Paris mass transit strike: Build rank-and-file committees, break union bureaucracies' diktat over strikes!

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On November 10, French transit, health and education workers struck against French President Emmanuel Macron's pension cuts and rising inflation, expressing the deep social anger rising among workers in France and internationally.

Prices are surging due to the combined impact of the vast bailouts of the super-rich by the banks since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and NATO's war on Russia in Ukraine. This is discrediting governments across Europe and provoking an international upsurge in struggles. A truckers' strike is coming in Spain, while port, transport and education workers are striking in Britain. Rail workers in the US are fighting against a sellout deal negotiated between the union apparatuses and the White House.

But while the ruling elites' drive to slash wages and pensions to fund the war in Ukraine meets with deep working class opposition, it also poses huge political challenges to workers. Faced with the division and stifling of workers' struggles by the national union federations, workers must organize themselves independently in rank-and-file committees.

Only a break with the union bureaucracies in France and their charade of negotiations with Macron can create conditions for an open struggle against imperialist war, the disastrous official management of the pandemic and the slashing of living standards. It is impossible not only to fight the war and the handling of the pandemic, but even to defend wages, within the narrow national framework of the trade union apparatus.

In particular, there are key political lessons to be learned from the refinery strike in France, which ran from September 27 to November 8. The last striking refineries, at Gonfreville-l'Orcher and Feyzin, returned to work on November 2 and 8, respectively. However, this powerful strike did not end in a wage increase above or even equal to inflation, but in an agreement that cuts real wages and marks a first step in the widening attempt by the banks to drive down the real wages of workers and pensioners.

The responsibility for the end of the refinery strike does not lie with any lack of militancy of the workers, but with the betrayal of this movement by the union bureaucracies. Indeed, one obvious question emerges as transport and public services strike today and anger mounts among electricity, shipping and auto workers.

Why weren't all the workers mobilized to defend the refiners, whom the state threatened with requisition—that is, a €10,000 fine and six months in prison—if they didn't stop the strike?

The strike caused a fuel shortage, hugely weakening Macron's position. While on the other hand, refinery workers were in a strong position. TotalEnergies announced that it had made more profit in nine months than last year: $17.3 billion compared to $16 billion in total in 2021. In the third quarter, its profit rose 43 percent over the same quarter of 2021 to $6.6 billion. "We are the largest exporter of liquified natural gas from the United States," said Chief Financial Officer Jean-Pierre Sbraire.

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Calls for solidarity with the refiners were circulating in the ports and in other strategic sectors of the French economy. The General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union, in particular, has 700,000 members, who, if mobilized, could bring down the Macron government in a few weeks.

As has happened countless times in French history, however, the Stalinist CGT bureaucracy has demobilized workers' opposition to the requisition order, isolated the refinery strike and let financial pressures strangle refinery workers, who have received no financial support from the union. As a result, refineries resumed operations one after another. This eventually led to a contract agreement with Total and ExxonMobil for a wage increase below inflation, which is already at 7 percent and is set to rise next year.

Fearing that it could be overrun by rank-and-file anger, the CGT bureaucracy cancelled a workers meeting at the Gonfreville refinery on the day it announced the end of the strike.

With this strike stifled, for now at least, the union bureaucracies are mobilizing other industries in scattered order, without preparing strike funds, and all the while negotiating with Macron. This is how they working to demobilize and strangle the wave of strikes, as workers in Europe and the world face an escalating war, mass illness and death, and a collapse of their real wages.

The historic social regression set in motion by the banks and the European governments is provoking and will inevitably provoke vast, international struggles in the working class. But to put this into action, it will be necessary to break the corporatist straitjacket of "social dialogue" with national capitalist governments imposed by the union bureaucracies on workers' struggles across Europe.

The great task facing workers in France and internationally is to prepare a rank-and-file insurrection against the diktat of the bureaucracies. This necessarily involves the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracies, to organize and expand workers' struggles against the Macron government and the financial markets.

Pessimism is neither justifiable nor permissible about the capacity of the working class to struggle. Global conditions are emerging for workers to revolt against the national bureaucracies and smash the obstacle to revolution that they pose.

The last 30 years since the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 have been an era of social reaction. The imperialist powers have waged wars in Iraq, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria that have cost millions of lives. The European Union, formed in 1992, has relentlessly pursued a policy of austerity. The product of this today is the social crisis, the NATO-Russia war in Ukraine, and the European refusal to buy Russian oil which is driving rising prices.

However, the opposition of the working class to social regression objectively is stronger than all the union and party bureaucracy historically linked to Stalinism. A revolutionary crisis is emerging. The social anger in France and around the world shows the vast potential for workers to organize and take control of their struggles away from the union bureaucracies and take the path of socialist revolution. The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers and young people who agree with this perspective to give it their support.

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