Inside French unions' "general assembly" at the Paris North train station

WSWS reporters
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The November 5 nationwide strike in France called by the trade unions refuted all those tendencies who claim that the escalating protests in France and across Europe can remain under the leadership of the union bureaucracies. The movement of youth and "yellow vest" protesters that led to several mass protests in October developed almost entirely outside them. From September to November 5, they organized no strikes to defend youth from bloody police repression and mass arrests.

Social anger is mounting among workers against inflation and austerity, police repression, the threat of far-right rule and imperialist war. In response, the trade unions have called one-day "general strikes" in France on November 5, Spain on November 11, Italy on November 20 and Greece on November 25. But the mounting ferment and anger in the working class does not find expression in growing worker participation in activities organized by the union bureaucracies.

Sophie Binet, the head of the Stalinist-led General Confederation of Labor (CGT), announced after meeting with Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu last month that "general assemblies" (AG) would be held by the trade unions in workplaces on November 5 to decide on further strike action. The meaning of this term, historically rooted in the assemblies of sans-culottes during the French Revolution, is clear. It would mean all workers assembling in their workplaces to decide via an equal, open and democratic vote on how to pursue the strike.

WSWS reporters attended the "general assembly" held by the unions at the Gare du Nord in Paris. It was evident from the outset that Binet's call, like the promotion of it by parties like the Morenoite Révolution permanente (RP) party and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's La France insoumise (LFI), was fraudulent. What took place was not a general gathering of Gare du Nord workers, but an internal meeting of a handful of union delegates who had no serious intention of taking further strike action.

At the Gare du Nord, no signs or banners announced when or where the "general assembly," announced online, was taking place. In reality, it was hidden in a locale which only union officials could access, with a special electronic badge, while the train station itself was patrolled by hundreds of heavily armed CRS riot police who searched passersby. WSWS reporters found the location, however, and were permitted to enter by a CGT official, who gave the first name Camille.

Camille told the WSWS that approximately 10,000 workers work at the Gare du Nord, though the locale itself, a road leading to the Gare du Nord's trade union office, could only hold a few hundred people. He added, "In the AG, we will discuss between the different unions. For now, not many people are attending. The question that the AG will face is whether to launch continuing strike action. For now I'm skeptical. Today, not a single one of my colleagues wanted continuing strike action."

When the WSWS asked why workers told union officials they did not want to strike when social anger is erupting across the continent, Camille replied: "Yes, there is anger. People are struggling to eat. By the middle of the month, their bank accounts are already empty. Anger is there. And images of violence on social media [by police against youth protesters] do not please anyone, including fathers and mothers."

But Camille pointed to the sellouts first of the April-June 2018 French rail strikes against wage cuts and partial rail privatization and then of the 2023 mass strikes against pension cuts. The trade unions' isolation of the 2018 rail strike and their wearing down and calling off the 2023 fight against Macron's massively unpopular pension cuts has embittered rail workers against the trade unions. Workers have no confidence in the union officials who, for their part, do not seriously intend to strike.

During the 2018 strikes, Camille said, "We went out on continuing strikes, workers struck for a month, a month

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and a half. But for now we're not talking about doing that. When during the struggle on the pension cuts we went out on a continuing strike, very rapidly it became a strike just by trade union activists; management was laughing at us. And that is something we will not do again, because we don't want to separate ourselves from our colleagues."

Ultimately, only approximately 100 people attended the Gare du Nord AG, largely union officials and a delegation of student members of RP. Discussion was opened by a CGT official, who called for "a general increase of wages" and endorsed the mass youth protest movement: "It shows energy, determination and anger that makes one feel good to see." Citing strikes in Spain, Italy and Albania, he added that "the workers' movement has historically promoted this internationalist perspective."

The official also noted growing concern among workers over war and police state repression. "The climate can become increasingly authoritarian," he warned, adding, "What can stop the far right and the fascist groupings … is a powerfully organized workers movement, that is capable of defending itself collectively and to not leave the street to the reactionaries."

For the WSWS reporting team and the Parti de l'égalité socialiste, Alex Lantier spoke to argue that workers have to build committees of action and organize, independently of the bureaucracies, a powerful European and international movement against austerity, fascism and war. He explained that working class opposition has been suppressed by the bureaucracies, but that the situation is evolving toward a general strike like May 1968 in not just France but across Europe. He said that such a strike would open a path to fight fascism and war via socialist revolution.

This appeal did not generate support, however, insofar as the AG was almost entirely composed of union delegates who, whatever their complaints about the national union leaderships, do not support continuing strike action independent from the bureaucracies.

RP presidential candidate and SUD-Rail delegate Anasse Kazib closed the meeting with a speech based on RP's perspective of pressuring the union leaderships to provide workers with a "battle plan" against Macron, appealing to his fellow union delegates to do better.

"We must say a few truths, let's not kid ourselves," he said. "The November 5 strike is almost totally unprepared by all the trade union organizations of the workers' movement. I looked in the entire Gare du Nord, and I could fit right here all the leaflets I found about this in the work stations. And it's not just at the Gare du Nord or even the National Railways. I'm talking about the entire workers' movement. And the November 5 date was fixed over a month ago, on October 4. In a month, we could have alerted everyone at the National Railways."

He added, "There are only union officials here, not one of us is better here than the others. Even our members who still pay dues are not here. So there is no point saying things are great, they're not great." Giving a racial coloration to his critique of the union bureaucrats hostile to striking, he added, "The leadership of the mobilization are black and Arab youth."

Kazib claimed he wanted more strikes: "What weakens this general assembly is that today, there is no decision for continuing strike action. Our colleagues say, 'Yes, Anasse, we'll go to the demonstration, but not to the AG, because tomorrow there is no strike.'" Kazib noted that it would be "criminal" toward protesting youth to delay further action, concluding, "On the contrary, we must immediately fix another date for a strike."

However, the meeting at that point shut down, as RP and SUD officials and supporters present did not act on their own calls for strikes. They did not table a motion for further strike action, instead acquiescing to the CGT officials' refusal to call such action.

The meeting was a confirmation, though in the negative, of the perspective advanced by the Parti de l'égalité socialiste and the WSWS. An explosive confrontation is developing between the working class and capitalist governments and ruling elites across Europe. However, to wage this fight and discuss the necessary socialist perspectives on which it can proceed, rank-and-file workers must build independent committees of action to break the grip of the bureaucracies and pro-capitalist politicians over the class struggle.

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