

Paris mass transit mounts one-day strike against inflation, austerity

Our reporters

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Yesterday, Paris mass transit workers struck against planned pension cuts and for wage increases as inflation surges around the world. This powerful strike, joined by certain other trade unions in the public sector, again demonstrated the enormous industrial power of the working class.

Vast traffic jams on 350 kilometers of key highways spread across Paris, as the subway and regional express (RER) lines stopped. Five metro lines (2, 8, 10, 11, 12) were totally shut down and all non-automated lines had only reduced service at rush hour. RER lines A and B, run by the Paris mass transit authority, had only one train of three, while the other RER lines, run by the French national railways, saw normal service.

At the same time, this strike made clear the social gulf separating the workers from the union bureaucracies. Indeed, after seeing many militant strikes strangled by the national union confederations, including the recent refinery strike, workers stayed away from marches held by the Stalinist-led General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union.

Fewer than 2,000 people marched with the CGT in Paris, almost exclusively union executives or heads of union locals, while a few hundreds marched in other major French cities. In Rouen, regional CGT secretary Pascal Morel was left with nothing other to say besides: “It is not because not a lot of people showed up that the question of wages is settled.”

In fact, the strength of the Paris transit strike showed that workers’ militancy is fully intact. But in France and internationally, workers, disenchanted with national union federations, are refusing to participate in events in which they have lost confidence. While the ruling class reacts by trying to build up neofascist forces, deep-rooted social processes under the surface among the masses are sowing the seeds of an explosive

and revolutionary reorientation of the working class.

The Parti de l’égalité socialiste (PES) advances the perspectives put forward by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). Against rising prices, the NATO war on Russia in Ukraine, mass COVID-19 deaths and the danger of a major economic and energy crisis in Europe this winter, workers must break the grip of the bureaucracy over the class struggle. It is time for a revolt against the national union confederations and the formation in France and internationally of independent, rank-and-file committees.

The deadening impact of the union bureaucracies emerged very clearly during the Paris march. While in France these organizations still recruit workers in workplaces, it is not to give them a revolutionary perspective, but to inculcate the pessimistic view that workers are passive, and that they must be resigned to waging national actions controlled by corrupt bureaucracies.

WSWS reporters interviewed Faouzi Abou Rayan, a CGT delegate in Paris mass transit (RATP) and member of Révolution permanente, a Morenoite tendency that emerged from France’s Pabloite New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) and is linked to the Socialist Workers Party (PTS) in Argentina.

“This morning we went to RATP management and got nothing. ... They sent us someone who was not even authorized to negotiate with us,” he said, adding: “Inflation has been going up for a long time. ... You look at food prices, they went up 15 or 25 percent. It is becoming really critical. Our wages have been frozen for 10 years, so for 10 years we have lost purchasing power.”

Due to energy price hikes, he added, “I have not turned on heating in my home, at night it is cold. This

is untenable.”

He stressed his dissatisfaction with the CGT leadership, notably on their negotiations of pension cuts with French President Emmanuel Macron: “The heads of the CGT, for me they do not represent the workers, that is my view. They have gone out of bounds. They negotiated things on pensions that they should not have agreed to.”

Asked about the need to oppose the NATO war on Russia in Ukraine, he replied: “Inflation is partially, even to a large extent provoked by this conflict, in which we should not be involved. Russian workers are being requisitioned; for the Ukrainian workers it is the same. Anyway, in all wars, it is the working masses that are sent to fight.”

On his membership in Révolution permanente, WSWs reporters asked him what he thought of the NPA’s support for NATO wars in Libya, Syria and Ukraine. He said it was due to a “lack of orientation.”

Now, he added, “in parties of the right or left, there is racism that has emerged in official language. They feel they can say things in the language of the far right that incite racism, targeting Muslims and foreigners. In the final analysis, they are keeping hatred on the boil. We know very well that capitalism wants to use racism to divide the working class.”

When WSWs reporters asked if he had studied the 1953 split between the Pabloite ancestors of the NPA and the ICFI, which has maintained the continuity of Trotskyist struggle against Stalinist and nationalist bureaucracies, he said he did not have time. Instead, he blamed the horrific degeneration of the official “left” on the alleged passivity of the working class: “People got into a comfort zone, there were a lot of social advances made. We took advantage.” Starting in the 1970s, he claimed, “there was a baba-cool era.”

Similarly, the WSWs interviewed Benjamin Carlier, a CGT delegate in the French National Railways (SNCF), who said he was striking over “pensions, wages, and the cost of living.” He said that workers “are already cutting spending, they eat meat less often. ... They buy fewer and fewer expensive products.”

Asked about the isolating and strangling of the recent refinery strike by the union bureaucracy, he said: “[Prime Minister] Edouard Philippe recently said, look at the ‘yellow vest’ protests [against social inequality], it was a clusterf*ck but we got through it. Whoever

goes on strike, we’ll get through it. They don’t care, they know workers can’t afford to lose a month of salary, it’s one week at most. Workers can’t go on losing €500 week after week, so they control workers that way.”

When WSWs reporters pointed to the responsibility of the French union bureaucracies, who have a €4 billion yearly budget but never give workers strike pay, he said: “Among the various unions, the doling out of money, how it’s divided up, it’s true that it’s opaque. ... Some former [CGT] bosses like Bernard Thibault got a bit too close to management, you got a feeling that once they had reached a friendly deal, we had to stop striking.”

He admitted that the union bureaucracy’s interests make it impossible to mobilize the working class in an anti-war movement through the trade unions: “Talking about war, things should really be done differently. But still, that would mean reorganizing lots of things which probably don’t really want to be reorganized. Maybe it is a question of generations.”

But when WSWs reporters raised the need to build an independent, international movement of rank-and-file committees against global problems like war, pandemics and inflation, he said it was impossible: “Already in France, things are really hard, so across Europe, I really don’t know.”

In fact, the testimony of CGT delegates themselves underscore the necessity for the working class of the break with the union bureaucracy advocated by the PES. The international upsurge of the class struggle of which the Paris transit strike is a part shows that the objective preconditions have emerged for such a break and for the rise of the ICFI’s influence in the working class.



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