurent Berger that they “entered using violence.” Kazib told Berger this accusation “does not surprise me from you, a king of lying. But tough luck: we filmed everything and there was neither verbal nor physical violence, though one of your

officials tore a striker’s jacket and another pushed a female striker.”

The end of indefinite strike action does not mark the end of a struggle. Many groups of “yellow vest” protesters and strikers are determined to continue, and anger in the working class against Macron in France, and against the capitalist system internationally, continues to grow.

However, workers can place no confidence at all in the unions’ assurances to strikers that they can return to work confident that the unions will continue to wage a struggle. The rank and file imposed the December 5 unlimited strike on the unions, which feared totally losing control after several wildcat actions at the SNCF rail system in the fall. Returning to militant action against Macron’s pension cuts and drawing broader layers of the working class into the struggle will depend on workers taking action independently of the trade unions.

This struggle has confirmed the warnings made by the *Parti de l’égalité socialiste* (PES), based on the historical experience of the working class with the trade unions. Tied to the government and planning to negotiate cuts with Macron—with whom there is nothing to negotiate—they strangled the struggle. The way forward for the workers is to build their strike meetings as committees of action, independent of the unions, to draw support from broader layers of the working class, in France and internationally, for a political struggle to bring down Macron.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact