

Trade unions in talks with French prime minister to strangle rail strike

By Anthony Torres
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As French rail workers continue their strike against the government's plan to privatize the French national railway (SNCF), the trade unions are preparing to negotiate directly with Prime Minister Edouard Philippe. Hoping to end the strike before it rallies support from other workers going on strike and from protesting university students, and fearing that the strike wave will develop into a political struggle to bring down President Emmanuel Macron, the unions are working to betray the rail workers. Philippe has stressed that he will negotiate only on condition that the unions formally accept the main elements of the SNCF "reform."

On Thursday, he announced that in the talks the opening of the SNCF to competition, its transformation into a private corporation, and the end of the rail workers' statute would not "be up for discussion." He added that the opening of the talks was "not at all a concession" on the government's part.

The subject of the negotiations will reportedly be the issue of how the state will take over SNCF debt, which appears to be creating the conditions for a financial crisis at the company once the reform has been carried out, threatening unpopular tax increases.

The government is proposing to gradually take over the SNCF's debts starting in 2020, whereas the unions are proposing that the state absorb the debts in full. Budget Minister Gérald Darmanin has insisted there will be no tax increases or new taxes to fund the reform. However, Philippe wrote a letter to the unions mentioning "further efforts needed from taxpayers, who already have brought several billion euros to the financing of the rail system, in order to cover its operating costs and invest in maintenance and development."

On the unions' part, the talks are a maneuver to mask

their collaboration with the government against the strike and put more pressure on strikers as they come under financial strain over lost pay. French unions maintain no strike funds for the rail workers.

On April 19, when protest marches were being called across France, the unions announced the end of talks with Transport Minister Elisabeth Borne. But the unions had not broken with the government. They sent a letter to Philippe asking to negotiate directly with him and indicating that they were prepared to accept most of the attacks on the rail workers.

After initially refusing to meet with the unions, Philippe agreed to launch talks on May 7, on condition that Borne be present. Laurent Brun, general secretary of the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor (CGT)-Rail, tried to claim in the face of all evidence that Philippe would be less inflexible than the transport minister. "We cannot imagine that the prime minister is calling us in to tell us that nothing will change and that the negotiations are over," he said.

Solidarity-Unity-Democracy (SUD) union Secretary Erik Meyer took a similar line: "We were greeted well by the prime minister during an information session," he said. "We want to talk directly to the person deciding the issue, so we can finally start talks on the basis of a viable plan."

On April 25, a joint union statement called for "a rally on May 3 in Paris and across the country" and a "day without rail workers" on May 14 if "the head of government does not hear our demands." They suggested that this might somehow impress the prime minister.

Even as the rolling strikes were beginning, the union bureaucracy was already signaling to the government that it supported the reforms and was anxious to end the strikes as soon as possible. Thierry Nier, Brun's

assistant at the CGT-Rail union, announced that the SNCF strike “could end very fast.” He added, “We cannot stand the status quo. The SNCF does not function well, there are improvements to be made, and we want to make them.”

The trade unions want to use the opening of talks with Philippe as a pretext to strangle the rail workers’ struggle and, if possible, keep it from extending into June.

Fifty years after the 1968 general strike, the unions are not seeking to defend what remains of the social rights established as part of the international impact of the October 1917 revolution in Russia and the struggle against fascism during the Second World War, as this would require in the first instance a political struggle to bring down Macron. The unions are working with the government to demoralize the workers and end the strike. The CGT did this in 1968 by negotiating the wage increases in the Grenelle Accords with the state; today, the unions aim to end the strike to impose cuts in wages and conditions on their members.

The unions are viscerally hostile to the rising struggles of rail workers, teachers, metalworkers and students in the United States and across Europe. They maintain a complicit silence on NATO war threats against Iran and Russia. Closely tied to the state and deeply nationalistic, they organize no opposition to war or the main points of European austerity policy. Their negotiations with Philippe must be taken as a warning to the working class.

If the trade unions maintain control of the struggle, they will strangle it. The only way forward is for the workers to take the strike out of the hands of the unions, break with the union bureaucracy and create their own independent organizations of struggle. Rank-and-file committees constituted independently of the unions would allow workers to coordinate a political struggle against Macron and the European Union (EU) with workers in other industries and countries.

Workers also face a struggle against pseudo-left forces representing layers of the affluent middle class, such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA). These tendencies work to block the emergence of a political struggle against austerity and war, subordinating strikes to the anti-working class interests of the union bureaucracy,

which is overwhelmingly financed by the state and the employers and seeks to make French capital more competitive against its international rivals.

The pseudo-left is well aware of the treachery of the unions and supports it. At an NPA public meeting, Mathieu, a SNCF union official, openly admitted that the unions’ strategy leads to defeat: “There is a whole series of difficulties, and that comes primarily from the strike schedule proposed by the CGT and the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour), which is two days on, three days off, which most rail workers are following now, but which can be modified according to the situation in the company and the country. About the schedule, I will admit that when I saw it come across on my cell phone, I told myself, ‘Well, it’s a betrayal.’ I mean, that is obvious.”

Despite this devastating admission, the NPA is still supporting the union bureaucracy. Mathieu added, “For the time being, the feeling is that we are all looking around at each other, asking, ‘So who will take the first step?’ And nobody really wants to go first.”

The experience of Syriza in Greece is a stark reminder of the treacherous role of the pseudo-left. The NPA and Mélenchon hailed the election of Syriza, which campaigned based on promises to end EU austerity. But it refused to appeal for a mobilization of broader opposition in the European working class and imposed the EU memorandum despite the Greek workers’ overwhelming “no” vote in Syriza’s own subsequent referendum on EU austerity. This January, Syriza rammed through the Greek parliament a law attacking the right to strike.

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