

Regional authorities around Paris, France, demand police intervene to break Transdev bus drivers strike

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Transdev bus drivers in the regions of Seine-et-Marne and Val d'Oise, near the French capital, are striking against the plans to open the regional bus network to competition from private providers. As they enter their sixth week of strike action, with new depots joining the struggle and the possibility of the strike spreading throughout Ile-de-France, the regional authorities are demanding that the police intervene and break the picket lines set up by the drivers.

The board of directors of the Île-de-France bus network met on Monday, chaired by the president of Ile-de-France, the former minister of education and finances, Valerie Pécresse. In a press release, the board of directors asked “the State to intervene in the most appropriate conditions to ensure the unblocking of bus depots and thus allow the functioning of the minimum service legitimately expected by users.”

At the same time, the former president of the postal service and Parisian rail network, Jean-Paul Bailly, would lead “a mission to reconcile the points of view” between the strikers and Transdev management.

Pécresse’s call for the police to crush the pickets is a frontal attack on the right to strike. This is in line with Transdev’s provocative and false statements that the strike has created a “climate of urban guerrilla warfare” in the Paris region. The aim is to suppress the legitimate demands of the workers in the face of the social attacks against them, and to prepare the ground for a police assault on the strikers.

The state fears an eruption of class struggle against the attacks on workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, while workers’ anger is rising in the transport sector. German railway workers struck for weeks this summer, and private bus drivers have launched strike action in

the UK. Transport strikes have broken out in Lyon and Chambéry in France, while a strike by garbage collectors in the Aix-Marseille area began on September 30 against an increase in working hours.

At Transdev, the workers are opposing the restructuring of working conditions, which is the outcome of a regressive agreement negotiated with the company’s main trade unions. It provides for longer hours at the wheel, a wage freeze and a loss of paid days off.

The opening of the public transport network to private competition is being pursued over the next two decades in France. It began this year with the Optile bus networks in the greater Paris area. It is to continue with Parisian metropolitan buses (2025), national suburban trains (2023 to 2033), streetcars (2030), and finally metros and regional trains (2040).

Patricia, a striker, explained to France-Bleu that the agreement is “totally disadvantageous for the staff. Previously, we were paid 39 hours and had 22 days of paid days off. Now, we are at 37 hours and they have taken away 11 days of RTT.” Vacation vouchers are being reduced “from €750 per year to €250.”

Freddy, a bus driver of 15 years, described a “lengthening of working time behind the wheel,” while the time allocated to “taking over the shift”—in particular to perform vehicle checks—has been reduced from 20 minutes to 10. He added: “As soon as you start your shift, you are under pressure. ... Before, when I had a seven-hour shift, I worked two hours more, which meant two extra hours paid. Now, with 42-, 43-, 45-hour weeks, I don’t want to work any more. Everything has been done to freeze our wages.”

New bus depots have recently joined the strike, such

as at Rambouillet. While some are opting for rotating strikes (as in Nemours and Rambouillet), many are maintaining a continuous strike (Chelles, Marne-la-Vallée, Saint-Gratien, Vulaines-sur-Seine, Vaux-le-Pénil).

The struggle of Transdev workers cannot be left in the hands of the trade unions. They were forced to call a strike at the Transdev depots, even though they had negotiated the agreement with management that provides for increases in working hours.

Now the unions are demoralizing the workers by isolating them, depot by depot, in order to weaken the movement. Jamel Abdelmoumni, Transdev central delegate for Sud-Rail in Ile-de-France, said: “Management’s strategy is first to try to weaken the movement, to suffocate it; then, to reach agreements on a case-by-case basis in order to get the most precarious workers back to work.”

But this strategy of the management, well described by the Sud-Rail union, is implemented by the union leaders themselves.

At Sénart, for example, an agreement has been signed by two out of three trade unions. On Monday, October 11, a negotiations meeting for the Vaux-le-Pénil depot was held at the Cité administrative building in Melun. On Tuesday, October 12, a meeting was held at Marne-la-Vallée, again in the presence of officials from the labour ministry. Two meetings have taken place in Vulaines-sur-Seine, one on October 12, the other on October 14, this time without a labour ministry mediator. At the other depots in Fontainebleau, Melun and Marne le Vallée, the unions are continuing negotiations.

While the Transdev strike began in early September, the unions have isolated the workers from other transport strikes in Lyon and Chambéry, striking garbage collectors in Aix-Marseille, and especially from their international counterparts. In the UK, truck drivers went on strike for one day in August to protest longer working hours, low pay, intolerable conditions and the consequences of a staffing crisis of 100,000 drivers. In anticipation of the strike, the British military was placed on high alert.

To oppose the straitjacket of the union apparatuses over the strike, and mobilize workers more broadly against the danger of police repression, workers should establish their own independent rank-and-file

committees at the struggling depots and other workplaces. The Transdev strikers have powerful support across France and internationally. But to unify and mobilize that support, workers cannot leave the initiative in the hands of the union apparatuses.

The “yellow vests” movement, which was organised on social media, as well as the coronavirus pandemic itself, have discredited the union apparatuses, which have collaborated with reopening workplaces and schools in unsafe conditions. The ruling class itself is no longer sure of the ability of the trade unions to suppress the class struggle. That is why its representatives turn to the police and the army.

This is a warning that capitalism is incompatible with the most elemental struggle by workers to defend their social and democratic rights. It is essential to organise workers independently of the unions, to defend their social and democratic rights, and impose a scientific strategy to stop the pandemic and eradicate the coronavirus. This means forging the unity of the international working class in the struggle for socialism.



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