

French unions vote to end transport strikes

By Alex Lantier
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Union officials meeting October 22 in the Paris suburb of Montreuil, at the headquarters of the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) union, voted to put off at least until October 31 any further strike calls against the planned elimination of the *régime spéciaux* (special regime) pensions. Such strikes would not take place until at least mid-November. The decision caps a tenacious campaign by the main French union confederations to prevent any extension of the strike movement.

On October 18, an estimated 75 percent of SNCF national railway company workers and 60 percent of RATP Paris mass transit workers went on strike, largely paralysing France. Large numbers of energy workers—43 percent according to management at Electricité de France and Gaz de France, 80 percent according to the CGT—also went on strike. These massive strikes were even larger in size than the 1995 strikes that forced then-Prime Minister Alain Juppé to eliminate many of the provisions of his pension reform, which also sought to largely destroy the *régimes spéciaux*.

However, by Monday, the strikes had largely subsided. Continued strikes in Paris suburban rail were expected to tail off after the SUD-RATP union federation announced that it would end its call for extended strikes on Wednesday. A powerful mobilisation of hundreds of thousands of workers vanished into thin air in a few days.

These events are a classic demonstration of how the union leadership can, in the absence of a politically independent leadership of the workers' movement, strangle a struggle of the working class. The union bureaucracy's main goals have been to discourage strikers, politically separate them from other workers and prevent any political struggle against the government—with which it stayed in close contact, in fact, all during the strikes.

This has been the basic political strategy of the trade unions ever since the election of President Nicolas Sarkozy in early May 2007. Over the summer, Sarkozy met repeatedly with the leaderships of the main trade union federations, the CGT, the CFDT (Confédération Française et Démocratique du Travail), and FO (Force Ouvrière)—even admitting to having one-one-one lunches in exclusive restaurants with CFDT head François Chérèque and FO chief Jean-Claude Mailly.

Sarkozy's most provocative gestures against public sector workers over the summer—notably, more than 22,000 job losses in the public sector and the law compelling “minimum service”

plans in case of mass transport strikes—were met with complaints, but no strike action.

The present mobilisation was forced upon by the unions by calls by Prime Minister François Fillon on September 9 to end the *régime spéciaux* in one quick reform, which, Fillon asserted, was “ready and simple to do.” Sarkozy and Fillon then tried to drum up support for pension cuts by demagogically attacking public sector workers' pensions for being larger than farmers' pensions. This backfired, however, as resentment deepened in the public sector workforce.

Trade union leaders continued backing the government's policy line after these announcements, however. CFDT chief François Chérèque claimed that “if we don't reform the *régimes spéciaux*, they will go bankrupt and the pensions will not be paid.” CGT pension negotiator Jean-Christophe Le Duigou called for negotiating “one company at a time, one industry at a time” in pushing the reform through, hoping to avoid a more politically explosive general pension cut via a law or decree.

Unions continued promoting the government's line, even after Sarkozy's September 18 speech announcing his plans for massive social spending cuts. CFDT pensions negotiator Jean-Louis Malys told the Communist Party paper *L'Humanité* on September 29 that “The status quo on the *régimes spéciaux* seems unimaginable.”

However, the railway union federations met and decided on October 1 to plan strike action for mid-October—a “day of action” on October 13 and a one-day strike for October 18.

The CGT—the largest union in the railways—then took the leading role in limiting the strike, promoting the idea that Sarkozy's popularity meant it was politically untenable to oppose the overall direction of his reforms. Asked by the *Journal du Dimanche* on October 13 if something like the 1995 strikes might occur, CGT rail union chief Didier Le Reste said: “We are in a different context, with a new society and a changed public opinion.” He hoped, however, that “workers will be able to express themselves very strongly” during the strikes.

The CGT soon came under pressure, however, from other unions—notably SUD-Rail, the second largest trade union in the railways—to make the October 18 strike open-ended. In an October 10 interview with the daily *Libération*, CGT chief Bernard Thibault criticised advocates of an open-ended strike

for “lacking experience.” CGT officials maintained that public opinion would turn against a strike lasting more than 24 hours.

In the strikes that started on October 18, the CGT acted firmly to limit the spread of strikes. Especially in the largest urban centres (Paris, Lyon, and Marseille), rail workers, including CGT members, voted on October 18 to continue the strikes. The CGT bureaucracy boycotted these workers’ assemblies.

On Friday, the FGAAC (Fédération Générale Autonome des Agents de Conduite) train drivers’ union—which had until then called for an indefinite strike—negotiated an accord with the government and quit striking. The conservative daily *Le Figaro* wrote that “The improvement in SNCF traffic was only possible thanks to the FGAAC’s exit from the movement.” The CGT then issued hypocritical denunciations of the FGAAC for “backstage discussions” with the government.

As the conservative financial daily *Les Echos* noted: “For the CGT, the situation is delicate. If it pretends to be surprised about ‘backstage discussions,’ it has also profited from the FGAAC’s exit to ‘save’ its plans for a limited strike.” In short, the FGAAC leadership’s betrayal helped the CGT to force workers to end the strike.

The October 22 meeting at CGT headquarters in Montreuil simply codified what was clear to all political observers—the leaders of the eight rail union federations do not want to call strikes, which, as they greatly fear, could rapidly escape their control.

It was left for the CFDT’s Chérèque to fire off final insults at the workers, telling a TF1 TV interviewer: “Today, please pardon the expression, we are pissing everyone off for no good reason, we’re making life miserable for tens of thousands of people going to work, whereas we’re stronger if we stay united.” This “unity” means unity with the CFDT, which called all during the strike for more negotiations with Sarkozy to tinker with his reactionary reforms.

Much has been made recently of Sarkozy’s “legitimacy” as elected President. In an October 17 interview with *Le Monde*, CGT leader Thibault noted that Sarkozy has “a legitimacy which no one contests,” but noted that since the strike was not “a ‘political’ strike,” this should not “lead unions to renounce their mission.”

In fact, hundreds of thousands of railwaymen, energy workers, and public sector workers have directly contested Sarkozy’s legitimacy by striking against his government’s social policy. This was, moreover, recognised on October 18 by the leader of the neo-fascist Front National, Jean-Marie Le Pen, who denounced “archeo-socialist unions” for a “preventive and political strike.”

Sarkozy was elected largely out of default, out of widespread disgust with the conservative and impotent Socialist Party and the entire “left” in France, which has proven its worthlessness. Sarkozy promised all things to all people during the election campaign, but wide layers of the population did not vote for

their own impoverishment or the impoverishment of other workers, or the destruction of their basic social rights. Sarkozy has no mandate to destroy the historically established gains and conditions of the French working class. A determined struggle would give leadership to the entire population and reveal how isolated the regime truly is. This is above all what the Communist Party Stalinists of the CGT and the other unions want to avoid.

The French press trots out polls finding that a majority of French people (55 percent) do not think the strikes are “justified.” However, other pollsters have found that 54 percent of the population “support or have sympathy for” the strikers, a paradox typically explained by differences in wording between polls. In fact, the French public has repeatedly given large popular support to political strikes in 1995, 2003 and 2005.

The current political situation, marked by the collapse of the French official “left” and near-total unity of the French ruling elite behind Sarkozy’s social cuts, has not failed to leave its marks on popular consciousness. However, this only underscores the greater bankruptcy of the trade unionist perspective—the fight against Sarkozy’s cuts now necessitates an explicitly political appeal to and mobilisation of the broadest layers of the working population.

The real danger to workers in France is not that they will suffer delays in reaching their workplaces for several days during transport strikes. It is that Sarkozy will successfully carry out a massive attack on their living standards—for instance, a pension cut after the 2008 municipal elections, to which (as Sarkozy openly admitted in his September 18 speech) the current *régime spéciaux* cuts are only a prelude—and drag them into spiraling wars of aggression abroad.

Even if the union bureaucracy’s manoeuvres prevent the current railway strikes from going forward, there will be further struggles. It is essential that workers draw the lessons of today’s struggles—above all, the need for a socialist political orientation and a break with the trade unions—for the success of the struggles to come.

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