

# French president Macron prepares to privatize railways

By Anthony Torres  
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After announcing the end of lifetime employment guarantees for public sector workers, French President Emmanuel Macron is preparing to end these guarantees for rail workers, another social right established during the Liberation from Nazi Occupation at the end of World War II.

Jean-Cyril Spinetta, former CEO of Air France, is preparing a report commissioned by Prime Minister Édouard Philippe in October, about a strategic reorientation of rail transport amid the European Union (EU)-mandated opening of French railways to private competition.

EU rules foresee the opening to private competition starting on 25 December 2023 for regional rail transport, and by 14 December 2020 for high-speed trains (TGV). French officials are drafting a bill to turn the EU directive on the SNCF (National Society of French Railways) into domestic French law.

Spinetta's report has not yet been published, but *Le Parisien* is already indicating various options being studied by Macron. In its article titled 'Maximum risk of social conflict at the SNCF,' it mentions a possible privatization of the SNCF: "Its current statute as a Public Establishment of Industrial and Commercial character (EPIC) is threatened by the EU, which considers that it hinders competition, according to Gilles Savary...a former Socialist Party (PS) deputy. This gives the SNCF a universal guarantee protecting it from bankruptcy. If it were transformed into a private corporation, partially owned by the *Caisse des dépôts* [i.e., the French government], it would conserve its public status while conforming to European regulations."

The privatization of the SNCF would go hand in hand with the abolition of the statute of rail workers.

*Le Parisien* notes, "This is the most explosive issue.

Based on a 1950 decree, it completes the Labor Code and defines rules specific to the railway workers on pay, vacations, career pathways, and trade union law. It is an advantageous statute, guaranteeing lifetime employment for railway workers... This is one way of blowing up the taboo of the sacred statute of the rail workers that automatically increases the wages bill for the SNCF by 2.4 percent every year..."

As at Orange (formerly France Télécom) and the Post Office, the statute could be suppressed for new hires at the SNCF, emptied of its content, or simply eliminated altogether. Thus Macron declared last summer, "Protecting you does not mean protecting your statute or your job of yesterday, but protecting you as an individual so you can get your job of tomorrow."

To impose the directive on free competition in the railways, Macron tried to blackmail the workers by laying down harsh conditions for the state to buy up SNCF debt: "Let's speak frankly, if we buy the debt, let's ask what is the new social pact the SNCF is willing to have? ... We are asking the SNCF to go further on reforms, on statutes, on flexibility, on pensions."

By moving to scrap the rail workers' statute, Macron is also preparing the pension cuts announced for 2019. Indeed, during the presidential election, he pledged to replace the roughly 30 different existing pension schemes in France by one unified, pay-as-you-go system. Thus, the rail workers' pension scheme, already slashed in 2007 under President Nicolas Sarkozy, would be destroyed and the entire population's pensions cut to the same rock-bottom level.

Plans to scrap the rail workers' statute are part of a broad attack by the financial aristocracy across Europe on all the social gains of the working class obtained

after the October 1917 revolution and the victory over Nazism in 1945. This is above all the product of a deep and intractable crisis of European and French capitalism. The government aims to smash the rail workers' statute to boost productivity and competitiveness at the SNCF, which like many French firms, is rapidly failing faced with global competition.

Léon Blum's government created in SNCF in 1937 as a joint public-private enterprise that was 51 percent state-owned, unloading billions of francs of private rail operators' losses on the public. At the same time, his government was isolating the revolutionary struggles of the Spanish workers in the Spanish Civil War against Francisco Franco's fascist coup, and brutally smashing strikes in France. This counterrevolutionary policy proved utterly bankrupt three years later, with the Nazi invasion of France and the collaboration of the French bourgeoisie with the Nazis.

Rail workers played an important role in the resistance to Nazi Occupation. As the SNCF helped the Nazis deport hundreds of thousands of Jews or resistance fighters to death camps, important sections of railway workers joined the resistance. Approximately 800 SNCF employees were shot by the Nazis for disobeying orders. Nearly 1,200 were deported to concentration camps for sabotage or acts of insubordination, and 2,361 were killed by bullets, mines or in aerial bombardments.

The statutes of public sector workers and of railway workers were guaranteed after the Soviet Union's defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II and the Liberation of France. Now, nearly three quarters of a century later, Macron's attacks on the railway workers aim to scrap these social rights.

This offensive against social rights established during the 20th century is yet another historic confirmation of the Trotskyist critique of Stalinism, and in particular of the class-collaborationist policy of the Stalinist French Communist Party (PCF) at the Liberation. Insofar as it left the capitalist class in power and blocked a struggle by the European proletariat to overthrow it and build socialism, none of these social rights were in fact safe.

Macron's offensive against the railway workers points to the irreconcilable character of the class struggle, which unfolds over decades. Under the Nazis and the Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime, the bourgeoisie massacred thousands of railway workers

during World War II; by attacking the workers today, the ruling class is spitting on these workers' graves.

Having handed itself trillions of euros in bank bailouts since the 2008 financial crisis, the financial aristocracy is attacking basic social rights across Europe. In Germany, the EU's largest economy, the ruling elite is trying to assemble a conservative/social-democratic "Grand Coalition" government preparing deep attacks on the workers to finance German rearmament. In Greece, the pseudo-left government of Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras of the "Coalition of the Radical Left" is applying draconian EU austerity measures.

Workers want to struggle to defend their rights and boost long-stagnant wages, while the ruling elite raked in untold billions of euros during repeated bank bailouts. This can only be done, however, in opposition to the pseudo-left and the trade union bureaucracy, which hypocritically declaims on its indignation at Macron while negotiating the attacks with him and with business groups.

These forces will not halt Macron or the reactionary governments across Europe. This requires the formation of organizations of the working class independent from the trade unions, waging an international campaign to unify workers' struggles across Europe. The basis of this struggle is a truly socialist and internationalist program for the construction of the International Committee of the Fourth International as the revolutionary vanguard of the working class, fighting for a program of the taking of power by the workers and building the United Socialist States of Europe.

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