

The way forward for French workers

Build rank-and-file committees to oppose Macron's austerity measures!

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French National Railway (SNCF) workers have voted overwhelmingly in a company-wide ballot to reject President Emmanuel Macron's planned privatization of the national rail system. Defying pressure from management not to vote and a press campaign backing Macron, 94.97 percent of SNCF staff voted against the measure, with 61.15 percent participation.

Far from retreating before Macron, workers and youth are increasingly combative. The vote came immediately after a one-day public sector strike against Macron and two weeks after striking Air France workers stunned management and the unions by rejecting a concessions contract. Students are protesting Macron's adoption of selective university admissions procedures favoring students from wealthy families.

The critical question now is to draw together the ever broader sections of the working class entering into struggle against the Macron government, counter efforts to isolate and dissipate these struggles, and link them to the growing movement of the working class internationally.

In 1935, amid the radicalization of the working class before the eruption of the 1936 French general strike, Leon Trotsky, the founder of the Fourth International, called for the formation of Committees of Action. These rank-and-file bodies organized independently of the union bureaucracies were to be, Trotsky wrote, the "revolutionary representation of the struggling masses."

Today, as masses of workers and youth seek a way to carry the fight forward on the 50th anniversary of the 1968 French general strike, it is critical to again advance the demand for the formation of rank-and-file committees of action.

A chasm separates the militancy of the working class

from the spineless policy of the union bureaucracies and their political allies. They see in the SNCF referendum vote not a repudiation by the working class of the agenda of austerity and militarism of Macron and the European Union, but rather a point of leverage in their negotiations with the government aimed at ending the strike and securing the social privileges of the union bureaucracy at the expense of the workers.

The rail unions have opened negotiations with Prime Minister Edouard Philippe, who said he would hold talks only if the unions agreed to an EU-mandated opening of the railways to competition, the scrapping of the rail workers' statute to pave the way for cuts in wages and conditions, and the privatization of the SNCF. The only topic of discussion, Philippe said, was state financing of SNCF debt.

On Wednesday, Laurent Brun, the head of the Stalinist General Confederation of Labor's railway federation, said SNCF management was "totally discredited" and asked the government to "go over its reforms." But Macron's Republic on the March (LRM) party has made clear that it plans to ignore the SNCF referendum. Instead, it will work out the best means to impose the cuts in its talks with the General Confederation of Labour (CGT).

During the SNCF referendum, LRM deputy Gilles Le Gendre mocked "illusions that just because there is massive opposition to the reform, we could go back on it." He declared, "That is not true."

The state, SNCF management and the unions would work together, he insisted. "We are all looking for an exit scenario from this crisis in which no one loses face," he said. "That is our ambition. That is what we want, but in the context of a reform whose contents will not change."

In other words, the greater the opposition the government faces from the workers, the greater the betrayal it will demand from the unions.

France's affluent middle class parties are covering for this reactionary operation, calling on the population to build a national movement against Macron led by the CGT. Backed by the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) and Workers Struggle (LO), Jean-Luc Mélenchon's Unsubmissive France (LFI) party is calling for a "new Popular Front" and a "Human Wave" protest on May 26, ostensibly to help the unions pressure Macron for concessions.

This is a trap for the workers. LFI, the NPA, LO and other petty bourgeois parties are giving their imprimatur to the unions' moves to divide the workers, isolate strikes and sabotage the struggle against Macron. The unions have called off strikes at Air France until a new CEO is named, limited public sector strikes to symbolic one-day actions, and separated the rail strikes from those in the rest of the public sector.

Bitter historical experience shows that the unions and their political allies must not be allowed to dictate the terms of the class struggle to the working class.

Fifty years ago today, at the height of the 1968 general strike, the CGT launched the talks with state officials and business groups that produced the Grenelle Accords. The general strike had erupted not under CGT leadership, but in a rebellion against it. Less than two weeks later, it had brought French capitalism to its knees.

The Grenelle talks were the means for the CGT to betray the revolutionary opportunity. They led to wage concessions which the CGT used to get the workers to return to the plants and workplaces so as to rescue the de Gaulle government.

There will be no such reformist outcome of the class struggle today. The 1968 general strike erupted at the height of the post-war boom. Since then, however, industry in France and much of Europe has been devastated by decades of austerity and tax handouts to the rich. French capitalism no longer has the resources to offer social concessions. As Macron seeks €300 billion in military funding through 2024 amid growing NATO war threats against Iran, Syria and Russia, he will make agreements only at the workers' expense.

Under these conditions, the struggle to build rank-and-file committees of action takes on enormous

immediacy. In 1935, Trotsky ~~Wrote~~ in *France* that such committees were the "only means of breaking the anti-revolutionary opposition of the trade union and party apparatus." Comparing them to the soviets formed by the Russian workers in 1917, which took power in the October Revolution under the leadership of the Bolsheviks, he wrote:

Committees of Action at their present stage have as their task to unite in a defensive struggle the toiling masses of France and thus imbue these masses with the consciousness of their own power for the coming offensive. Whether matters will reach genuine soviets depends on whether the present critical situation in France will unfold to the ultimate revolutionary conclusions.

The Parti de l'égalité socialiste (Socialist Equality Party—PES), the French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), urges the broadest discussion of this perspective in workplaces, schools and on the Internet. It calls on those who want to participate in this struggle to join and build the PES.

Working to impart the greatest possible consciousness of the nature and objectives of the emerging movement, the PES will advocate and assist in the formation of rank-and-file committees in factories and other work locations. It will seek to unite the emerging strike movement with all the expressions of working class opposition to war, austerity and social inequality and develop a socialist and internationalist movement of the working class to take state power and reorganize economic life on the basis of social need, not private profit.

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