

Rail and airport workers strike in France for wage increases

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Workers at the national railways and airport security in France are striking against worsening working conditions and for wage increases. These strikes are part of an international resurgence of working-class struggle against the attacks by the state and employers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A nationwide action called by the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) and Sud Rail began on Wednesday, demanding wage increases to coincide with mandated annual salary negotiations between the unions and management. According to the unions, the railway management wants to impose yet another wage freeze for the seventh straight year in 2021.

Several train lines are being disrupted. Four out of five trains on the Paris-Regional B line and three out of four trains on the D line are running and one out of two trains on the N line. In the provinces, disruptions are also expected. In Occitania, the strike began on November 16, and in the Alpes-Cote D’Azur region, traffic will be disrupted from November 16-18.

After being on strike on October 11 and 26, rail agents in the Île-de-France region surrounding Paris will be on strike on December 1 against a restructuring plan that includes layoffs and additional workloads, to be implemented in April 2022.

For three days since November 16, airport security agents have been on strike against the renegotiation of local contracts that reduce annual bonuses. The strike affects the airports of Roissy, Toulouse, Marseille, Mulhouse, Clermont-Ferrand, Lyon and Nice with strike participation rates between 70-100 percent.

According to Nordine Kebbaché, a delegate of the CGT at Transdev in Roissy, employees of the subcontracted airport security guards are demanding “more than maintaining the annual bonus, a 10 percent increase in wages, improvements in working conditions,” or an additional bonus.

The international financial aristocracy is responding to the pandemic by restructuring the global economy to impose poverty wages and destroy jobs. Rising prices due to raw material shortages affect every aspect of workers’ lives as their real wages are falling. At the same time, the collective wealth of billionaires has increased scandalously from \$5 trillion to \$13 trillion in one year, while the pandemic has killed millions.

In France, in the space of 10 years, the 500 largest fortunes have seen their wealth triple from €211 billion to €731 billion, or 30 percent of French GDP.

The strikes in transport and airport security are part of a growth of working-class struggle against the attacks by the ruling class throughout the pandemic. Last summer, German railway workers went on strike for weeks, and private bus drivers in Britain were on strike last month. In the US, auto workers have repeatedly rejected sellout agreements negotiated by the UAW and Volvo Trucks and struck for weeks in a rebellion against the UAW at John Deere, the equipment manufacturer.

In France, last month Transdev bus drivers in Seine-et-Marne and Val d’Oise went on strike for weeks against a work restructuring, threatening to paralyse the Ile-de-France region’s transportation. Garbage collectors in the Aix-Marseille metropolitan area went on strike for more than two weeks against the increase in working hours. Fearing the combativeness of the transport workers, the president of the Île-de-France region, Valérie Pécresse, who is also a candidate in the Republican presidential primaries, threatened to break the bus drivers strike by sending the police against the pickets.

However, the legitimate demands of the workers cannot be won via a movement organized by the trade unions. The latter are calling for strikes not because they want to develop a movement against the policies of Macron and the EU but because they want to divert the rise of working-class struggle.

Discredited by decades of betrayal, the unions are attempting to secure credibility among the workers, while negotiating the lowering of working conditions and a reduction in real wages. This is one element of the coronavirus policy advocated by European governments, to “learn to live with the virus,” involving the full operation of workplaces and schools in the midst of the spread of the pandemic. This exposes workers and their children to mortal danger as Europe is once again the epicenter of the global pandemic.

The struggle for the defense of workers’ social rights is closely linked to the struggle against the pandemic. To break the accelerating spread of the virus in March 2020, workers had to mobilize independently of the unions and political establishment, carrying out wildcat strikes in Italy and Spain to demand that workers be allowed to shelter at home. Fearing a social explosion, governments accepted strict lockdowns.

The strikes were initiated from below, and the capitalist class with the help of trade unions was able to use this period to push through trillions of euros in bailouts, before imposing the reopening of workplaces and reopening of schools, without adequate measures to prevent the accelerated spread of the virus. This has produced a wave of death—and an unprecedented transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top of society. The trade unions’ collaboration with Macron has contributed toward the resurgence of the pandemic, despite the impact of the initial lockdowns.

The struggle for wage increases, to counter inflation and for a scientific policy to eliminate the coronavirus, raises the question of creating working-class organisations independent from the old trade union apparatuses. These committees, organised in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), will be able to fight against the pandemic and for the transfer of power to the workers to expropriate the financial aristocracy.



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