

French railworkers strike for pay raises as inflation surges across Europe

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French National Railways (SNCF) workers struck on July 6-7 to demand wage increases indexed to inflation, as broad sections of workers in Europe go out on strike against rising living costs.

Only three TGVs (intercity high-speed rail service) out of four were running on some lines, and two express regional trains out of five. The SNCF reported three TGV running out of five on lines east of Paris, three trains out of four to the north and west, and four out of five in the southeast. Two of three of the discounted Ouigo trains ran. International traffic concerning Eurostar, Thalys and Lyria remained “normal,” according to the SNCF.

Intercity traffic was much more disrupted, with one train out of three on average running. On several lines, there were no trains: Nantes-Bordeaux, Nantes-Lyon or Toulouse-Hendaye. Except for the Paris-Nice line, night trains did not run. The local traffic was also hit, notably with only one train out of two on average in the Paris metropolitan area on the lines J, L, N, R, U of the Transilien network, as well as the lines B, C, D, E of the RER network.

On Wednesday afternoon, SNCF management pledged: “Wage levels will be raised by 1.4 percent, and all salaries will also be increased by € 500 over the year. Production-related allowances (night shifts, Sundays, holidays, standby duty) will be raised by an average of 4 percent. In addition, the starting salaries of operational staff have also been raised by 4 percent.”

All of these measures are retroactive to April 1 but will be visible on pay slips by October, SNCF HR Chief François Nogu  said at a press conference. The SNCF said it would open negotiations on wages in December. It is proposing an increase of 3.7 percent for lower salaries and 2.2

percent for executives, i.e., a median of 3.1 percent: 70,000 SNCF employees will receive an increase of more than 3.1 percent and 70,000 less.

The increases proposed by the SNCF are in fact an attempt to impoverish workers. The eurozone’s annual inflation rate was estimated at 8.1 percent in May 2022, up from 7.4 percent in April, according to Eurostat. Of the major components of eurozone inflation, energy is expected to have the highest annual rate of inflation in May (39.0 percent, compared with 37.5 percent in April), followed by food (7.5 percent, compared with 6.3 percent in April), and industrial goods excluding energy (4.2 percent, compared with 3.8 percent in April).

According to Eurostat, inflation in France is below the eurozone average, but at 5.8 percent, it is still rising. Negotiations between SNCF management and the union bureaucracies for an increase in the median wage to 3.1 percent thus will mean a fall in real wages for workers.

The SNCF’s proposal is so insulting that even the union bureaucracies had to react. In a press release, the Pabloite Solidarity Union Democracy (SUD-Rail) federation said that “it’s not enough” and promised that SUD will not “resign itself to approving yet another reduction in the purchasing power of SNCF employees.”

The Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT), the largest union at the SNCF, said, “[T]hese measures are still very inadequate, but it is the mobilization of railway workers that allowed this salary thaw and to wrest these first advances.” In a press release, it proposed “to continue the united movement to demand that management pay more than just inflation compensation.”

The National Union of Independent Labor Unions (UNSA), the second largest union at SNCF, hailed what

its Secretary General Didier Mathis called “encouraging measures” on wages.

Workers cannot rely on the union bureaucracies that are negotiating with the SNCF and the Macron administration. Macron and SNCF management are determined to impose a drastic decline in living standards for railroad workers and more broadly of the entire working class.

At the end of June, SNCF CEO Jean-Pierre Farandou indicated that he was determined to impose wage austerity. “We have put the issues on the table, we are trying to build a balance, because increasing wages is one thing, but there is also an economic issue: It costs and we must be careful about the impact on the price of tickets, for example,” he told public television. “At the end of the year, the company accounts must remain balanced so that we do not cost money to the country.”

The strike for wages thus necessarily entails a political confrontation of the workers against Macron and the austerity diktat of the European Union, as well as against corporate management.

Workers must take the struggles out of the hands of the union bureaucracies, forming independent rank-and-file committees to mobilize workers more broadly—and above all, internationally. The French railway workers are entering the battle amid an international resurgence of the class struggle. On all continents, the working class is mobilizing collectively against soaring inflation and the impact of a pandemic is still taking its toll.

Public sector strikes have taken place in Belgium, Italy and Greece. Mass strikes have broken out in Turkey and Spain, while pilots and other airline workers have gone on strike across Europe. And above all, the strike by UK railworkers is drawing massive public sympathy, marking the beginning of a fightback by millions of workers who want to defeat the class warfare offensive of the Johnson government and the employers.

Governments have poured trillions of taxpayer funds into financial markets that have benefited only the super-rich and big business, deepening public debt and driving record inflation. Now NATO governments are pouring billions into military budgets as they aggressively target Russia in Ukraine and threaten China. This war threatens

to escalate into a Third World War between states armed with nuclear weapons.

The wars and the restructuring of the European economy that Macron and the banks want to carry out mean launching an offensive against the entire working class.

The offensive of the bourgeoisie cannot be fought within the narrow national framework of trade unionism. The unions, aware that workers will oppose insufficient wage increases, and that the wave of strikes in Europe is turning into an open conflict with the EU and NATO, felt obliged to call this one-day strike. But their aim is to maintain their grip on their members while they prepare to betray them; it is not to wage a struggle against war or against the looting of society by the banks.

This poses the question for railroad workers and the entire working class of building their own rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to mobilize the vast social power of the working class and unify it across industrial and national lines. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), launched by the International Committee of the Fourth International in April 2021, plays the central political and organizational role in encouraging and leading this movement.

The formation of rank-and-file committees across workplaces and industries will make it possible to forge the fighting unity of all the workers who enter the struggle, to keep the unions from breaking up their struggles, and to bring down the capitalist governments that oppose them.



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